

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Where Am I?
(Unwrapping a Hasidic Story)

Buber, Martin: The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism. Vincent Stuart. London. 1963.

In memory of Anita White



Why this story? Why now?

I came across this story a long time ago, in my early years of rabbinical studies. I do associate the story with Rabbi Reubén Nisenbom, who taught a course on Martin Buber's Hasidic stories in the Argentinean Spring of 1983. While I attended the full course, I only remember flashes of it. I wasn't even 18 years old, and I didn't fully appreciate the depth of the teachings nor the quality of my teacher. Years later and almost an ordained rabbi, I sought spiritual counsel with Reuben and slowly his early teachings came back to me. The few times we met in his office at Congregacion Emanu-El in Buenos Aires, deeply shaped my rabbinate.

A few years ago, encouraged by a Hartman colleague, David Thomas, I read Buber's *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism*. I remember enjoying the pamphlet but now I realize that it was not meant to be enjoyed. Paraphrasing my teacher, Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, if you didn't feel it burning inside, it didn't do the job.

In his book *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism*, Buber tells the story about the man who can't find his clothes in the morning. Now the story is in front of me, one more time. Searching for the story online I came across a direct translation from the original story in *Siach Sarfei Kaddesh*, together with a superb analysis of the story by Admiel Kosman. I had exchanged emails with Admiel Kosman a few years ago and I wish I could call him my rabbi.

Anita White, of blessed memory, was a beloved member of Hillcrest Jewish Center. Anita loved the story and frequently repeated its punch line: "where am I?" I knew she was referring to Chanokh Heynekh of Aleksander's story, even if she herself had forgotten where the line came from.

A few days ago I saw Silvia's "to do list" for Presidents' Week. I couldn't help but think that after all the items on the list are crossed out, what's going to happen? Will she or I find more meaning in our lives after we are done crossing out all the items in our lists, replying to all our emails, returning all the phone calls?

That night I dreamt about the story and I woke up pondering "where am I?"

Like the man in our story I couldn't find myself in the morning, or in the afternoon, or the next morning, so I decided to read the story anew, to study it and to teach it, with the hope of at least renewing the search.

Background to Our Story

Chanokh Heynekh HaKohen Levin



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chanokh_Heynekh_HaKohen_Levin

Chanokh Heynekh HaKohen Levin (1798 – March 21, 1870 of Aleksander served as the rebbe of a community of thousands of Hasidim during the "interregnum" between the Chidushei HaRim of Ger and the Sfas Emes.

Chanokh Heynekh was one of the leading students of the Rebbe Reb Simcha Bunim of Peshischa. After the latter's death he became one of the most prominent followers of Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk and the senior disciple of Chidushei hoRim. Following the death of the Chidushei hoRim in 1866, the bulk of his numerous chasidim chose Rabbi Chanokh Heynekh as the next rebbe.

Chanokh Heynekh served as the Rabbi in the Jewish communities of Aleksander from 1837 (or earlier) till 1853, Nowy Dwór from 1853 to 1859, and Przasnysz from 1859 to 1864 (or 1866). After his tenure In Przasnysz he retired from the rabbinate and settled in Aleksander, where he lived during his period of leadership as rebbe.

His teachings are collected in *Chashovoh leToivo* (first published in 1929), and are quoted widely.

Martin Buber



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Buber



Martin Buber (Hebrew: מרטין בובר, German: *Martin Buber*, Yiddish: מארטין בובער; February 8, 1878 – June 13, 1965) was an Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher best known for his philosophy of dialogue, a form of existentialism centered on the distinction between the I–Thou relationship and the I–It relationship. Born in Vienna, Buber came from a family of observant Jews, but broke with Jewish custom to pursue secular studies in philosophy. In 1902, he became the editor of the weekly *Die Welt*, the central organ of the Zionist

movement, although he later withdrew from organizational work in Zionism. In 1923, Buber wrote his famous essay on existence, *Ich und Du* (later translated into English as *I and Thou*), and in 1925, he began translating the Hebrew Bible into the German language.

In 1930, Buber became an honorary professor at the University of Frankfurt am Main, but resigned in protest from his professorship immediately after Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. He then founded the Central Office for Jewish Adult Education, which became an increasingly important body as the German government forbade Jews to attend public education. In 1938, Buber left Germany and settled in Jerusalem, Mandate Palestine (later Israel), receiving a professorship at Hebrew University and lecturing in anthropology and introductory sociology.

Buber was a direct descendent of the prominent 16th century rabbi Meir Katzenellenbogen, known as the Maharam of Padua, as was his cousin, cosmetics entrepreneur Helena Rubinstein. Karl Marx is another notable relative.

Buber's wife Paula died in 1958, and he died at his home in the Talbiya neighborhood of Jerusalem on June 13, 1965. They had two children: a son, Rafael Buber and a daughter, Eva Strauss-Steinitz.

Buber was a scholar, interpreter, and translator of Hasidic lore. He viewed Hasidism as a source of cultural renewal for Judaism, frequently citing examples from the Hasidic tradition that emphasized community, interpersonal life, and meaning in common activities (e.g., a worker's relation to his tools). The Hasidic ideal, according to Buber, emphasized a life lived in the unconditional presence of God, where there was no distinct separation between daily habits and religious experience. This was a major influence on Buber's philosophy of anthropology, which considered the basis of human existence as dialogical.

In 1906, Buber published *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, a collection of the tales of the Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, a renowned Hasidic *rebbe*, as interpreted and retold in a Neo-Hasidic fashion by Buber. Two years later, Buber published *Die Legende des Baalschem* (stories of the Baal Shem Tov), the founder of Hasidism.

Buber's interpretation of the Hasidic tradition, however, has been criticized by scholars such as Chaim Potok for its romanticization. In the introduction to Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*, Potok notes that Buber overlooked Hasidism's "charlatanism, obscurantism, internecine quarrels, its heavy freight of folk superstition and pietistic excesses, its tzadik worship, its vulgarized and attenuated reading of Lurianic Kabbalah." Even more severe is the criticism that Buber deemphasized the importance of the Jewish Law in Hasidism. This is ironic, considering that Buber often delved into Hasidim to demonstrate that individual religiosity did not require a dogmatic, creedal religion.

Golem



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem>

In Jewish folklore, a golem (Hebrew: גולם) is an animated anthropomorphic being, magically created entirely from inanimate matter. The word was used to mean an amorphous, unformed material (usually out of stone and clay) in Psalms and medieval writing. The most famous golem narrative involves Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the late-16th-century rabbi of Prague. There are many tales differing on how the golem was brought to life and afterwards controlled.

The word *golem* occurs once in the Bible in Psalm 139:16, which uses the word גלמי (*galmi*; my golem), meaning "my unshaped form," connoting the unfinished human being before God's eyes. The Mishnah uses the term for an uncultivated person: "Seven characteristics

are in an uncultivated person, and seven in a learned one," (Pirkei Avot 5:6 in the Hebrew text; English translations vary). In Modern Hebrew, *golem* is used to mean "dumb" or "helpless". Similarly, it is often used today as a metaphor for a brainless lunk or entity who serves man under controlled conditions but is hostile to him under others. "Golem" passed into Yiddish as *goylem* to mean someone who is clumsy or slow.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

¹I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless.²"Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?"³I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

⁴I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁵I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my labor,

and this was the reward for all my toil.

¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done

and what I had toiled to achieve,

everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;

nothing was gained under the sun.



Reading the Story.

Buber, Martin: The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism. Page. 30.

Rabbi Hanokh told this story:

There was once a man who was very stupid. When he got up in the morning it was so hard for him to find his clothes that at night he almost hesitated to go to bed for thinking of the trouble he would have on waking.

One evening he finally made a great effort, took paper and pencil and as he undressed noted down exactly where he put everything he had on. The next morning, very well pleased with himself, he took the slip of paper in his hand and read: "cap" -there it was, he set it on his head; "pants" -there they lay, he got into them; and so it went until he was fully dressed. "That's all very well, but now where am I myself?" he asked in great consternation. "Where

in the world am I?" He looked and looked, but it was a vain search; he could not find himself.

"And that is how it is with us," said the rabbi.

? How can you best describe the state of mind of the man in our story before he came up with the idea of making the list?

? "One evening he finally made a great effort..." Why was it a great effort for the man in our story to take the paper, the pencil, and to make the list?

? How can you best describe the state of mind of the man in our story as he was making the list?

? How can you best describe the state of mind of the man in our story as he was finally fully dressed but couldn't find himself?

Below is a slightly different version of our story (as it appears in *Siach Sarfei Kodesh, Volume 2, Page 58, translated by Admiel Kosman*). Read this version as well and then address the questions below:

Once there was an ignorant man who was called Golem because of his foolishness. He was afraid to sleep at night, because he would have to take off his clothes, and the next morning he wouldn't remember to gather them up from all the places where he had left them. One time he took paper and pencil, and wrote on the paper all the places where he had put his clothes, so that he could sleep in peace. This is what he wrote: "Hat on this side, pants on this side, shoes on this side," and so with all his clothes, so that in the morning he would remember where everything was. In the morning, when he arose from his bed, he was about to gather up all his clothes, and he read what he had written to himself. That is: hat in such-and-such a place, and so forth. Then he thought about this, and said: "Wie bin ich?" [Where am I?], because he searched for himself, as well, in his bed. Understand, this undoubtedly alludes to a great ethical teaching, as can be understood. (Siach Sarfei Kodesh vol. 2, p. 58)

? Ignorant, golem, fool, stupid. Which of these words better describes the man of our story?



Our man's question - "where am I?"- as troubling as it is for him, it is a moment of deep insight (good questions, even unanswered questions usually are).

What was necessary to happen for our man to come up with his “ultimate” question?

- ! Finding our place in life: a very taxing task we won’t achieve by “making lists.”

the Appendix

PONDER AND CONSIDER: A Different Reading. A Different Insight

By Rabbi Rami Shapiro, From: [Hasidic Tales](#), Skylight Paths, 2004

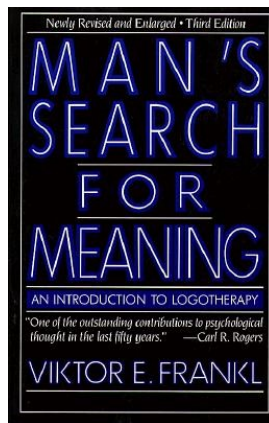
What is this story getting at? Think about it: where am I? Where are you, indeed? I'm standing here! And you're sitting in this chair, of course! It's obvious, isn't it? Or is it really that obvious? At some point, especially if I keep droning on, you may look at your watch and say 'What time is it? When does this end, anyway? I wonder what there will be to eat when this is over?' If you can catch yourself at that very moment, then where are you? Are you really still here? Or have you actually gotten lost in time? I don't mean time-travelling, I mean: have you suddenly looked at your watch and mentally left this moment in favor of some other, future moment?

Similarly, you could be sitting here listening to me, and suddenly you remember that you forgot to return an important email from yesterday, or you remember a fight you had with a family member last week, and you're feeling bad about it. Again, are you really here, or are you now lost in the past? In either case, have you actually left the chair? Physically, of course not. But in every other sense—you have left this place. You're gone. You're missing this moment, the only moment that's *really* happening!

Bibliography

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s_Search_for_Meaning

Man's Search for Meaning is a 1946 book by Viktor Frankl chronicling his experiences as an Auschwitz concentration camp inmate during World War II, and describing his psychotherapeutic method, which involved identifying a purpose in life to feel positively about, and then immersively imagining that outcome. According to Frankl, the way a prisoner imagined the future affected his longevity. The book intends to answer the question "How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?" Part One constitutes Frankl's analysis of his experiences in the concentration camps, while Part Two introduces his ideas of meaning and his theory called logotherapy.

According to a survey conducted by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress, *Man's Search For Meaning* belongs to a list of "the ten most influential books in the United States." At the time of the author's death in 1997, the book had sold over 10 million copies and had been translated into 24 languages.

Experiences in a concentration camp

Frankl identifies three psychological reactions experienced by all inmates to one degree or another: (1) shock during the initial admission phase to the camp, (2) apathy after becoming accustomed to camp existence, in which the inmate values only that which helps himself and his friends survive, and (3) reactions of depersonalization, moral deformity, bitterness, and disillusionment if he survives and is liberated.

Frankl concludes that the meaning of life is found in every moment of living; life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death. In a group therapy session during a mass fast inflicted on the camp's inmates trying to protect an anonymous fellow inmate from fatal retribution by authorities, Frankl offered the thought that for everyone in a dire condition there is someone looking down, a friend, family member, or even God, who would expect not to be disappointed. Frankl concludes from his experience that a prisoner's psychological reactions are not solely the result of the conditions of his life, but also from the freedom of choice he always has even in severe suffering. The inner hold a prisoner has on his spiritual self relies on having a hope in the future, and that once a prisoner loses that hope, he is doomed.

An example of Frankl's idea of finding meaning in the midst of extreme suffering is found in his account of an experience he had while working in the harsh conditions of the Auschwitz concentration camp:

... We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving

us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: "If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us."

That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way—an honorable way—in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory...."

Frankl also concludes that there are only two races of men, decent men and indecent. No society is free of either of them, and thus there were "decent" Nazi guards and "indecent" prisoners, most notably the kapo who would torture and abuse their fellow prisoners for personal gain.

His concluding passage in Part One describes the psychological reaction of the inmates to their liberation, which he separates into three stages. The first is depersonalization—a period of readjustment, in which a prisoner gradually returns to the world. Initially, the liberated prisoners are so numb that they are unable to understand what freedom means, or to emotionally respond to it. Part of them believes that it is an illusion or a dream that will be taken away from them. In their first foray outside their former prison, the prisoners realized that they could not comprehend pleasure. Flowers and the reality of the freedom they had dreamed about for years were all surreal, unable to be grasped in their depersonalization.

The body is the first element to break out of this stage, responding by big appetites of eating and wanting more sleeping. Only after the partial replenishing of the body is the mind finally able to respond, as "feeling suddenly broke through the strange fetters which had restrained it" (111).

This begins the second stage, in which there is a danger of deformation. As the intense pressure on the mind is released, mental health can be endangered. Frankl uses the analogy of a diver suddenly released from his pressure chamber. He recounts the story of a decent friend who became immediately obsessed with dispensing the same violence in judgment of his abusers that they had inflicted on him.

Upon returning home, the prisoners had to struggle with two fundamental experiences which could also damage their mental health: bitterness and disillusionment. The last stage

is bitterness at the lack of responsiveness of the world outside—a "superficiality and lack of feeling...so disgusting that one finally felt like creeping into a hole and neither hearing nor seeing human beings any more" (113). Worse was disillusionment, which was the discovery that suffering does not end, that the longed-for happiness will not come. This was the experience of those who—like Frankl—returned home to discover that no one awaited them. The hope that had sustained them throughout their time in the concentration camp was now gone. Frankl cites this experience as the most difficult to overcome.

As time passed, however, the prisoner's experience in a concentration camp finally became nothing but a remembered nightmare. What is more, he knows that he has nothing left to fear anymore, "except his God" (115).

Frankl's meaning in life is to help others find theirs.

Quotations

Freedom, however, is not the last word. Freedom is only part of the story and half of the truth. Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility. In fact, freedom is in danger of degenerating into mere arbitrariness unless it is lived in terms of responsibility. That is why I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast.

What was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us*. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our question must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

De nada sirve

Moris

<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=de+nada+sirve+moris&FORM=HDRSC3#view=detail&mid=4386CCEC0AA05DAABA0D4386CCEC0AA05DAABA0D>

De nada sirve escaparse de uno mismo.
De nada sirve escaparse de uno mismo.
Veinte horas al cine pueden ir
y fumar hasta morir.
Con mil mujeres pueden salir;
a los amigos los pueden llamar.
De nada sirve...
No se dan cuenta que de nada sirve
tocar la batería, seguir la acería,
no, de nada sirve.
¿De qué le sirven las heladeras
y lavarropas, televisores
y coches nuevos y relaciones
y amistades y posiciones?
Si están podridos y aburridos
de este mundo que está podrido...
No, de nada sirve.
Los que van a la oficina dicen que todo sirve.
Los que hacen música, creen que lo más importante
de nada sirve.
si uno lo usa para la soledad interna
que siempre nos corre, que siempre nos corre.
Cuando están solo, están bien solitos;
ya no hay guitarras ni amplificadores.
Están solos en la cama y empiezan a mirar el techo;
empiezan a mirar el techo y en el techo no hay nada.
Hay solamente un techo.
¿Que pueden hacer? Es muy tarde,
son las tres de la mañana.
Los bares están cerrados, las mujeres duermen,
los cines también están cerrados,
la guitarra no se puede tocar,
sino el vecino se va a despertar.
¿Qué puedo hacer? ¿Qué puedo hacer?
Estoy solo y muy aburrido
¿Qué puedo hacer? ¿Qué es mi vida?
¿Qué es este mundo? ¿Qué soy yo?
Me voy a volver loco, no sé qué hacer...
En ese momentito se dan cuenta
que todo es una estupidez.
Cuando van de veraneo y bailan shake
con sus movimientos centroamericanos,

sensualidad fabricada,
tratan de levantar mujeres.
Pero están vacíos y están muy podridos.
Volvemos a la cama, que es un gran lugar
para dormir o también para fifar.
Cuando lo consiguen, en este mundo es difícil,
está reglamentado...
Muerden la almohada de desesperación.
No saben qué hacer con sus vidas,
ya todo fracasó.
Han masticado chicles, han comido chocolates,
han leído Radiolandia, han llamado a sus amigos,
han salido con mil mujeres, han grabado treinta mil discos,
han sido famosos, han firmado autógrafos,
han comido hasta reventar, han fumado hasta acabar.
¿Y qué queda?
No queda, no queda, nada queda, nada queda.
Hay una cosa que sirve,
que sirve a esta humanidad,
y es darse cuenta que nada sirve
si uno lo usa para escaparse de uno mismo.
Amigo, te doy un consejo aunque yo consejos no doy:
trata de hacer la prueba de parar las maquinitas,
las maquinitas que llevas dentro de tí
y fijate qué es lo que pasa
cuando te agarra la soledad y te agarra el hastío.
No escuches discos de Bob Dylan, o de Los Beatles,
o de los Rollings Stones o de Mick Jagger.
Mucho silencio, mucho pensar, mucho meditar.
Nada de evasión y pensar
¿Qué es lo que pasa conmigo?
Si soy inteligente y también soy intelectual...
Soy bastante inteligente pero estoy muy aburrido.
¿Qué es lo que pasa conmigo?
Yo aún no me lo puedo explicar,
por favor que alguien me lo diga.
No puedo salir de mí, estoy muy encerrado
en mi prisión de carne y hueso.
No puedo salir, no puedo salir.
Me voy a morir dentro de mí.
Antes de morir yo quiero salir,
ver las estrellas, el mar, me quiero ahogar
y quiero salir, quiero vivir, me quiero ir
por favor, de mí.
¿Qué puedo hacer? No hay nada que hacer.
Tenés que vivir, tenés que sufrir,
tenés que sentir, tenés que amar,
te tenés que arriesgar, te tenés que jugar,

no podés tener seguridad, no podés tener
ninguna propiedad, te tenés que jugar,
tenés que jugarte, tenés que salir
a que te rompan la cara, que te maten, que te pisen.
Tenés que querer a cualquiera,
tenés que odiar a cualquiera.
Ay, ¿qué puedo hacer? Estoy solo
y todos pasan a mi lado. Nadie me mira
o si me mira es para encerrarme.
Estoy muy encerrado.
De nada sirve escaparse de uno mismo.