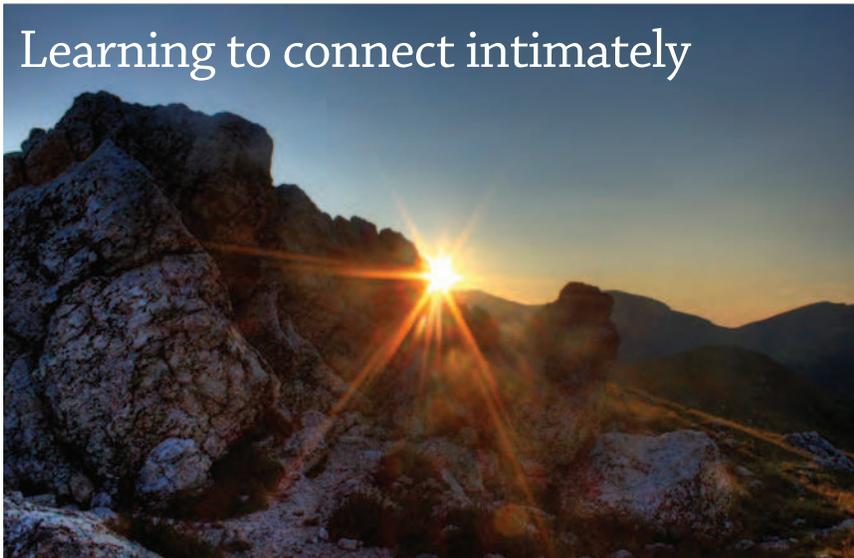




Uncovering THE SACRED

BY LEONARD CARR

Learning to connect intimately



INTIMACY IS IN A SENSE THE MOST PROFOUND earthly expression of shalom. Intimacy is a way of being, and not simply a state of relationship. It is a state that, when brought into a relationship, creates a union or intimate bond. This space possesses the qualities of affinity and rapport that fosters closeness and togetherness. There is no activity that is intrinsically intimate. What makes an encounter intimate is the intention and frame of mind that people bring to it.

The nature of intimacy is such that it can be experienced without a second par-

ty actually present. For example, when listening to music, looking at art, or reading a book, one is in a sense communing with the object, and through that engaging in an inner-dialogue with the person who created it. The sense of being merged with, and feeling the presence of Hashem, in the stillness of wholehearted and single-minded devotion, is an intimate spiritual interlude.

Intimacy is inaugurated in its purest form by a state of openness and innocence. The child's reaction to a special moment, open to both possibility and

surprise, curious, trusting, expectant, and hopeful, ready to celebrate the new world that has just opened with wonder and delight, the desire to explore and play in every nook and cranny without evaluation or judgement.

Intimacy is what happens in those extraordinary magical times, as delicate and fragile as they are powerful. It can be at once overwhelmingly encompassing and seemingly inviolate. It is at the same time so gossamer tender that the slightest breach can irreversibly destroy the moment. In daylight, there is nothing extraordinary or special. It is like when you see that first shard of light piercing the blackness of night. At the dawning of the light, you become totally engaged and absorbed, drawn to see more while at the same time needing to protect yourself from seeing too much, lest the tantalising beauty turns into searing damage. You savour that moment carefully and intently, taking in as much you can, scanning every colour, contour, and nuance.

Intimacy resides in the space between you and another, when you become enchanted, completely immersed, lost and found, in the presence of the other. Through the encounter with another, you become more deeply attuned to your inner-world. Through that concert you become more deeply aware of the privilege and poignancy of being invited and admitted into the sacred, secret world of the other. In this space every revelation, no matter how subtle or nuanced, is a precious gift to be savoured and cherished. It is the feeling of pure connection; having found your home, while being at home, with the other. In the region of the

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“INTIMATE CONTACT WITH ANOTHER IS BUILT ON THE IMPLICIT TRUST THAT WHEN YOU REACH OUT, THE OTHER WILL MEET YOUR GAZE, SEE YOU IN THE WAY YOU WISH TO BE SEEN, HEAR YOUR VOICE THE WAY YOU WISH TO BE HEARD, AND RECIPROCATE YOUR GRASP.”

intimate, you encounter the other simultaneously in the roles of host and guest.

Intimacy sojourns in the silences, in the closing of the eyes or in the merging with the shapes of letters; the meaning of the benedictions and in the prayerful words. There is a tantalising tension in the desire to experience connection through the revelation of unfathomable knowledge, penetrating the mystery, exploring deeply, and breaking through all obstacles and barriers to complete communion. At the same time, there is the sense that it could become too overwhelming, even dangerous; the danger in domesticating the mysterious, and, in so doing, rendering it ordinary, mundane, and dispiritingly prosaic. There is a precariousness in pushing or prolonging the ecstatic moment to the point where the knowledge becomes overexposed. Too much knowledge leads to familiarity, habitation, and taking for granted what should be exclusive, unique, and precious.

There is an alluring vulnerability in trying to simultaneously pervade and preserve the mystery of the space in-between, retaining the magic while at the same time trying to get familiar with the secrets. There is also a disquieting fickleness about being caught in the teeth of this alluring, intriguing, irresistible enigma. The intensity is heightened by the frightening sense of the fragility and elusiveness of the moment. The wanting desperately to hold it tight and, at the same time, knowing that trying to possess it or control it will cause it to dissipate.

The conditions of intimacy are protected by qualities like reverence, respect, adoration, veneration, devotion, loyalty, and awe. Intimacy follows a clear intention. The antagonists of this intention are apathy, complacency, and indifference, all of which make authentic encounter impossible. The intention is driven by anticipation and desire. The deeper the desire, the clearer the focus and more intense the quality of engagement that you bring to the intimate encounter. Passion, enthusiasm, fully-aroused senses catalyse one into the absorption and focus. Also required is the wholehearted, single-minded totality of one's mental,

emotional, and bodily presence.

There is a cherishing of the other, holding them in heart and mind, anticipating, longing, and reaching out whenever possible for opportunities for connection and encounter. This means holding questions in heart and mind like: How can I get closer to you? How can I meet your needs? What are your longings and wishes? What can I do to enrich your experience? What would you like to request of me? How can I make your passage through life more enriching and enjoyable? When you cherish Hashem in this way then life itself becomes a prayer.

Formal prayer wakes us up to the human experience, and in so doing broadens and deepens our relationship with Hashem, giving us the words to articulate the longings hidden in the deepest reaches of our souls. It helps us to articulate the silent prayers of our souls, to which in conscious life we are often both deaf and numb - too switched off to even sense, let alone grasp. Certain words, like those of benedictions, and gestures, are reserved solely for the relationship, held private and concealed from those who are not invited or welcome to share the space. The sacredness of these phenomena is inherent in their exclusivity and personal nature. It is the peculiarity of these expressions that bind the membership group, be it a couple, family, or tribe. The experience of, and the distinctiveness inherent in intimacy is what renders it a bonding force in relationships.

In this climate stories, prayers, explanations, or songs never lose their power to enchant and inspire. In the curiosity and hunger for richer, closer, and more nourishing contact, you scan and search for new details, different angles, new perspectives made possible by new lighting, a different background or novel setting. You enjoy the reassuring comfort of the familiar while at the same time noticing the subtle differences in the nuances that evoke novel thoughts and impressions. The routine and habitual retain their freshness when you remain committed to encountering them as if for the first time.

The awe and wonder inspired in one by the knowledge of the other makes it easy to acquiesce and yield in reverent submission and devotional surrender. Intimate contact with another is built on the implicit trust that when you reach out, the other will meet your gaze, see you in the way you wish to be seen, hear your voice the way you wish to be heard, and reciprocate your grasp. You cannot tumble into it, force it, or fake it. The preparation entails gathering insight regarding who and what you are about to meet. When you enter that mysterious realm you have a few signs, beacons, and guideposts that orient you while you explore some of the hidden secrets, unfolding nuances, and novel features that present themselves to you.

In preparation for closeness you need to have gone to effort, to invest, be moved and modified by the encounter. Each interaction in the intimate space leads to more self-awareness, through discovering your own reactions as well as how you are reciprocally influenced and affected by the relationship. It also opens new vistas of understanding and appreciation of the other.

That is why one washes, and puts on special garments expressly reserved for an encounter with the sacred. It is as if you first wash off the quotidian, rinse the soiled residue of the mundane workday reality. This means cleansing away anything that is rooted in comparison. It is imperative to dispense with expectation, judgment, evaluation, criticism, theorising or philosophising, condemning, suspicion, and worry. This allows one to have complete faith and trust in the encounter, in one's entitlement and ability to receive, and in the other's willingness and ability to receive. Donning special or, even better, new, specially acquired garments signifies and helps one to embody a sense of newness. It affirms that this experience will be like no other that has come before or will occur afterwards. It renders the experience unique, exclusive, extraordinary, and other worldly - in a word: sacred. ■