

Tanya in Plain English

Chapters 26–28

Chapter 36

Tzvi Freeman

Translator's Introduction

The Tanya—or “Collected Talks” as its author, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, titled it—is meant to guide you to the wisdom you need to fulfill your purpose in life. But we don't all read the same words the same way. One reader finds familiar concepts in the terms of his standard lexicon, while another is entirely baffled by foreign ideas in obtuse Talmudic jargon. One reader navigates the streams of thought with comfort and ease while another feels like city boy dragged out on a safari.

Ideally, learning Tanya should be like having a private audience with Rabbi Schneur Zalman himself. You would bare your soul before him, he would hold his head in his holy hands and then speak to you as your own heart, in words custom-tailored for your mind and soul. That, writes the author in his introduction, is really the whole purpose of Tanya: to replace the experience of private communion with a *tzaddik*.

But now, you have this one thin volume, with the wisdom, soul and very being of the tzaddik squeezed into its pages, speaking directly to your unique soul, and its up to you to discover your pearl of wisdom in those deep waters. That's why the author instructs his disciples and followers in every city that they must assist those who cannot find their personal message in the words of Tanya. Yet, in the edition of Tanya sold at Barnes & Nobles there is no chassid enclosed.

Which all comes to explain what gives me the chutzpa to present this new translation of the Tanya into plain, common, contemporary English. In every if, then, and, but, comma and em-dash I tried to imagine: If the author was writing this to us today, how would he say it? The truth is, I don't really know. But the job has to be done, the angels weren't rushing in, so only this fool was left.

ing back to their mundane physical state. This will last until the end of days. By then, the physicality of the body will be purified and so too that of the world, so that they will be able to receive the revealed light of Havayah.

That light will shine to Israel through the Torah which is called *strength*. From the extra intensity of light that will shine to Israel, the darkness of the nations will be illuminated as well, as it is written, *Nations will walk to your light*. And, *The glory of Havayah will be revealed and all flesh will see together...* And, *To go into the clefts of rocks and the folds of cliffs due to the fear of Havayah and the glory of his majesty...*

And as we say in the High Holiday prayers, *Shine out in the splendid majesty of Your strength over all those that dwell on planet earth...*

I kept as close as possible to the author's structure and voice, while arranging them into shorter sentences, adding a word or phrase—perhaps even a full sentence here and there for clarity; spelling out clearly what is the question and what is the answer; avoiding clauses and sub-clauses and all the other peculiarities through which the typical educated 18th century Jew sailed smoothly, but are not quite the match for our 21st century cyberspace surfer. I also took the liberty of converting addresses to the third-person (“he must be happy” or “one must be happy”) to the second person (“you must be happy”) or imperative (“be happy!”)

The serious student will go back to the original text—as he should—and likely mark with horror the travesties of inaccuracy I have committed herein. Nonetheless, I believe that Rabbi Schneur Zalman would approve. I did not treat this task lightly. Each chapter is a labor of weeks, even months, of careful editing and re-editing, honing each word, phrase and sentence to a careful balance of precision and clarity. Much was learned in plumbing the author's intent as I asked, “Why did he write it this way and not more simply?” Often I found my answer in a few enlightening words from one of the author's successors, most often the Rebbe's notes. Sometimes, it was the written comments of another of those who have taught Tanya and lived with it all their lives, some of whom may have been one of my own teachers and I hereby apologize for sleeping through that class. Sometimes it was just a matter of one of those forehead-slapping revelations that I had gotten it all wrong and good thing I noticed or else I would have really messed up this translation real bad.

Quite likely, I *have* messed up on occasion. I won't be the slightest embarrassed if you let me know. Nevertheless, my hope is that now, with the labor of struggle through unfamiliar jargon and syntax put to the side, all those who are searching will hear within the text the whispers of the tzaddik speaking to their hearts and minds, as though he was their own soul.

Here I'm presenting two excerpts. For myself, I have found chapters 26–28 to be the most practical chapters of the entire work, dealing with the ever-present plagues of guilt, anxiety and depression. The depth of insight into the human psyche is astonishing and the advice—though so much counter to our common intuition—will prove critical for anyone wrestling with Esau's angel. Personally, I have found 90% of what I need to know in life neatly packed in chapter 27 alone. But that's only when you mine the words for all their depth. Which is just what I am hoping this translation will aid you to do.

The first chapter I translated was chapter 36, partly because when I begin to learn Tanya with someone, that's where I start. And partly, because it is so revolutionary a chapter. In typical fashion, Rabbi Schneur Zalman presents a thorough paradigm shift in Jewish thought as though it were the established tradition to which everyone had always subscribed.

But they did not. In general, talk of our purpose and the purpose of Creation had much more to do with getting to heaven than with getting heaven down to earth. The Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria, was most responsible for this shift in thinking, when he presented the concept of *tikun*—repairing the primordial catastrophe that provides the backdrop of the cosmos. Yet even then, it is always framed within the context of the impact upon higher worlds. There are also hints to this new way of thinking in the writings of Rabbi Yehuda Loewe, the “Maharal of Prague.” But nowhere before Tanya will you find it spelled out so clearly, in practical terms, as this chapter 36.

I would also like to thank my editor, Rabbi Yanki Tauber, for his often brilliant edits and comments—even for those with which I disagreed. And you, the reader, for providing the incentive to this writing, and hopefully the impetus to continue the work until it is complete.

states, *All the people saw the sounds*. They saw that which is generally only heard or understood.

The rabbis also state, *They stared towards the east and heard the voice emerge, saying, “I am...”* And so also to all four directions and from above and from below—as they explain in the Tikunei Zohar, *There was no place from which He did not speak with them*.

Why did it occur this way? Because, whereas all else that exists locks in His light and conceals it from us, within the Ten Statements that were made at that event His will stands out openly. After all, these Ten Statements comprise the entire Torah and the Torah is His innermost will and wisdom. Therefore, there was nothing to negate His presence there at all, as we say, *For in the light of Your face you gave us the Torah of life*. Where there is nothing obstructing His presence, He can be found as He truly is, within all space, even in the physical realm.

This is the reason that the people who experienced the giving of the Torah repeatedly expired from existence, as the rabbis taught, “At each utterance, their souls flew out...” Yet the Holy One, blessed be He, returned their souls to them with dew, the same dew with which He will revive the dead in the future.

What is this dew? It is the dew of Torah, which is called *strength*, as the rabbis said, “Anyone who occupies himself with Torah, the dew of Torah gives him life.” This is what we said earlier, that Torah fortifies the person to exist within the Infinite Light.

After this, however, the sin of the golden calf had its effect. The people and their world were coarsened, return-

light of Havayeh, the Infinite, shines in the place of darkness and otherness throughout all of this world, shining with greater intensity and greater power — with the advantage of light that emerges from darkness — than the mere reflection of His light that shines in higher worlds.

For in those higher worlds it must shine through filters and obstructions to negate and conceal the light of the Infinite so that these worlds will not dissolve from reality. Our world, however, is capable of sustaining this light unadulterated because G-d has given us the Torah, which is called strength and power. This is what the rabbis meant when they said that G-d empowers the righteous to receive their reward in the Time to Come — meaning that they will not dissolve out of existence into the light of Havayeh, since it will be revealed without any filter at that time.

This is the meaning of the verse, *Your Master will no longer cloak Himself from you* — meaning that He will no longer be covered from you, as a cloak or garment covers — ...*but your eyes shall see your Master.*

Also: *Eye for eye shall see...for Havayeh will be an everlasting light for you...* and *The sun shall no longer be your light by day...for Havayeh shall be your everlasting light...*

The messianic era — and especially once the dead are resurrected — is a state in which the world has achieved its purpose and wholeness for which it was originally created. Yet the world already has been in a similar state, at the time when the Torah was given. It is written about that time, *You were shown so that you will know that Havayeh is the Elokim, there is nothing else besides Him.* Meaning that we were shown visibly, to our physical eyes, as the verse

Chapter 26

Glossary for this chapter:

- Yetzer: There are actually two yetzers: The yetzer tov, which is an urge to do the right thing, and the yetzer hara, an urge to do the wrong thing. When the word *yetzer* is presented without any modifier, it refers to the yetzer hara.
- Tumah: A kind of dark energy that inhabits voids of G-dly light.
- Havayeh: We never pronounce the four letter name of G-d as it is written, so we say *Havayeh* instead, changing the order of the letters.

In truth, at this point there is a general principle you need to know. Let's compare this to winning any other competition, one in the physical realm. Think of two men who are wrestling with one another, each attempting to throw the other down. If one of them would be lazy and sluggish, he would be easily beaten — even if he were stronger than the other.

The same applies when it comes to winning against the yetzer: You can't beat it while in a state of laziness and sluggishness which are symptoms of depression and a fossilized heart. The only way to win is with the zeal that comes out of joy and a wide open heart, free from any nuance of worry or anxiety in the world.

Yes, there is a verse, "In every sadness there will be some profit" — meaning that there will be some qualitative gain to emerge from this sadness. But on the contrary, those

words imply that the sadness itself has no positive qualities, only that some sort of gain will be eventually attained through it.

And what is it that can be gained? It is the true joy in Havayah your G-d that comes after a true sadness at designated times over one's sins with a bitter soul and a broken heart. Through this, the spirit of tumah, the Other Side and the iron curtain separating between you and your Heavenly Father are broken.

Now, generally, to free the heart of any sadness or nuance of anxiety from mundane concerns, even of children, health and finances, we give the following advice:

Everyone knows the statement of our rabbis, may their memory be for a blessing, "Just as one should bless G-d for the good, so he should bless Him for the bad." The Talmud explains that this means we should greet such tidings with the same joy as we would greet tidings that were obvious and visible good, because "this is also for the good." It is only that it is not revealed good, visible to the human eye. That is because it originates from the Hidden World, which is higher than the Revealed World.

The Revealed World is the last two letters of the Divine Name, vav and hey, whereas the Hidden World is the first two letters, yud and hey. That is why it says, "Fortunate is the man who is chastised by yud-hey (those first two letters alone also spell one of G-d's names)."

This explains another teaching of our rabbis. They taught that when the verse says, "His beloved are as the sun

many filters that conceal and obstruct that light. As far as He is concerned, nothing has changed.

This is one interpretation of the verse, "For no man may see Me and live." If a human being could see the Infinite Light, he would of necessity cease to exist—for his existence is contingent on concealment of that light. Our teachers, may their memory be for a blessing, went even further and interpreted that even the angels—who are called "living beings"—have no existence within that light.

So this is what is meant by *lowest realms*: That although from His perspective He fills all space and time, yet from within the creation, there is a series of worlds that degenerates from level to level through a multitude of filters that negate the light and vitality that extends from Him until this tangibly physical world is created. This world, then, is the ultimate descent in terms of negation of His light and multiple layers of darkness. The descent is to such an extreme that it is full of klipot and a sense of otherness that actually opposes Havayah, saying, "I and nothing but I!"

Yet what could be the purpose of this series of worlds and their degeneration ever lower and lower? It could not be the higher worlds. After all, as high as they could be, they are still a descent from the light of His presence. Rather, the goal must be this lowest world. But what could be gained from a lowly world?

It must be that this goal does not arise out of any need or to profit any gain. It simply was His decision that He would have pleasure when the sense of otherness is suppressed and darkness transformed into light; when the

Chapter 36

Glossary for this chapter:

- Havayah: We never pronounce the four letter name of G-d as it is written, so we say *Havayah* instead, changing the order of the letters.
- Elokim: An adaptation of the name of G-d that describes His power and might.
- Klipot: Literally, *shells* or *husks*. Singular: *Klipa*. Used to describe forces that obstruct the divine light. *Klipat Noga* is a translucent shell—a form of *klipa* that can be inducted to the service of good.

We already know from our sages that the purpose behind creation of this world is G-d's desire to dwell in the lowest realms. But what did they mean by *lowest*? If G-d existed in some higher realm, then we could say that some worlds are higher because they are closer to Him, and others are lower because they are further from Him. But for Him there is no higher and lower, since He fills all worlds equally.

Here is the explanation: Before the world was created, there was only Him alone in perfect oneness filling all the conceptual realm in which He would create this world. And from His perspective, so it is even now. True, there was an act of creation in the interim, and what could be a greater change than that? Yet even this change was only in the consciousness of the beings that receive His vitality and light, for now they receive it through the medium of

when it comes out in all its might," it is speaking of those who rejoice in their suffering. For how can a suffering person rejoice? Only because he cherishes closeness to G-d more than anything in this world, as it says, "For your kindness is greater than life..." And closeness to G-d is much stronger and of immeasurably higher quality in the Hidden World, "for there is the fortress of His might," of "He who dwells in supernal concealment."

That is why such a person will be privileged to witness the sun in all its might in the time to come. This is speaking about a time promised in the future when the sun will come out of its sheath in which it is covered in this world—meaning when the Hidden World will be revealed. The light of that world will shine and illuminate with a great and intense revelation all those who took refuge within it in this world and were sheltered by its shadow. For it is the shadow of wisdom, not light and visible good. That is enough for those who understand.

When it comes to depression over matters between you and G-d, however, in that case you need to take some advice seriously to get rid of it. Obviously, this is so when you are in the middle of doing G-d's work—because working for G-d must be with joy and wholeheartedness. But it is so even for a businessperson involved in worldly affairs: If you suddenly find yourself depressed or concerned over matters between you and G-d in the middle of your business, this is plainly a trap of the yetzer, intended to bring you down into a pleasure-seeking state afterwards.

This is obvious, for if not so, how could it be that you are sincerely depressed due to love of G-d or awe of Him in the middle of your business?

So now, whether this sadness hit you at a time when you were serving G-d by learning Torah or in prayer, or whether it occurred spontaneously at a time not designated for such tasks, you need to take this to heart:

Now is not the time for genuine sadness, even if you are concerned about grave sins, heaven forbid. Rather, for this you need a designated time and appropriate circumstances, when your mind is in a settled state. At that time you will contemplate the greatness of G-d to whom these sins were directed, so that thereby your heart will be broken with genuine bitterness.

Elsewhere, this time and practice is explained. And there it is also explained that immediately after your heart is broken at those designated times, you must remove the sadness from your heart entirely. You must believe with complete faith that G-d has removed your sin and that He is utterly forgiving. That itself is the genuine joy that comes after a depression as mentioned above.

them out of your mind and muster up more intensity in your mental focus.

Sometimes it's hard to get these things out of your consciousness--they are capable at times of plaguing your mind with force. Then you can pour your soul out to G-d and plead to Him in your thoughts, asking that he have mercy over you in His abundant mercies, as a father has compassion for his children who are of his same essential brain. So, too, G-d will have compassion over your soul which is drawn out of Him, to save it from the turbulent waters. And He will do so for His sake, for His people are truly a part of Him.

This is counter-intuitive, since common sense tells you that these inappropriate thoughts are proof that your davening is worthless. After all, if you were davening properly you wouldn't be getting these inappropriate thoughts, right?

Well, that would be true if there was only one person inside you—if the same one who was davening was the same one who was conjuring and fantasizing these inappropriate thoughts. But when you really get down to it, there are two personalities inside the human brain at war with one another, each one with the same objective and motive: To gain complete control and have the brain exclusively at its disposal.

All thoughts of Torah and heaven-inspired awe originate in the G-dly soul. And all mundane matters come from the animal soul--only that the G-dly soul happens to be stuck inside it.

So the whole thing is as though you were davening and some devious antisemite was standing in your face trying to engage you in conversation just to mess you up. Obviously, the best strategy is to not answer him a thing, neither positive nor negative, and to act as though you were utterly deaf. You can fulfill the Torah's written advice, "Never answer an idiot according to his idiocy, lest you also become the same as him."

So that's precisely what you have to do: Don't react in any way--not with a complaint, not with a response--against this extraneous thought. Wrestle with dirt and you'll get dirty. Just pretend you have no idea and are totally unaware of the imaginings that popped in. Get

Chapter 27

Glossary for this chapter:

- Tzaddik: *plural: tzaddikim*. A righteous person. In Tanya, one who has achieved such a state of love for G-d that he has divested himself of any urge towards anything contrary to G-d's will.
- Rasha: *plural: reshaim*. A person who has succumbed to the urge to do something contrary to G-d's will, and has not yet expressed utter regret and abandoned his ways.
- Beinoni: *plural: beinonim*. The "in between" person. Though he strives to be a tzaddik, the beinoni lives in a constant battle to not be a rasha.
- Shechina: The Divine Presence. G-d in the modality of immanence.
- Sitra Achra: Literally, "the other side." There are only two sides: One side lets the truth of G-d's oneness shine through, the other opposes it; one side tells you—or at least admits—that there is nothing else but Him, and the other side denies it.
-

What if your depression is not from a nagging sense of guilt over sins, but from immoral fantasies and destructive urges that keep falling into your mind?

It all depends on what you are doing at the time. Let's say we are not talking about these thoughts falling into your mind at your time for prayer and study, but rather when you are occupied with your business and other day to day concerns. Then, on the contrary, you should rejoice in your lot. Yes, these fantasies fall into your mind, but nevertheless you take your mind off of them. You are fulfilling the words, "...and you shall not follow your heart and your eyes after which you tend to stray."

After all, who is this text referring to? Obviously not to tzaddikim, G-d forbid, to call them "strayers." Rather, the text is speaking about beinonim such as yourself, to whom fall lustful thoughts, sometimes for permissible things and sometimes....

When you distract your mind from such thoughts, that's how you perform this mitzvah of "not following." Our rabbis taught, "Someone who sits tight and does not sin is rewarded just like someone who fulfilled a mitzvah." If so, you should celebrate fulfilling a mitzvah by *not doing* exactly the same as if you had fulfilled a mitzvah by *doing*.

On the contrary, your depression stems from arrogance. You don't recognize your place and therefore you feel bad that you are not on the level of a tzaddik—because inane thoughts like this certainly do not fall into the minds of tzaddikim.

If you would only recognize your place, that you are very distant from the stature of a tzaddik, that if only you

Furthermore, even if erotic fantasies and other inappropriate thoughts pop into your mind while you are laboring in Torah or focusing on prayer, don't pay any attention to them. Instead, immediately get your mind off of them.

And don't be a fool either to attempt to elevate that aspect of your personality from which this extraneous thought extends. That is a technique meant only for tzaddikim who do not have distracting thoughts falling into their minds from their own character. If such a thought occurs to them, it belongs to someone else. But when it's your own thoughts falling into your mind--from the negative aspect of your heart, from the left ventricle--how are you supposed to pull something up when you yourself are the one who is tied down?

Yet, nevertheless, don't let this get you down into a self-blaming depression. You are doing G-dly work right now and that has to be done with a lot of joy. Instead, just the opposite: When these distracting thoughts strike, you should be even more encouraged and intensified in your efforts with all your might to focus on your prayers with joy and to celebrate. Why?

Because you realize that this thought is coming to you from the kelipah of the left ventricle of your heart. In a beinoni, that kelipah is at war with the G-dly soul. And you are well aware of the way warfare goes—and hand-to-hand combat as well: When one side starts taking control, the other side starts fighting harder as well, mustering up all its forces. So as your G-dly soul exerts itself and struggles to daven, the kelipah struggles to confound it and throw it down with its totally out-of-nowhere thoughts.

Chapter 28

Glossary for this chapter:

- Kelipah:** Literally, shell or husk. Used to describe forces that obstruct the divine light. Klipat Noga is a translucent shell—a form of klipa that can be inducted to the service of good.
- Beinoni:** Someone who is neither a tzadik, nor a rasha. The beinoni is in constant struggle to conquer his urges.
- Tzaddikim:** *singular: tzaddik*. Righteous people. In Tanya, those who have achieved such a state of love for G-d that they have divested themselves of any urge towards anything contrary to G-d's will.
- Avodah:** Literally, work—either in the sense of doing a difficult job, or transforming something, such as working a hide into leather—or servitude, as a servant serves his master. Used to describe the labor of connecting to G-d through immersion in His Torah and intense focus in davening.
- Daven:** Infinitive: Davening. Commonly called *prayer*, however, in actuality it is much more about achieving mystic union than about petition and requests.
-

could be a beinoni and not a rasha all your life for even one moment—look, this is the measure of the beinoni and his job: to conquer the urges and the fantasies that rise from his heart to his brain, to distract his mind entirely from them and to push them away with both hands.

With every single push by which you expel it from your thoughts, the sitra achra is defeated here in our lowly world. You do your job down here and it has an effect in a higher realm. There, as well, the sitra achra is defeated as it soars upward as an eagle, just as the text says, “If you will lift yourself up like an eagle...from there I will throw you down, says G-d.”

The Zohar marvels over the tremendous enjoyment derived by G-d when the sitra achra is defeated down here in our world and G-d's glory rises above, stating that it goes beyond any other praise and reaches higher than anything else can reach.

So don't feel discouraged or overly distressed even if you will spend your entire life in this battle. Perhaps it is for this that you were created, perhaps this is your task in life—to be constantly suppressing the sitra achra.

This is what Job had in mind when he said, “You created wicked people.” He didn't mean that G-d created them to be actually wicked—G-d forbid. Rather, he meant that G-d created people who would have thoughts and fantasies just like the deeds of the wicked. They would then be engaged in a constant battle to distract their mind from these thoughts in order to defeat the sitra achra. But they will not be able to eradicate it entirely—that is done by tzaddikim.

You see, for G-d, there are two kinds of enjoyment. One is from the total obliteration of the sitra achra and its transformation from bitter to sweet and from dark to light by the tzaddikim. The second is when the sitra achra is suppressed at the apex of its strength and might, while soaring upward like an eagle—and from that height G-d throws it down. Why does He throw it down? Because there is an initiative from below by the beinonim.

This is what the text is saying with the words, “Make tasty foods for me, as I love.” That is the Shechina speaking to Her children, all the Jewish people, as explained in the Tikunei Zohar. The word “foods” is plural because there are two sorts of delicacies: one from sweet, delicious foods, the other from foods that are sharp and pungent—only that they are well spiced and prepared until they become delicacies to refresh the spirit. In the same way, G-d derives satisfaction from both the service of the tzaddik and the service of the beinoni.

This is what the text is talking about when it says, “Whatever G-d causes is for His sake, even the wicked man on the day of his wickedness.” It is talking about when a person will repent from his wickedness and transform the night of his evil into day and light above when the sitra achra is suppressed and G-d’s glory rises.

It does not stop there. It applies even in matters that are entirely permissible, anything in which you slay your urges—even for a short moment—with the intent of suppressing the sitra achra in the left ventricle of the heart.

For example, let's say you want to eat, but you delay your meal for an hour or less and spend that time occupied in

Torah. The Talmud describes how in their days the rest of the world ate their first meal at ten in the morning, but the students of the sages would not eat until noon. They would deprive themselves with the purpose of suppressing the sitra achra. They didn't do this to have more time for study—since they studied for the rest of the day anyway.

The same applies when you keep your mouth shut and refrain from speaking some mundane matter that you really want to say. The same with fantasies. With even the slightest degree by which you suppress the sitra achra here below, G-d's glory and His holiness rises above to tremendous heights. Then, from this holiness another holiness is drawn upon you below to empower you tremendously in your job to serve Him, blessed be He. This is what the rabbis had in mind when they taught, “Sanctify yourself a little below and you will be sanctified a lot from above.”

And this is in addition to fulfilling a positive mitzvah of the Torah—“Make yourselves holy”—when you sanctify yourself in that which is permissible to you. The Torah means that you should be actively making yourself holy, implying that you do this even though you are not really holy and separated from the sitra achra—since it is still in all its strength and might in the left ventricle. It’s just that you conquer your urges and sanctify yourself. Yet when the Torah says, “you will be holy,” it means that eventually you actually will become holy and separated from the sitra achra. How? Through all this holiness you are getting from above, empowering you to drive it from your heart little by little.