



# PARADISE LOST

We all yearn to return to the perfection of the womb

BY LEONARD CARR

**RABBIS TEACH US THAT THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF A** person's life are the days spent in the womb. We are taught the entire Torah by an angel; we are able to see from one end of the world to the other. This is the world of shalom – perceiving the big, unified, perfect picture of life and being entirely at one with that transcendent and inclusive reality. Unbounded happiness alludes to the emotional reality. Learning the entire Torah implies complete spiritual wisdom of the intellect. Seeing from one end of the world to the other refers to limitless perception of physical reality. From a purely physical understanding, in the womb, your needs are met before you even become aware that you lack or need anything. You float securely cocooned and protected in body temperature water. This means you do not perceive a boundary between your skin and the outside environment. In other words, you experience a sense of oneness and continuity with your environment.



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You forever retain an implicit memory of that time and long to return to it. This craving is expressed in the ever-burning desire for the ultimate redemption. On a mundane level, for example, whenever you get upset with someone who fails to just “get you” or meet your needs without you even having to identify them for yourself or articulate those needs, you are tapping into that memory.

Your longing is a misdirected expression

of your desire for true shalom. All of your pain and discomfort is based on a comparison of this incomplete, fragmented, lonely, challenging world and the world from which you originated and to which your soul constantly longs to return. Your most profound longing is to get back to that tranquillity, harmony, perfection and oneness called shalom.

From the moment the womb becomes too small and confining, and you begin

your journey into this world, you experience yourself as having limitations and boundaries. There is the physical boundary of skin, the cravings of needs as well as physical discomfort. From that point, everything in life feels lacking, incomplete, impermanent and ever-changing, which is the nature of the physical world. Your ongoing challenge in life is learning to live effectively by navigating this ambiguous, uncertain, complex, inconsistent world by learning to appreciate boundaries in the most effective and constructive manner. Boundaries and reality are synonymous.

You are blessed with three primary resources with which to navigate. There is your body with its temperament, instincts, drives, sensations, desires and intuitions. In addition, you have emotions that give



you the ability to experience a rich nuanced world of feelings and needs. Your emotions also give you the ability to form meaningful relationships and to connect with and relate to others. Emotional boundaries are felt through empathy and expressed, for example, through kindness. Lastly, there is your intellect, which includes language and thought. It is through your intellect that you can interpret your emotional and bodily experience. This is the highest faculty that gives you the ability to stand outside of your experience and make sense and meaning of your world. It affords you the distinctively human ability to make choices about how to respond most effectively.

The intellectual expression of boundaries expresses itself when you take decisions based on comparing what your subjective reaction seems to be compelling you to do and what your higher values and ideals dictate. Your intellect gives you mastery over your physical self. It protects you from being seduced by your desires or emotions. It can prevent you from becoming engrossed in thought or compulsive action that causes you to neglect other priorities. In other words, your intellect allows you to hold a transcendent and inclusive view of reality. This means being both grounded and present in the moment, while simultaneously holding an implicit view of the overarching perspective and how your immediate experience relates to the big picture of your life. Put simply, this means comparing your current reaction to how you would prefer to react given your true values and aspirations; in short, being the person you most ideally prefer to be.

If you could maintain such a view then you could pick the perfect reaction for each situation. The perfect reaction would be the one that is most fitting in terms of timing, intensity and appropriateness to the context. It is the reaction most perfectly suited to achieving the most favourable outcome. All discomfort and human suffering, whether physical, emotional or spiritual, is the result of a breakdown in wholeness and perfection – something out of place, missing the mark, off-course or lacking. All discomfort stems from separateness, which implies fragmentation and inevitably re-

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sults in competition and conflict. In contrast to the description of your experience in the womb when you and the world are one continuous flow of consciousness, the sense of separateness puts you into an adversarial relationship with the world. You have a sense of an isolated self inside lacking in the power to be whole, and the world outside that holds the requisite resources for your attainment of wholeness. As soon as you feel you lack something essential to your wholeness and well-being that you can only acquire through the intervention of another person, then you are in a state of essential lacking.

In this state, you feel unsupported, alone, exposed and vulnerable. You consequently perceive the world as threatening or life as a competition for scarce resources. In the survivalist approach that results from lacking, you may come to see even those you most love as a threat to your well-being or even emotional survival. Rather than being aware of your own needs and the needs of others, you become locked down in your own narrow, limited approach, rigid and unyielding, closed off emotionally from both yourself and your relationships. Your perception becomes tunnel vision and all you can see is your immediate goal of reacting to your instinctive feelings like fight, flight or numbing and withdrawal. You become switched off to the possible consequences of your behaviour on your relationships. You lose sight of how your reaction will affect your own broader interests. You have no trust in yourself, or the process of life.

When you are closer to shalom by contrast, you feel supported by life, confident in your own resources and strength. This allows you to manage your life creatively and operate effectively in your world. You also have trust in the process of your life, that

rather than being random, your life is guided in ways that no matter how things look at any moment, will ultimately work out for the best. This inner knowledge makes you expansive, openhearted and relaxed. You are able to hold a broad view of the world with all its conflicts and contradictions and can see the big picture of what constitutes the greater good. You are able to connect with and host the knowledge of your values, principles, needs and feelings, aspirations, motives and desires, and use that awareness to inform your actions in ways that get your needs met, while at the same time being responsive to the best interests of others. In this state, you approach the world in a way that seeks a harmonious fit between your personal world and the larger world that includes others.

In a state of shalom, you feel tranquilly and joy based on the deeply felt sense that you are supported by Hashem and that your life is guided towards what will be best for your psychological and spiritual growth and development. You perceive your experiences and circumstances as gifts to discover and mobilise your inner resources and talents in ways that grow you into becoming a richer, deeper, wiser and more effective version of yourself. In such a state, you understand that your talents and abilities are gifts that you were given in order to make a unique contribution to the world and to fulfil your unique mission in the world. This is an essentially ecological approach to life where you realise that only by contributing and investing your talents and resources in making the world a better place and improving the lives of others, that you can achieve true happiness and satisfaction. This is because the world you create for others is the world that you too inhabit. What is best for others is inevitably best for you. ■