

# The Paradox of Hashem's Transcendence

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Essentially the concept of God's utter otherness protects Him from us. Left to our own devices, we humans tend to create things in our own image—or distort things to fit our image and our idea of them.

Yes, God is close. He is closer than the very air we breathe. This is true to such an extent that the Torah states, "*Ein od milevado*—there is no other besides Him" (Deuteronomy 4:35), and "*Ein od*—there is nothing else" (*ibid.* 4:39). Nonetheless there is a paradox here. The truth is that we may say this only when we understand that God is NOT the air we breathe, not an idea, not a physical or even spiritual quality or entity, not limited by matter, energy, time, space, or anything. God is the Creator of all these fundamentals of existence, and is therefore not defined or limited by any of them. They are all things that God created; they never can and never will define, confine, constrain, or contain God.

This is the meaning of what Chanah said in her prayer, "There is none *kadosh* (beyond, holy, transcendent, separate, other) like Hashem, for there is none besides Him. There is no Creator like our God" (I Samuel 2:2). It is the secret behind countless verses scattered throughout *Tanakh* wherein Hashem is seen as utterly other: "He dwells in eternity on high; His name is *Kadosh*, the transcendent Holy One" (Isaiah 57:17). "I am Hashem; I do not change" (Malakhi 3:6). "'To whom will you liken Me that I be an equal?' says *Kadosh*, the transcendent Holy One" (*ibid.* 40:25). "To whom will you liken Me, or make Me equal, or compare Me, that we may be alike?...I am Hashem, and there is none else. I am Hashem, and there is none like Me" (Isaiah 40:5,9).

קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ קָדוֹשׁ יְדוּד זְבָאוֹת מְלֵא כָּל הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹדוֹ:

"*Kadosh* (beyond time), *kadosh* (beyond space), *kadosh* (beyond the conception of even the highest celestial beings) is Hashem; [nothing can withstand the full revelation of His *Ein Sof* light; nevertheless] He is the God of all the hosts [of heaven and earth, and] the whole world is filled with His glory [i.e., a measured ray of His *Ein Sof* light]" (Isaiah 6:3).

Isaiah begins here by emphasizing God's transcendence above and beyond anything in creation. As in the above translation (which is based on the ancient *Targum Yonathan*), it is as if he is saying, "Hashem is beyond time, beyond space, and beyond the conception of even the highest celestial beings." The continuation of the verse, "the whole world is filled with His glory" or "the fullness of the entire world is His glory," emphasizes the flip side of the coin: Although God Himself is beyond all categories of creation, nevertheless, His *kavod* (glory, i.e., the *radiance* of His essence light) fills the entire world.

Only after we understand that God is infinite *Ein Sof*, and therefore infinitely other, does He tell us, "Do I not fill/permeate heaven and earth!" (Jeremiah 23:24), and "the whole world is filled with His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Only when we understand that "God is totally and completely other" can we then say, "There is nothing else but God."

Again, the paradox is that only by setting God apart from us can we really begin to know how very close He is.

There is little we can say about infinite *Ein Sof* except that IT IS. It is not subject to change. It is the source and ground of existence, the Creator of the step-down system of universes that allows for the existence of an other. It itself is above and beyond the system even as it fills and permeates it.

Only when these two—the infinite light of *Ein Sof* that transcends creation and the immanent aspect of the light that permeates creation—are seen together as constituting one inseparable unity do we begin to grasp the ultimate paradoxical truth. In other words, we begin to understand that we—and the step-down system of universes that God created in order to give us separate existence—do and do not exist apart from *Ein Sof*.

We live in a paradox. God is utterly other, but extremely close. It is not one or the other. Indeed it is only because He is utterly other that is He utterly close. As paradoxical as it sounds, His other-ness actually insures that there is nothing between Him and us. He doesn't simply "exist." He is the ground of all existence. Precisely because He is *kadosh*—separate, apart, beyond, other, unlike anything He created, without form, perfectly one—He is not only with us in our existential aloneness but we actually exist in Him. His light not only fills/permeates existence but it also fills/permeates us as well. There is no separation.

Yes, in order to create the possibility of otherness, God constricted His light and made a step-down system of five general levels—and millions of sublevels.<sup>1</sup> He did this so that we could recognize Him through His system and eventually return ourselves and the entire system back to Him.

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Yes, we live in the world, and in one sense we can only relate to transcendence via immanence. That is, we can be satisfied with learning the traditions we have received about great prophets and sages, men and women who somehow experienced God. We can learn the wonderful wisdom of the Torah that tells us of God's greatness above and beyond anything that we can know. We can even begin to delve into the deeper teachings of *kabbalah* and *chasidut* which were committed to writing with the specific intention of opening the way back to the experience of *devekut* (intimate bonding and attachment to the source). Up to a certain point, this is exactly what is proper, and the benefits can be wondrous.

Nevertheless for those who truly strive to know God, God's attributes (immanence) are merely signposts that point us in the right direction. The destination, however, is to know Hashem above and beyond any quality (transcendence).

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<sup>1</sup> In every case the lowest extremity [sometimes referred to as the *ziv* (radiance), *he'arah* (beam, illumination), or *kav* (ray)] of each higher level extends into and becomes clothed within the level below it. This begins with the light of *Ein Sof* clothed in *Keter* or *Adam Kadmon*. At each successive stage the light coalesces and thickens ever so slightly, until after many stages a physical universe comes into being, seemingly out of nowhere and out of nothing. It isn't really out of no-where and no-thing, but the level above it—that gave birth to it, so to speak—is so much greater than it, that it is called in-finite and no-thing relative to the lower level that it spawns.

In order to know Hashem's transcendence above and beyond the qualities through which we experience Him, we too must transcend the very qualities that make us who we are. This involves surrendering our individuality, nullifying ourselves in God, and merging into His oneness. In Chasidic texts this is known as *bitul hayesh* (nullification of self or ego-death) or simply *ayin* (no-thing-ness). As frightening as this might sound, it is the holy of holies of all spiritual work. In advanced meditation, for instance, we nullify our separate existence in His infinite oneness which is called *ayin*. In this state we, as such, do not exist.

We may not remain in that state for too long, lest it become impossible to return to our separate existence. Also, although we emphasize that *bitul* is the goal, it is no less important to return from *bitul* with a greater ability to connect to Hashem within the parameters of our everyday life.

This is why spiritual work is described as *ratzo vashov*, running and returning. It is a constant process involving running-beyond-ourselves in order to return-to-ourselves, in order to run-beyond-ourselves even higher, in order to return-to-ourselves each time with more power and more light. Clearly, without running—transcending the limitations of the human condition and actually bonding and merging, to the point of being subsumed within God's light—we will forever be outsiders.

After transcending, we never just return to the same old self. Every time we run, we return with more essence. We return as ourselves but we are not the same. It is us because we cannot be other than ourselves. Nevertheless we are completely new, infinitely more, because we immersed in the infinite Source and emerged newly born. Now our mission is to constantly bring more of the light of that infinite source to bear on all the details of our life. By embodying that light, the light of *Olam Haba* (the World-to-Come), we become *bonei Olam Haba* (children of Eternity) even as we walk in this world. Thus we bring creation closer to its goal when every *prat* (detail) will return to the great *Clal* (all-encompassing Unity), the great I AM, and still retain its individuality—because it was through its individuality that it played its part in bringing about this great return.

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*Shma Yisrael YKVK Elokenu YKVK echad.*  
Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God. Hashem is ONE.

**Shma Yisrael** [hear O Israel], **YKVK** [the infinite, eternal, all-encompassing One in whom there is no separation or differentiation] **Elokenu** [is our God, the Creator and director of all who grants us individual existence because He wants us to know Him in and through the events of the dramas of our lives]; **YKVK** [the infinite eternal Being] **echad** [is ONE, i.e., He is the essence unity and oneness behind all existence who beckons us to return and re-merge into His oneness in full conscious relationship].

In the *Shma* the Torah proclaims that all things come from one ultimate unitary source. There is one unifying force in the universe behind all things: God alone, and no other. God is the absolute unity and oneness behind all that exists. This unity and oneness is all-inclusive. Everything—all multiplicity—is grounded in it. Nothing exists outside God's oneness.

This is even more explicit in another verse: “*Atah horeta ladaat* (you have been shown, so that you could know), *ki YKVK Hu HaElokim* (that *Havayah* is the supreme being)—*ein od milevado* (there is no other besides Him)” (Deuteronomy 4:35). “***Ein od milevado***—there is no other,” i.e., there is no other God.

Immediately following this, the Torah obligates us to internalize this important knowledge: “*Veyadaata* (***know***) today and reflect upon it in your heart that *YKVK Hu HaElokim* in the heavens above and on the earth below; ***ein od***—there is nothing else” (Deuteronomy 4:39).

*Echad* tells us that God is one. But we still do not grasp the implications. He may be one somewhere far away. We therefore need to know that *ein od milevado*—there is no other beside Him. But even this is not sufficient. It could still just mean that there is no other being like Him. We therefore need to know that *ein od*—there is nothing else.

- ❖ *Echad* = God is ONE.
- ❖ *Ein od milevado* = there is no other God.
- ❖ *Ein od* = there is nothing else.

*Ein od* teaches us that God’s unity refers not only to His sovereign rule—that there are no other gods—and not only to the uniqueness of His oneness—that there is no other oneness like it. It also means that HE IS ALL THAT THERE IS.

*Ein od* teaches us the deepest meaning behind *echad*, the belief that God is ONE. Grounded in *ein od*, God’s oneness means that, despite all the evidence of diversity and separateness which our senses communicate to us about the universe, in truth all that actually exists is God’s absolute and indivisible unity. From the divine viewpoint of creation, there is no finite and objective universe that exists independently “out there” that separates and intervenes between God and us. Even though we experience ourselves and sense the world around us as solid, hard reality, Jewish tradition teaches us that this is only how it appears from our limited perspective.

In the most succinct terms, the Torah is telling us that we must develop our ***daat***—our deep inner knowing, awareness, and consciousness—to ***know*** and ***realize*** that we are part of a great unified ***daat*** (consciousness, or conscious oneness). This oneness precedes and transcends all existence, and at the same time permeates and lies at the core and nucleus of all existence. It is not something outside us that we can point to. It doesn’t even exist per se, for it is not a being, but rather it is BEING ITSELF.<sup>2</sup> IT IS THE ALL. This is the meaning of ***ein od***, there is nothing else.

The Torah is telling us that we live in a unified reality. We come from oneness and we are going to oneness. Before creation God was one irrespective of us. We didn’t exist as individuals. Enfolded in His infinite light, our souls were undifferentiated in a state of infinite unity. But He desired to give each one of us life, eternal life, and to reveal His infinite oneness through the prisms of our lives. His will, the divine will, is to ***reveal*** His infinite light within the finite fabric of creation.

This is what the Torah is all about. Through its commandments—and even through the stories of its main characters—the Torah reveals to us what the Godly will is and

<sup>2</sup> See Rambam immediately below.

how to fulfill it. In His Torah and through His prophets God thus tells us that He wants us to love our fellow human beings—and all beings—as we love ourselves; that He wants us to create a perfected world-society based on love, truth, and righteousness; that, in the merit of the above, He wants to bestow the ultimate good upon all mankind, which is to pour forth His prophetic spirit on all flesh, and to thereby reveal His *ein sof* (infinite, endless) light on, in, and through earth.

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At the beginning of his magnum opus, *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam (like many other masters before and after him) begins with four words whose initials form an acrostic of the four-letter name, *Yod-Keh-Vav-Keh*:<sup>3</sup>

(א) יְסוּד הַיְסוּדוֹת וְעִמּוּד הַחֲכָמוֹת לִידַע שֵׁשׁ שָׁמַיִם מְצוּי רֵאשׁוֹן, וְהוּא מְצִיא כָל נִמְצָא. וְכָל הַנִּמְצָאִים מִשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶרֶץ וְמָה שֶׁבִּינֵיהֶם לֹא נִמְצָאוּ אֶלָּא מֵאֵמֶת הַמְצָאוֹ:  
 (1) **Yesod Ha'yesodot Ve'amud Ha'chokhmot**—the foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdoms is the realization that there is a **matzuy rishon** (source of all existence); **ve'hu mamtzi** (who constantly brings into existence) **kol nimitza** (all that exists). **Ve'khol ha'nimtza'im** (and all existences) in heaven and earth, and everywhere in between, **lo nimitzeu ela** (exist only) **me'amatat heematzo** (by virtue of the reality of His being the source of all existence).

The phrase *Matzuy Rishon* (מְצוּי רֵאשׁוֹן) can be translated as First Cause or First Existence and left at that, but we would miss its incredible depth. The root of this word—and the root of all the key words that follow it in this passage—is the two-letter root *mem-tzadi* (מֵצ), and on an even deeper level, the one-letter root, *tzadi* (צ). This one letter (which is the equivalent of the Latin “ex,” which then comes into English in such words as exist, exit, extract, extricate, exhale, expose, exhibit, exhaust, exhume, exile, etc.) is the basis for three extremely closely related ideas:

- (1) to go forth (*latzet*); to bring forth (*lehotzi*), to be brought forth (*hutza*);
- (2) to bring forth into existence or to invent (*lehamtzi*), existence (*metziyut*);
- (3) to find (*limtzo*), to be found or to be found existing (*nimitza*).

The single conceptual link between these three sets of terms, all of which revolve around the one-letter root *tzadi* (צ), is the fact that for something to exist, it must be “brought forth” into a state of “existence” from a previous state of “non-existence,” so that we can then think that we “invented” it, but really, in the end, realize that we have only just “found” what was always there.

Based on this, we can now appreciate the word *matzuy* (מְצוּי) in relation to God. The initial letter *mem* (מ) of *matzuy* denotes the idea of *makom* (place) or *mekor* (source). Placed here before the *tzadi* (צ), it denotes that God is the unknowable source that brings forth into existence all that exists. This is the meaning of *matzuy*. *Rishon* just emphasizes that this source is the first. There is nothing before it.

But who brought this first source of existence into existence? Not only is the answer no-one and no-thing, but more correctly, this first source doesn't “exist” per se! It does not “exist” because It precedes existence—It precedes the idea of being

<sup>3</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodey HaTorah* (Laws of the Foundations of the Torah), Chapter 1, laws 1-4.

brought forth into existence. It is not a being, an entity. It is BEING ITSELF. The phrase *Matzuy Rishon* catches this subtlety.

Next, Rambam attributes an action to this source in the present tense: "*Ve'hu mamtzi kol nimitza*—who constantly brings into existence all that exists." In his Thirteen Principles of Faith, Rambam adds, "*Ve'hu levado asah ve'oseh ve'yaaseh le'khol ha'maasim*—He alone has done, does, and will continue to do [or He alone made, makes, and will continue to make] all things." Perforce we must say that the present tense here in our text is an eternal present that includes within itself all past and all future.

Finally Rambam states emphatically, "*Ve'khol ha'nimtza'im* (and all existences) in heaven and earth, and everywhere in between, *lo nimitzeu ela* (exist only) *me'amatat heematzo* (by virtue of the reality of His being the source of all existence)."

Clearly this idea that God is the *Matzuy Rishon*—the First or Primary Source of existence who is completely other because He is above and beyond all categories of existence and therefore cannot be defined by anything that exists—could easily be the most important foundation and pillar of Judaism. It is no surprise that Rambam begins with it.

Everything Rambam now says flows from the above foundation principle:<sup>4</sup>

(ב) ואם יעלה על הדעת שהוא אינו מצוי, אין דבר אחר יכול להמצאות:

(2) If one could conceive *sh'hu eino matzuy* (that He is not the source of existence), *ein davar acher yakhol le'heematzo* (nothing else could exist).

ג) ואם יעלה על הדעת שאין כל הנמצאים מלבדו מצויים, הוא לבדו יהיה מצוי, ולא יבטל הוא לבטולם. שכל הנמצאים צריכין לו, והוא, ברוך הוא, אינו צריך להם ולא לאחד מהם. לפיכך אין אמתתו כאמתת אחד מהם:

(3) If, however, one could conceive *sh'ein kol ha'nimtza'im mi'levado metzuyim* (that nothing else existed besides Him), *Hu levado yihyeh matzuy* (He alone would continue to exist). His existence would not be affected by their lack of existence, for all that exists depends on Him. But He, blessed be He, is not affected by [and is certainly not contingent on] them at all. We can therefore conclude that *ein amitato ke'amitat echad mehem* (His reality is unlike the reality of anything else, i.e., His reality is absolute as opposed to relative or contingent).

ד) הוא שהנביא אומר "וה' אלהים אמת". הוא לבדו האמת ואין לאחר אמת כאמתתו. והוא שהתורה אומרת "אין עוד מלבדו", כלומר אין שם מצוי אמת מלבדו כמותו:

(4) This is what the prophet meant when he said, "*YKVK Elokim emet* (*Havayah Elokim* is the true ultimate reality)" (Jeremiah 10:10). His alone is the reality [behind all existence]; nothing else shares His level of reality. This is what the Torah means when it says, "*ein od mi'levado*" (Deuteronomy 4:35). That is, *ein sham matzuy emet mi'levado kamoto* (there is no other true absolute source of existence besides Him or like Him).

<sup>4</sup> *Hilkhot Yesodey HaTorah* 1:2-4.