

**The
great
transition**

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Somewhere in the life-voyage of certain religious people there is a great transition, which can also become a major crisis of significance. The traveler enters this great transition as a man or a woman of God, as a man or woman of truth, and emerges as a Lover of God, as a Seeker of Truth. Each tradition employs its own imagery to describe this transition, and it is known variously as the initiation, the end of apprenticeship, death and rebirth, the sojourn in the wilderness, the passage through the gate, etc. When a traveler passes through the great transition, the significance of the voyage is totally transformed. From the perspective of one who has passed through it, the first leg, the first part of one's life, is perceived as a period of preparation in which the traveler learns the skills of his trade — the basic geography of the cosmos, the rudiments of navigation and map-reading, and the recognition and avoidance of dangers. The great transition is both a summons and a revelation. The traveler opens his sealed sailing instructions, and, for the first time, his true destination becomes clear. He also discovers that although the knowledge he had gleaned and the competences he had acquired previously are of great value — he could not have reached his present station without them — the total picture they give is, ultimately, an illusion, from which he must move into a deeper reality. This great transition is also the point at which many travelers are broken. The new route is so strange when compared with the old that the two appear to be incompatible, or even mutually exclusive. It is a sad but commonplace fact that the life of a religious person, especially in our times, is often no preparation for the tasks facing a Seeker of Truth.

I perceive precisely such a crisis, a breaking point, in the religious lives of many of my Jewish friends today. They have come so far as Jews, have learned the traditional wisdom of the Jewish religion, and have accepted, with some degree or other of commitment, its praxis, its skills. And then, suddenly, comes the summons, comes the revelation. The response is frequently one of shock, of despair. No matter how clear the recognition that the call is of truth, and to truth, they feel that they have not been prepared to make the crossing, that nothing that they have learned as Jews has equipped them for the life of a Seeker of Truth. The great transition is seen as

impassible. At this point, many shrug off the summons, and justify themselves by saying that the new route is not part of the Jewish way; some attempt to continue as if nothing had taken place, and tend to live rather impoverished, automatic, religious lives. Others, and their number seems to be growing, accept the summons, but feel that they cannot pursue it within Judaism, that they cannot reach completion as Jews; these are the Jewish dropouts, the recruits to other, especially Eastern, religions.

Personally, I believe that this crisis can be navigated, and that it is possible to make the passage and to emerge as a religious Jew. The difficulties are formidable, especially for those outside the orthodox camp. Those who wish to undertake it must be willing to seek out and to find the Jewish wisdom that deals with the path to enlightenment, forewarned that the access to it is obstructed; the texts are obscure, and teachers are few. Such travelers must be prepared to question and to challenge much of what they have previously learned of Judaism, even, on occasion, to the point of smashing apparently sacrosanct structures in order to extract a few holy stones. Nevertheless, I believe that it can be done, and that the effort will be richly rewarded. What follows is an offering of insights, derived from my own work and that of my friends, into the nature of some of the obstacles we have encountered. There are, of course, no answers, but the very understanding of a difficulty is often a step towards confronting it.

The first obstacle derives from a confusion of means and ends. Is one a Jew primarily in order to serve God, or is one a Jew for a variety of valid, though ultimately extrinsic reasons, among which religion, at least ontologically, is secondary? Now, it is clear that membership of any religious community is determined to a large extent by psychological and sociological factors, but in the case of the Jews, with the burden of three thousand years of troubled history and a community structure that was fashioned at least partially by external pressures, these are particularly heavy. Thus, for example, even a person who finds little satisfaction in Judaism is likely to feel bound to it by a sense of guilt. How can one abandon a path that one's forefathers fought so ferociously to defend, on many occasions at risk to their lives? How can one opt out of a nation that was threatened so barbarically with extinction in the most recent past? How can one desert a community under siege?

Parallel to, or flowing from, this continued association out of a sense of guilt, another, more positive and certainly more acceptable mechanism develops: the growth and reinforcement of personal identity by means of membership in a group. The Jew learns

to love and to be proud of the values of his group, its path and its praxis; and he receives warm rewards for this loyalty. On the most basic level he acquires a strong identity and a support group upon which he can call in time of crisis. On a higher level, he discovers the rich spiritual resources that are his heritage, a well-tried way to worship God, a world view that attributes deep significance to the cycles of life, and a theology that promises—despite the vagaries of history—divine protection and ultimate vindication. Now, there is nothing wrong with such mechanisms. They are both commendable and essential for a group that has every right to desire to continue to exist. Nevertheless, for the Jewish traveler who approaches the great transition, they can constitute a serious obstacle. He learns that in order to proceed with his work—which is to understand God’s will and to align his whole being with it—he must strip ego from self, must rid himself of all habits of thought that inhibit the freedom of his soul. He has to learn to purify his praxis, so that it will serve the one goal. The Jewish identity we have described makes this task very difficult, for it has welded together the functions of the soul and the process of survival.

So far we have dealt with problems whose provenance is sociological, the effects of a recruitment to a religious community for reasons that are not primarily associated with the worship of God. Let us now turn to another group of obstacles, those that derive from an apparent incompatibility between what the traveler has learned in the first part of his voyage—that is, the Judaism he has received—and what he perceives as the path beyond the great transition—to become a Seeker of Truth. These difficulties are of a mixed etiology, but can broadly be attributed to the sad state of contemporary Judaism. I have no intention here of embarking upon a critique of Jewish theology, and shall limit my diagnosis to a single sentence: Judaism appears to be suffering from a lack of knowledge of the old and from an inability to confront the new.

The first obstacle in this group is one that all but the most extraordinarily fortunate seekers are certain to encounter: the almost universally accepted, but quite false, hypothesis that Judaism does not acknowledge the “inner path of quest” as a legitimate route to God. Had I not been so sternly warned by my academic teachers to reject out of hand all “conspiracy” theories, I would be greatly tempted to adopt such an explanation. Ask a hundred rabbis, and you find that many will say that it is not the Jewish way. “Enlightenment is not a goal in Judaism.” Survey the numerous scholarly works on Jewish mysticism, and with one or two remarkable but little known exceptions, you will find no reference to it. Even accounts of small closed groups that were clearly

established as holy communities are generally written in a way that emphasizes other, secondary characteristics, such as the messianic aspirations of the members. Scan the textbooks, the manuals, the encyclopedias for material on meditation, and you are likely to conclude that it was never part of Jewish praxis. Nevertheless, there is a vast body of Jewish wisdom on the inner path, dispersed in books on the Kabbalah, and especially in the later Hasidic works. True, it is not presented in monographic discourses (Hasidic books are notoriously nonsystematic), and there are few explicit manuals of instruction, but it is possible to glean a mass of important teachings from these sources. Some Hasidic writers, for example, deal extensively with the processes of cognition, the migration of attention through the various levels of consciousness, and specifically with the problem of the painful descent from the holistic mode, from an ecstatic perception of an all-pervading oneness, to the individuated mode, the perception of particularized reality. Many other topics of a related nature, comprising together what could be called the basics of the mystic's craft, can be located in a good Jewish library.

This obstacle, this systematic denial of access to information, is in fact a new manifestation of an ancient and perennial struggle, that between priest and prophet, theologian and mystic, the community and the ecstatic. When perceived as such, it is relatively easy to confront: it is not that no path exists, but that there are powerful social forces that wish to prevent one from following it.

The problems that derive from the inadequacies of modern Jewish theology, however, are far more difficult to resolve. The traveler needs theology; it is an essential navigational aid, and he cannot proceed without it. The task of theology is to provide a reliable map, a concept of the universe in which every detail is significant and the life of the individual is meaningful. Furthermore, theology must describe the features of the universe in such a way that the mystery that enshrouds them is untouched. Divinity resides in mystery. The major failing of theology today is that it has restricted its own applicability to a few relatively safe areas of existence. Most of the universe is no longer mysterious, or at least not so in religious terms.

Traditionally, Jewish theology relates to and portrays four interrelated areas of existence, which may be envisaged as four concentric circles. The innermost is the human soul; the second circle is the individual's immediate environment, which starts with his body and reaches out to the entire Jewish people; the third is the cosmos,

everything that God created; and the outermost circle is the Creation, the mythical key to an understanding of the personality of God and the nature of his relationship with the world.

Much of the work of Jewish theologians and thinkers in recent years has been directed towards the second circle, most specifically towards the contemporary problems of the Jewish people. Thus serious attempts have been made to grapple with the agonizing problem of the Holocaust, and, on the brighter side, the significance of the establishment of the State of Israel. Now, although an understanding of what it means to be the Chosen People is extremely important in such traumatic and dramatic times, its value is limited when the universe as a whole is unfathomable from the perspective of religion.

For centuries theology (both Jewish and non-Jewish) fought against the encroachments of science into what it considered to be its private territory. Frequently, however, it seems to have done so for the wrong reasons. By focusing the issue on the conflict between religious dogma and scientific fact, the theologians failed to perceive the deeper significance of the scientific world view. When, in recent years, they were willing to accommodate, to concede that, for example, there was no inherent contradiction between dogma and the discoveries of Galileo and Darwin, and that the book of Genesis was in many ways an allegory and not a textbook of history, it was too late. The scientific cosmology had won the day, and its significance is not that the earth is not the center of the universe, or that man evolved from amoebas by way of worms and apes. The cosmological teaching of modern science is that man is insignificant: in terms of the infinite reaches of time and space, human history is but an ephemeral, local event of minute proportions; not only is man not the final stage of Creation, he is not even necessarily the highest form of life, just the most recent development on this particular planet. The effect of this onslaught of science upon religion has been devastating. Instead of confronting an exciting new world, theology has restricted its concerns to safe familiarities, and even these seem at times to be demystified.

For the traveler who becomes a Seeker of Truth, such a theology is of no more value than a broken toy. He must relate to the mysteries of astrophysics, and must face with awe his own minute proportions in relation to the cosmos. He must ponder once again the question posed so powerfully in the Bible, by Ezekiel, by Job and the Psalmist: In

such a terrifying world, is there any significance to my life? The Jewish seeker cannot determine his coordinates exclusively within the narrow bounds of Jewish history and people-hood; he must plot his course also by the most distant galaxies.

Paradoxically, this is not a particularly difficult task, though it may seem formidable. Whereas much modern theology appears to be paralyzed in the face of the new cosmology, that embodied in the old Jewish mystical tradition, the Kabbalah, appears to be alive and pertinent. These strange theosophical works depict a universe of infinite size and complexity in which, on the one hand, man is insignificantly small, and yet, on the other, he is the observer and the actor who stands at the center. It is obviously a fruitless pursuit to attempt to find equivalences between the details of the Kabbalistic picture of the universe and, for example, the Big Bang (though, needless to say, it has been attempted), but the modes of cognition, and even the theory of knowledge, seem to coexist in peace. What I wish to say here is that the Kabbalah offers a map of the cosmos that is not incompatible with our new knowledge, and can match it in excitement. A friend of mine once remarked that were the great mystics of the Middle Ages alive today, they would surely employ science fiction as a vehicle for their works. In my opinion, the writings of Isaac Luria, a major Kabbalist who lived in the sixteenth century, were just such science fiction.

So far I have reviewed a few common obstacles of a more general nature. Before concluding with a short discussion of what is most frequently considered to be the most serious difficulty of the Jewish seeker, the lack of teachers, I shall list three or four more problems, each a cluster of closely related questions, and shall devote no more than a few words to each.

Is the Jewish praxis really the way? Is compliance with a complex set of commandments an aid or an obstacle to the path? Do not the details obscure the essential work? Is it possible to be confident that, in performing a particular minor ritual, one is making manifest the will of God? My response to these questions is to repeat what has been given to me: It is the way if one chooses it as the way.

Does not the great emphasis placed on study in the Jewish tradition introduce an element of achievement orientation, of personal involvement with success, precisely in

the area in which one must be free of the constrictions of ego? The answer to this is that there is such a danger, but that the great teachers, especially of the Hasidic movement, were aware of it, and fought against it on both the personal and social levels.

Does not Jewish self-consciousness, drawing on centuries of apologetics, engender a rather over-serious, humorless way of looking at the world? Can the Jew smile in his prayers? Can he perceive the laughter in the universe? Can he hear the Almighty chuckling? This one is difficult. The perception of the humorous is certainly a requirement of many seekers, but many others have done without.

The final item I shall mention in this survey is the lack of teachers. Whereas the western world appears to be inundated with great (and less great) gurus and spiritual guides, there are very few who can lead the seeker on the Jewish path. Once there were many. A Jew living in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, in the heyday of the Hasidic revival, could probably choose between a dozen or more great *rebbe*s, and he would be able to select the one whose path and regimen seemed to suit him best. What then must the modern Jewish traveler do, as he approaches the great transition and desperately needs the direction of a spiritual mentor? First, he must realize that he is not alone, and that there are many others in the same predicament. Seekers of Truth who have no spiritual teachers must come together and teach each other.