



Kavanah as Existential Living - Judaism and the "Here and Now"

Many of us Rabbis have been preoccupied during the past couple of years in our reading, thinking, writing and speaking about the question of "**What makes a meaningful life?**"

Recently I rediscovered that an old Hebrew concept contains the seeds for unfolding one of the most germinal ideas in modern thought for a mature, purposeful, and energetic existence.

The ancient rabbinic concept of "*Kavanah*", I find, it is very closely related to what modern existential theologians as well as humanistic psychologists refer to as **living in the "here and now."**

Thus, my message for this season is

to explore one of the keys to finding a more significant, more zestful, more satisfying way of life, religiously, emotionally, existentially.

As in so many other instances, the ancient Hebrew sages anticipated the insights and discoveries of the most modern students of human behavior.

The word *Kavanah* has several levels of meaning. It is variously translated as "**intention**" and "**motivation**," on the one hand, and "**devoutness**" and "**concentration**" on the other. According to our revered teachers, prayer and *mitzvot* should be performed with sincerity, with motivation, with concentration, with the proper intention, and with devoutness. Some rabbis even went so far as to say that performing a *mitzvah* without *kavanah* is without total merit. Surely, they all agreed that the act of prayer must be accompanied by **giving of oneself fully and totally to that activity with all-involving concentration.**

The *Shulkhan Arukh* warns us,

"*Tov m'at be-kavanah, me-harbeh blee kavanah,*"
or "Better is a little with kavanah than a lot without it."

The Eighteenth Century Hasidic work called *Tanya* states:

"*Tefillah b'lo kavanah ke-guf blee neshama,*"

“Prayer without kavanah is like a body without a soul.”

Most insistent of all the rabbinic scholars on the presence of *Kavanah* in prayer was Maimonides, who, despite his strong neo-Aristotelian rationality, shows himself to be a mystic at heart when it comes to communication with the Divine Presence, the *Shekhinah*. In his Code of Law, he writes:¹

"*Kavanah* means that the worshiper must clear his mind of all private thoughts and regard himself as standing before the *Shekhinah*. If his thoughts are wandering or occupied with other things, he should not pray . . . Prayer should be accomplished quietly and with feeling, not like one who is trying to unload a burden and departs as soon as he gets rid of it."

In his other *magnum opus*, the GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED, which is Maimonides' major philosophical treatise, he deals with the proper approach to the recitation of the two most significant prayers in the Hebrew liturgy, the *Sh'ma* and the *Amidah*:²

"The first thing you do is this: Turn your thoughts away from everything while you read *Sh'ma* or during the *Tefillah* . . . After some time, when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the prophets, or when you say any blessing... When you are engaged in the performance of religious duties, have your mind exclusively directed to what you are doing."

In that paragraph, Maimonides hints to us that the behavior which is appropriate for prayer and study is also most fitting for other religious acts and duties—namely, **having one's mind free from all other things and having it directed exclusively to what one is doing at this very moment.**

More and more in recent years, students of human life and human development have been finding this key of full concentration, of being fully present where you are, as the basis of meaningful living.

Some twenty years ago, Erich Fromm wrote his classic little volume for the WORLD PERSPECTIVES SERIES called THE ART OF LOVING (1956). In it, he tells

¹ Tefillah 4:16

² 3:51

his readers that loving another human being is an art and a skill which must be carefully cultivated, like any other delicate art and skill. To master any art, he explains, requires a great measure of concentration. But in our culture, we are taught the opposite of concentration.

"You do many things at once," explains Fromm. "You read, listen to the radio, talk, smoke, eat, drink. You are the consumer with the open mouth, eager and ready to swallow everything—pictures, liquor, knowledge. This lack of concentration is clearly shown in our difficulty in being alone with ourselves. To sit still, without talking, smoking, reading, drinking, is impossible for most people. They become nervous and fidgety and must do something with their mouth or hands. . . ." ³

We have heard countless times of people who try to quit smoking only to find that they increase their eating activity. For healthy, mature and meaningful life, Fromm advises this prescription:

". . . **one must learn to be concentrated in everything one does**, in listening to music, in reading a book, in talking to a person, in seeing a view. **The activity at this very moment must be the only thing that matters**, to which one is fully given. If one is concentrated, it matters little what one is doing; the important, as well as the unimportant things assume a new dimension of reality, because they have one's full attention." ⁴

Fromm's teaching coincides with some of the most important teachings of Hasidic Judaism, which stress full enjoyment and immersion in life "here and now" rather than in some future far-off dream world. Martin Eicher in his classic collection, *TALES OF THE HASIDIM*,⁵ , explains:

"The hassidic movement did not weaken the hopes in a Messiah, but it kindled... its ... followers to joy in the world as it is, in life as it is, in every hour of life in this world, as that hour is. Without dulling the prick of conscience... hassidism shows men the way to God who dwells with them..."

³ Fromm, 1956, pages 108-9

⁴ Fromm, 1956, page 113

⁵ 1947, I, page 3

According to Buber, Hasidism could be summed up in a single sentence: "God can be beheld in each thing and - reached through each pure deed." It was the excitement of each moment, the newness of each experience, that made life exciting, challenging and daring, according to the Hasidic view of Judaism.

One of the disciples of Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn (d. 1858) was asked, "What was most important to your teacher?" The disciple answered, "Whatever he happened to be doing at the moment."⁶ In Buber's study of the Hasidic tradition,⁷ he relates:

"It is said of a certain Talmudic master that the paths of heaven were as bright to him as the streets of his native town. Hasidism inverts the order stating that, it is a greater thing if the streets of a man's native town are as bright to him as the paths of heaven. For it is here, where we stand, that we should try to make shine the light of the hidden divine life.

"If we had power over the ends of the earth, it would not give us that fulfillment of existence which a quiet devoted relationship to nearby life can give us. If we knew the secrets of the upper worlds, they would not allow us so much actual participation in true existence as we can achieve by performing, with holy intent, a task belonging to our daily duties. Our treasure is hidden beneath the heart of our own home."

Scholars have pointed out that **real genius consists of utilizing one's talents fully and completely by concentrating on acts of creativity.** All the talents in the world will not bring achievement without the added significant cutting edge of total concentration. In Schiller's words, "GENIUS IS CONCENTRATION."⁸ Existentialist philosopher Martin Buber recounts the story of how he first came to discover his popular new philosophy of human relationships which he calls "I-THOU", a relationship of full devotion and concentration. He had counseled a young man who left the scholar's study unsatisfied and a short time later took his own life. That experience was seminal in Buber's discovery of the importance of a full human-to-human encounter, an I-THOU meeting of full beings. Buber realized that he had not been fully listening to the young student, had not given

⁶ Buber, 1948, II, page 173

⁷ 1958, pages 172-3

⁸ Perls, 1969, page 92

him his undivided attention, and had therefore been unable to hear him fully, not to speak of answering his gnawing anxieties.

Fritz Perls, modern founder of GESTALT THERAPY, found his remarkable success with his clients in what he came to call "CONCENTRATION THERAPY".⁹ He discovered that when he was able to get his clients to focus their total awareness in the present moment, and cease unproductive historical ruminations, and stop constantly blaming themselves over past mistakes, then a certain magic would take place in their psychic health. By giving full concentration to the act of the present moment, through attention to internal silence, body concentration, and other related techniques, he was able to help his clients regain their sense of aliveness and energy and hopefulness.¹⁰

It seems that the penetrating insights of the ancient and medieval Jewish sages were far in advance of their time when they stressed the importance of **not trying to do more than one thing at one time**. It is such a simple and obvious idea, yet one which, if carried out fully, could literally transform a person's total life.

- All of us can tell of stories of people in the helping professions who gave less than their all to their clients, students, or patients, and seemed to be preoccupied with other things instead of giving full attention to the problems at hand.
- All of us can think of times when members of our family were too busy daydreaming about the future, or romanticizing about the past, instead of giving themselves to the person with whom they were speaking or relating.
- All of us can think of occasions when, instead of being helpful to those we love, to friends, or to charges, we were wrapped up rehearsing past events, or mentally preparing for future tasks, instead of living in the "here and now."

An important distinction must be made between being concerned with the past and the future and being consumed by them. It is good to take direction from our past history and personal lives. It is good to make plans for days and years ahead, to work toward a far-off goal. **The mistake we make is living in**

⁹ 1969, pages 185 ff.

¹⁰ Shepard, page 50

the past, or in the future, instead of merely living for them. What we must learn to do is to live in the present and the present only.

Dr. Joseph Stein makes a similar point when he suggests that:

...to find a more productive way of life people who have become accustomed to live in the past or in the future must redirect their life patterns. Such a person "needs to undertake sex for the sake of sex, not to prove he is a good lover; to work largely for the sake of work, not just to support his family; to have friends for the sake of friendship, not to make connections to use in his business; to read to enjoy the excitement of ideas, not to be able to participate in conversations at social gatherings; to own a car as a means of conveyance, not to impress others with something he can scarcely afford. He deprives his life of zest and spontaneity when he fails to live existentially".¹¹

In *THE MAN OF LA MANCHA*, Don Quixote advises:

Take a deep breath of life
and consider how it should be lived . . .

Call nothing your own
except your soul.

Love not what you are,
but only what you may become.

Look always forward:

In last year's nest, there are no birds
this year.

Maimonides realized some seven centuries ago that one who is searching in last year's nest will not be able to contact His maker, or perform a meaningful good deed for his neighbor.

In the same way, Fritz Perls tells of the young man who had an engagement for dinner one evening at 9:00 with a lovely lady friend. He had an examination in college the next morning. He had planned to study from 7:00 to 9:00, and then go out to dinner from 9:00 to midnight. But between 7:00 and 9:00 all he could think about was his dinner date at 9:00, and thus did not succeed in studying properly for the exam. Then, when sitting at dinner with his young lady friend, he berated himself the entire time about the coming examination for which he

¹¹ 1972, page 90

had not prepared himself. In the earlier part of the evening, he lived in the future, instead of the present. Then, in the latter part of the evening, he lived in the past, with recriminations about his failure to study properly, and ruined his entire evening. Had he lived in the here and now, he might have studied from 7:00 to 9:00, and having finished that, enjoyed his date from nine to midnight.

Dr. Jut Meininger speaks of the concept of "TIME COMPETENCY" in his recent book, *SUCCESS THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS*.¹² "The person," he writes,

"who is time competent lives in the present, using information from his past and expectations of the future to enhance his perception of the present, not to limit it. The past and the future extend his perspective; they don't interfere with it. They help him plan, to assess probabilities, and to alter his present actions and his commitments to the future in terms of how he sees those probabilities. They broaden his understanding of the relationship between events—his sense of continuity between what has been, what is, and what is yet to be. Above all, the past and the future help the time competent person rather than hinder him."

How many people do we know who live in either the past or the future, wasting their precious days here on earth without savoring the sacredness of the present hour?

Some who live in the past beat their breast over foolish mistakes, wrong decisions, poor judgments, wasted years, and unnoticed opportunities. When we live in the present, we are aware of past errors, admit them and learn from them, but don't constantly wallow in them.

When we live in the future, we hope for a better day or save for a dream vacation or fantasy home without ever stopping on the way to taste the joys and excitement of the journey to reach them. "Some day," we say to ourselves, "I'll begin to enjoy life." We work hard and save up time!

Richard Alpert discovered these truths in the Talmud, from Maimonides and Hasidism, but his autobiography provides a fascinating example of the importance of existential living, of living in the "here and now."

¹² 1963, page 101

He tells of a visit to his wealthy father, just after his mother's death. His father was a conservative Boston Republican who had been President of the NEW HAVEN RAILROAD and a major contributor to BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY and ALBERT EINSTEIN MEDICAL SCHOOL. On the way home from the airport, his father speaks of his gloom and doom and how life is now totally without purpose for him. Arriving home, they decide to make raspberry jam, which was a hobby of his father's. While they sterilize the bottles and mash the raspberries, the father persists in his gloomy mood, speaking of how everyone has forgotten and neglected him.

Alpert, later to be known as Ram Dass ignores his father's talk of gloom and talks only of the raspberries. "Should the bubbles all rise to the top?" he asks. Soon his father, receiving no reinforcement for his dark cloud that he is creating and holding all by himself, gives it up, and turns his attention to the raspberries. "Well, get all the bubbles up," he warns his son. Very quickly the conversation turns to the here and now, the father relaxes and laughs, and the two of them find tremendous fun in making raspberry jam.

Ram Dass then completes the tale:

"To short cut the whole story, let me explain that eight months later, I gave the bride away at his marriage... He married a beautiful, wonderful woman. As he went into the temple, he said to me, 'This is all your doing, you know,' because what I did was hold his hand all the time because all of his questions would be about the future or the past, like 'Is this wrong in terms of the memory of Mother? Is this going to be a terrible thing later?' All I was saying was, 'How does it feel today? Did you have a good time at dinner last night? What are we doing today?' And he said, 'Oh, it's wonderful. She's a wonderful person... As soon as his mind stopped creating all that stuff about then and there, and he lived here and now... he was having a ball. He was writing love songs and they went on a honeymoon in Scotland and Ireland."

Of course, the father had beautiful and wonderful memories of his first wife. But wallowing in gloom would surely not have served either those memories or himself very well. It took a "here and now" philosopher to recognize that, and to help his father live for the past and for the future, but still very much in the present.

It is obvious, then, that Maimonides' extension of the old rabbinic principle of *Kavanah* has implications for how we relate to others, how we treat ourselves, how we see our lives, and how we make our decisions. Let's stop rehearsing the good and the bad of our past to the point of making our lives too historical instead of vibrant and alive. Let's not only dream about what can be in some glorious far off year, but make it happen beginning this very hour.

In Saul Ansky's version of THE DYBBUK he talks about the sacred nature of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, when the holiest man of his people, the High Priest, steps into the Holy of Holies, the holiest place in the holiest city in the holiest land.

"Once during the year, at a certain hour, these supreme sanctities of the world were joined with one another . . . "Every spot where a man raises his eyes to heaven is a holy of holies. Every man, having been created by God in His own image and likeness, is a high priest. Every day of a man's life is a Day of Atonement, and every word that a man speaks with sincerity is the Name of the Lord".¹³

The Jewish way of achieving existential living, of living dynamically in the here and now, is to sanctify life in such a way that each of us every hour of every day is a high priest in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement!!

Listen to the words of Richard L. Evans: ¹⁴

"There are fathers waiting until other obligations are less demanding to become acquainted with their sons. There are mothers who sincerely intend to be more attentive to their daughters. There are husbands and wives who are going to be more understanding. But time does not draw people closer!!

When in the world are we going to begin to live as if we understood that this is life? This is our time, our day and it is passing. What are we waiting for?"

The ancient sage Hillel was very much tradition oriented, very much history oriented, and yet in the popular ancient collection of rabbinic sayings called PIRKE AVOT, his most significant and well-known maxim ends with four simple Hebrew words:

Ve-im lo achshav, aymatay? If not now, when?

¹³ quoted in The Jewish Catalog, 1974, page 5

¹⁴ quoted in Mark Lin , 1972, page 11