

As If Nothing Had Happened

Rosh Hashanah, the Lost Diamond,
and the Secret of Beginning Again



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The Torah of Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin and the Torah of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov are rooted in the same hidden place. In many ways, the Torah of Rav Tzadok and the Torah of Izhibitz can be understood as a continuation and culmination of the Torah of Rebbe Nachman: a realm of Torah that offers a person a profound sense of well-being without diminishing the responsibility to become better. It is a Torah that tells us that everything is all right, while simultaneously awakening us to the endless work that remains to be done.

Ordinarily, these two truths seem to stand in conflict. If a person accepts that everything is fine, that they are good, and that everything is ultimately okay, that awareness can weaken effort. It can diminish the urgency to change, to struggle, and to grow. But if a person feels that they are not okay, that the world is not okay, and that there is an endless amount of work that must be done before they can become worthy, then the very demand for growth takes them away from any experience of inner peace. The more responsible they become, the less whole they feel; the more whole they feel, the less responsible they may become.

This apparent contradiction is the ancient paradox of *yedi'ah* and *bechirah*, divine foreknowledge and human freedom. We do not know how these opposing truths coexist, and yet we know that they do. Spiritual life therefore requires us to make room for both perspectives, without allowing either one to erase the other.

The Stillness of Yedi'ah and the Labor of Bechirah

The world of *yedi'ah* is the world in which everything is foreseen. Hashem knows everything, Hashem sustains everything, and Hashem is present within everything. This includes our experiences and our actions, our good deeds and our misdeeds, our mitzvot and our transgressions. Without any deviation from the allness of divine unity, all of it is contained within the encompassing reality of *Ein Od Milvado*. Nothing exists outside of Him, and no amount of defilement can remove a person from that place.

The world of *bechirah*, however, is the world in which nothing is settled in advance. I am left with an absolute responsibility to refine myself and the world in this moment, according to the power vested in me by God. If I do not reveal the light entrusted to me, then that light will not be revealed. If I fall, I am responsible for the falling. If the world appears broken, I am called upon to participate in its repair. In the realm of *bechirah*, there is always more work to be done.

The world of *yedi'ah* is a world of *menuchah*, calmness, and *bittul*. I let go and let God. The world of *bechirah* is the place of *yegi'ah*: effort, striving, forcing, choosing, and acting with the awareness that if I do not do it, it will not happen. These worlds seem to negate one another, but the secret is that they operate together as one.

There are certain tzaddikim capable of revealing a Torah of *yedi'ah*—a Torah of divine foreknowledge, unity, and essential all-rightness—without diminishing our awareness of the endless need for growth. This is a dangerous Torah to reveal. A Torah concerned only with *yedi'ah* can become *ribui ohr*, an excess of light: too much unity without the vessels of human effort. When divine unity comes at the expense of *yirat Shamayim*, teshuvah, and the desire to become better, the lights of *keter* are transformed into the lights of *karet*. What should have connected the person to the highest crown instead cuts the person off.

This does not mean that divine unity is untrue. It means that the person has overlooked a fundamental principle: Hashem desires our *avodah*. He desires to be revealed here, within human imperfection, within the *dirah be-tachtonim*, within the world of limitation, choice, and *yirat Shamayim*. The highest unity must not abolish the lower world. It must descend into it and illuminate it.

The Ancient Torah of the Future

For this reason, the tzaddikim were exceedingly careful when revealing the Torah of *yedi'ah*: the Torah of Mashiach, the Torah of the future, which will disclose how everything—without any *yotzei min ha-klal*, without a single exception—is contained within the goodness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and how everything is always becoming better and better. If misunderstood, this Torah can lead to a distorted apprehension of how Hashem is present within our lives. It can produce spiritual stagnation, laziness, and ultimately transgression.

Yet certain tzaddikim knew how to secrete the light of Mashiach Tzidkeinu into their teachings. Their Torah contains a revelation of *Atika Stima'ah*, the concealed Ancient One: an ancient Torah that will be revealed in the future. It is ancient because it has always been present within the Torah itself, and it is new because its innermost meaning has not yet been fully revealed.

The Torah of *Atika Stima'ah* is the Torah of divine unity, the Torah of *Ein Od Milvado*. From its perspective, *bechirah* is like the thin peel of garlic, a necessary appearance that does not possess ultimate independent reality. Yet when this teaching is understood correctly, it does not lead to spiritual inactivity. It leads to spiritual activism. The true recognition

of divine unity does not end growth; it makes infinite growth possible.

Every revelation of Hashem that appears complete in this moment becomes partial in relation to the next moment. The instant a new *sechel chadash*, a new consciousness, emerges before my eyes, my previous grasp of the Infinite is revealed as diminished. A person who imagines that they have arrived at the summit of *yedi'ah*, that they have mastered *Ein Od Milvado* and no longer need to ascend, has fallen into the *kelipah* of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. Divine unity has made them tired. Their knowledge of Hashem has caused them to forget their effort before Hashem.

The secret is to know that we are okay, to know that Hashem is perfect, and to know that everything is fine—and precisely because everything is fine, to descend into the territory of *avodah*. We enter the *dirah be-tachtonim*, where things appear difficult and fragmented, in order to grow, act, and refine ourselves through the middot of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; through *ahavah*, *yir'ah*, *deveikut*, Torah, and mitzvot. These may appear to be a descent from the pure contemplation of divine unity. But when we are armed with the proper measure of *yichud Hashem*, as revealed by the true tzaddikim, we understand that there is no contradiction.

First, we establish the all-rightness. We establish the goodness. We recognize the Torah of *yedi'ah*: HaKadosh Baruch Hu is

everywhere. Then, because we desire to reveal even more of that unity, we descend into the worlds of separation, where *beirur* and clarification take place. The descent is no longer frightening. It no longer means that I am outside of unity, that I am bad, that I am stuck, or that if I do not perform perfectly I will cease to be worthy. Those symptoms of a *bechirah* severed from *yedi'ah* begin to fall away, because I know that Hashem is everywhere, and that Hashem Himself is the One giving me the capacity for *bechirah*.

Hashem desires that I enter this place of work, not because I am fundamentally deficient and not because something will remain eternally broken if I fail to repair it. Everything will ultimately be repaired irrespective of what we add, because the deepest repair will be the revelation that it was always HaKadosh Baruch Hu doing the repairing—especially when we imagined that we were doing it ourselves. The descent into *avodat Hashem* is not demanded because reality is ultimately broken. It is given because Hashem desires that we experience the pleasure of participating in His work: descending into concealment and distance, into *bakeseh leyom chageinu*, and ascending from there with an even newer and deeper revelation of His unity.

The Books Written Within the Mind

The Torah of Izhbitz, the Torah of Rav Tzadok, and the Torah of Rebbe Nachman speak from the level of divine unity, yet they give us strength to continue the work we need to do. They never lead us into the spiritual death of believing that no more work is necessary because everything is fine. They renew our capacity to do more work precisely because everything is fine.

The task is no longer *yegi'ah* and suffering for the sake of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. It becomes *lehit'aneg beta'anugim*, the pleasure of discovering Hashem within every place. The descent into darkness, clarification, and *richuk* is not evidence that I am broken. It is an invitation to reveal more diamonds and more light. These *tikkunim* ultimately take place within the mind.

Rav Tzadok teaches, in the name of the Chozeh of Lublin and the holy Maggid as well, that the book of the tzaddikim and the book of the resha'im are located within the human mind. Where are these books, and where does the writing take place? The books are our minds, and the writing is the thinking we think within them. The words of our thoughts engrave themselves upon consciousness, and through our patterns of thought we determine the book in which we experience ourselves as written.

When we think *machashavot tovot*, we write ourselves into the book of the tzaddikim. When we think *machashavot ra'ot*, we write ourselves into the book of the resha'im. When we no longer know where we stand, we experience ourselves as wedged between them. The initial task is therefore to engrave ourselves in the book of the tzaddikim: to engrave within our minds the fundamental truth that we are all right, that we are connected, and that absolutely nothing can sever our bond with HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Ammech kulam tzaddikim. The Jewish people are inscribed through *machashavot tovot* and *dibburim tovim*. The vacant space within the heart is repopulated with the infinite light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. That is the realm of *yedi'ah*: everything is fine, everything is good, and everything is becoming better.

Only after we write ourselves into the book of the tzaddikim can we safely descend into the territory represented by the book of the resha'im: the places requiring repair, the clarifications yet to be made, and the labor still waiting for us. The need to work is not a contradiction to being a tzaddik. The holy Baal HaTanya places this paradox at the beginning of *Tanya*, citing the teaching at the end of the third chapter of Niddah: *Mashbi'in oto, tehi tzaddik*—the soul is adjured, “Be a tzaddik”—and yet even if the whole world tells a person that they are a tzaddik, they must remain in their own eyes *ke-rasha*, as though they still have everything to repair.

To be *ke-rasha* does not mean denying the tzaddik within. It means that I still descend into the *avodah*, not because I am not a tzaddik, but because the path toward greater *tzidkut* passes through further clarification. In this way, a person can live an entire life of teshuvah without fear or insecurity about their place in the eyes of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. *Ammech kulam tzaddikim*. Every Jew is the apple of His eye: *Yisrael asher becha etpa'ar*.

Teshuvah Without Toxic Shame

The Baal Shem Tov, Rebbe Nachman, and Rav Tzadok teach us to begin with *yedi'ah*. We must begin with the *emunah sheleimah* that everything is fine, and that our sins, stuckness, failures, and symptoms are not ascribed to us in the absolute terms we imagine. They are part of Hashem's narrative. They are among the ways in which HaKadosh Baruch Hu reveals Himself through the particular shape of our lives.

When I let go and let God, I relinquish the toxic shame that tethers my identity to my worst actions. My mind then opens to the deeper reality of *neshamah shenatata bi tehorah hi*: the soul You placed within me is pure. I possess a *chelek Eloka mi-ma'al*, a portion of Godliness from above, which naturally desires to become better and better. The soul does not want to remain in the mud. It knows that its root is infinitely beyond the mud.

Rav Tzadok teaches that a person must believe with complete faith that there is absolutely nothing random in their life or in the world. Everything that has happened is rooted in Hashem's original intention for that individual. This is the foundation of the Torah and the mitzvot: all of Torah and mitzvot are pathways toward the fundamental recognition that everything comes from the hands of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Our failures and transgressions appear to us as happenstance, as deviations from the way we thought Hashem would run our lives. Yet in the final clarification, we will recognize that these, too, were contained within the way HaKadosh Baruch Hu was leading us. What appeared outside the order during our descent will be revealed as included within His original order. It resembles a person awakening from a dream in which they did many things and suffered many consequences, only to discover that, in the deepest sense, nothing actually happened.

Through the faith that nothing is random and nothing is separate from the light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, judgments are sweetened and transgressions are rectified. We arrive at the recognition that if it happened, it happened within His reality. Rav Tzadok explains in *Tzidkat HaTzaddik*, section forty, that the essence of teshuvah comes when HaKadosh Baruch Hu illuminates our eyes and allows us to see how the transgressions and falls themselves ultimately became a path

toward greater merit. We come to understand that everything that occurred within our lives was rooted, at the deepest level, in the *ratzon* of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

This does not abolish responsibility. It places responsibility within a larger unity. We are participants in a co-creating process with HaKadosh Baruch Hu—or, more precisely, we are the vehicles who become aware of HaKadosh Baruch Hu moving through us. This is the paradox of *yedi'ah* and *bechirah*. In the place of *yedi'ah*, there appears to be no room for *bechirah*. In the place of *bechirah*, there appears to be no room for *yedi'ah*. Yet both are fundamentally true at once.

In the realm of *yedi'ah*, everything is fine. In the realm of *bechirah*, everything requires repair. These truths do not cancel one another; together they form the paradoxical life of a Jew. We know that everything is all right, and from within that knowing, we desire to make it even more all right. We descend into the work of making perfection more perfect than it already is.

Returning to the Place Before Change

This paradox gives us a healthy way to approach Rosh Hashanah. Each Rosh Hashanah is an ascent toward the unchanging place, the place beyond change: *rosh ha-shinui*, the head and source of all transformation. Malchut, time, and space ascend beyond their own boundaries and return to the

innermost dimension of HaKadosh Baruch Hu's desire to recreate the world, to breathe life into it for another year, and to renew the *shefa* of existence.

Like the voice of the shofar, we retract ourselves from the world and run upward. We move beyond the accumulated identities of the passing year and return to sincerity, cleanliness, and the way we are remembered before HaKadosh Baruch Hu. We return to the *chelek Eloka mi-ma'al mamash*, to the self engraved within the *sifran shel tzaddikim* through *machashavot tovo*, and to the secret awareness that everything is ultimately HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

But after Rosh Hashanah, we descend. We become confused and muddled within the world of *bechirah*, and we forget the world of *yedi'ah*. We fall away from our inherent goodness, from the unbreakable bond of all-rightness and confidence, and from the recognition that HaKadosh Baruch Hu loves me and I love Him: *ani ledodi vedodi li*. We begin to ask, *Bameh ahavtanu?* How have You loved us? Hashem, how could You possibly love a person like me? How can You love someone who has fallen into the places where I have fallen?

As the year continues, we experience more viscerally the contradiction between the original light of Rosh Hashanah, the *yedi'ah* that everything will be okay and has always been okay, and the world of contingent *bechirah*, in which I fall

and struggle. How, then, can I show up at Rosh Hashanah again? How can I return to the beginning with the same confidence and newness when I know what happened during the previous year? I descended. I forgot the infinite light. I moved from *yedi'ah* to *lo yada*, from clear knowing into confusion, and now I return to HaKadosh Baruch Hu carrying everything I have become.

The *avodah* of Rosh Hashanah is to retrieve the innocence of the original beginning without denying the year that followed. It is to recover the purity that preceded the defilement and congealment of experience. Rebbe Nachman teaches this return through a short and beautiful story, a story we may have heard before, but which we must learn again for the first time.

The Diamond Found in the Mud

There was once an impoverished man who earned his livelihood by digging in the mud, fashioning tiles from it, and selling them. One day, in the midst of his digging, he discovered a magnificent diamond. He immediately understood that it was worth an immense amount, but he had no way of determining its true value. He brought it to a merchant, who told him that no one in that country could pay what the diamond was worth. To sell a jewel of such magnitude, he would have to travel to London, to the place of royalty.

The mud digger was impoverished and had no money for the journey. He sold his few possessions and went from house to house collecting whatever people would give him, until he had enough to reach the sea. When he attempted to board the ship, he encountered yet another obstacle: he could not afford the ticket.

He approached the captain and showed him the diamond. When the captain saw the extraordinary jewel, he assumed that this must be an exceedingly wealthy man. He welcomed him onto the ship with honor and placed him in a private suite with a window opening toward the sea, treating him as one of the rich.

The poor man would sit in his cabin and delight in the diamond. He especially enjoyed looking at it while he ate, because the joy and expansiveness it awakened within him were good for the body and good for digestion. He would lose himself in the diamond,

taking pleasure in the wealth, possibility, and transformed life that it represented.

One day, as the diamond rested on the table before him, the man fell asleep. While he slept, the housekeeper entered the room, gathered the tablecloth and its crumbs, and shook everything into the sea. She did not know that a priceless diamond was hidden among the refuse.

When the man awoke, he understood what had happened. His pain was so great that he nearly lost his mind—*kim'at sheyatza mida'ato*. What could he do? The diamond was gone. He could not pay for his passage. The captain was a thief and, he feared, would murder him when he discovered that his wealthy passenger possessed nothing at all.

The man then made an astonishing decision: *Asah et atzmo same'ach ke'ilu lo era davar*. He made himself joyous as though nothing had happened. The captain visited his cabin each day to speak with him. When the captain returned after the diamond had been lost, he saw no change in the passenger's face. The poor man had composed himself so completely that none of his terror, grief, or despair was visible.

The captain said to him, "I see that you are a wise and trustworthy man. I have a proposal. I am arranging a large purchase of wheat that I hope to sell in London for an immense profit. But because I am the captain, people may claim that I stole the grain. I would like the purchase to be made in your name. I will supply all the money, and you will receive a portion of the profit." The arrangement found favor in the eyes of

the poor man, and they proceeded with the transaction.

When they reached London, the captain suddenly died. Because the entire purchase had been registered in the poor man's name, all the money from the wheat belonged to him. The profit was double or perhaps triple the value of the diamond he had lost. Rebbe Nachman concludes the story by saying that the diamond had not truly belonged to the man, and therefore he lost it. The wealth of the grain did belong to him, and therefore it remained.

The Courage to Arrive as Though Nothing Happened

Every Rosh Hashanah, we discover a diamond. We ascend into the world of *yedi'ah*, touch *Ein Od Milvado*, and recognize that we are richer than rich. From within the mud of our lives, we uncover a light whose true value cannot be measured in the ordinary marketplace. Only in the place of royalty can its worth be understood.

Then, as the year unfolds, we lose the diamond. It is swept away with the crumbs and thrown into the sea. The clarity is sullied, obscured, and submerged beneath all the things that happen to us. The illumination of Rosh Hashanah, which once felt more real than anything else, begins to seem like something we possessed briefly and then failed to protect.

Faced with the question of how to continue, Rebbe Nachman gives a simple and radical *eitzab*: *Asah et atzmo same'ach ke'ilu lo era davar*. A person makes themselves joyous as though nothing happened. This is the counsel of how to return on Rosh Hashanah. We arrive as though nothing has changed.

We return with the same *retzonot* hidden in the *Kodesh HaKodashim* of the mind. We may have fallen, descended, deviated, transgressed, and traveled into distant places. Nevertheless, at the innermost point, we stand before Hashem as though nothing has altered. *Ke'ilu lo notzarti*—as though I had not yet been created, as though I still stood within the undifferentiated light of the *Or Ein Sof*. Regardless of how far I have fallen, I am still here. I am still standing before the King.

Ke'ilu lo era davar, as though nothing happened, because at the deepest level, nothing did happen. All the happenings, all the *mikreh*, all the chance, descent, failure, and suffering are real within the world of *bechirah*, and all of them require our response. But they are not the final story. The final story is the infinite light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Every descent is necessary and becomes a way in which He reveals Himself, but it never touches the deepest bond between the Creator and the soul.

The diamond is never ultimately lost because the diamond was never ours. The light was never a possession we acquired through our perfection, and therefore our imperfection cannot destroy it. Rosh Hashanah returns us to the realm of *yedi'ah*, where we receive the capacity of *retzon yere'av ya'aseh*: to desire the will of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, to accept the will of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and to recognize that everything is contained within the all-encompassing will of the King of kings.

The will of the King is always good. It is always wealth, always riches, always *shefa*. Sometimes we lose what we imagined to be the source of the *shefa*, only to discover that the loss was clearing a space for the *shefa* to return doubled and redoubled. The diamond disappears, but the grain arrives. The object in which we placed our hope is swept into the sea, but the true wealth that belongs to the soul is already traveling toward us.

One Movement of the Mind

It does not matter how far down the number line of *bechirah* I have sunk. I may feel that the diamond is lost, that the captain will kill me, and that every danger I feared has finally arrived. Yet it is never more than one movement of the mind to return to *yedi'ah*, to the place of *ke'ilu lo era davar*. The poor man made himself joyous as though nothing had happened, not because nothing painful had occurred within

the story, but because he refused to let the loss redefine the essence of the story.

There is no descent, *tzimtzum*, or *bastarah* capable of blocking the infinite light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu or destroying the miraculous vessel that receives it, which is the soul. Within us is an inherent *taharah*, irreducible in its purity: a supernal purity rooted beyond every possibility of defilement, the *tehiru ila'ah*. In that place, the soul can become joyous as though nothing happened because, in relation to that place, nothing has.

From the *tzimtzum* downward, the world tells a story of change. But HaKadosh Baruch Hu remains the same infinite light after creation as before creation. On Rosh Hashanah, *rosh kol hamachashavot*, we return to *kadmut hasechel*, to the source of thought. We ascend to the changeless place and attach ourselves to the light in which nothing has changed.

We stand before Hashem and say: "Here I am. I am back. I am the tzaddik I promised You I would be. I will work on everything else during the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah. I will continue to become better, because I have always wanted to become better. But see me now in the light of my inner *tzidkut*. Remember the holiness that was never damaged." That is what HaKadosh Baruch Hu sees. That is what the shofar reveals.

Rosh Hashanah asks us to enter with a second naïveté: the radical willingness to believe once again that this year will be the year. We may have said the same thing last year, only to discover that last year was not the year we imagined. But *mah ichpat li?* What does this year have to do with last year? What does this moment have to do with the moment that preceded it? The past can instruct the world of *bechirah*, but it cannot imprison the world of *yedi'ah*.

We make ourselves joyous as though nothing happened. We enter with joy and with the confidence of redemption. This is the inner meaning of the story told about the holy Baal Shem Tov. A *machshefah*, a terrible darkness, was attacking Jewish children at the moment of birth, and Jewish babies were no longer surviving. There was great suffering and fear. Someone came to the Baal Shem Tov and cried that a woman was in the midst of a dangerous labor, that the situation was desperate, and that the darkness had taken hold of her.

The Baal Shem Tov refused to enter the story as it had been presented. Instead he declared, “Mazal tov! Mazal tov! Mazal tov! It is a beautiful baby boy.” From that declaration came the *yeshu'ah*. He sweetened the judgment at its root by returning to *ke'ilu lo era davar*, to the place in which nothing has changed and all that exists is the infinite light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

The Joy That Carries Us Out

This is the posture with which we enter Rosh Hashanah: a deep stillness, an inward *mesirut nefesh*, like the poor man sitting aboard the ship and gazing out at the sea. He believes himself to be a dying man with no remaining hope, and he discovers that his only path forward is to become joyous as though nothing happened. His joy does not deny the lost diamond. It refuses to surrender the deepest truth of his life to the fact of the loss.

The Torah of *yedi'ah* tells us that our essence remains held within Hashem. The Torah of *bechirah* tells us to rise, choose, repair, and return. Rosh Hashanah unites them. We do not come before the King claiming that the year was perfect. We come before the King knowing that beneath everything the year contained, the soul remains perfect in its root. From that knowledge, honest teshuvah becomes possible. Because I am not fighting to earn back my essential worth, I am finally free to confront what I have done. Because the bond was never severed, I can repair everything that obscured it.

Ki vesimchah tetze'u, with this joy we leave exile. We enter the redemption of the new year with the faith that it will be a year of riches (*Paz*) and *shefa*, a year illuminated by *Baruch She'amar vehayah ha'olam*, the One who spoke and the world came into being. We move forward with equanimity, confidence, responsibility, and joy: not the shallow joy of

pretending that pain is unreal, but the supernal joy of knowing that pain never became the whole truth.

May we merit to live with the wisdom of *asah et atzmo same'ach ke'ilu lo era davar*. May we return to the book of the tzaddikim within our own minds, rediscover the diamond hidden within the mud, and enter Rosh Hashanah knowing that no descent has ever carried us outside the infinite light of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. From that changeless place, may we descend willingly into the holy labor of change, and may the coming year reveal that the wealth prepared for us was greater than anything we believed we had lost.