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The Rebbe's Empowerment of the Individual: Ten Dimensions

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How can one condense something so powerful, so all-embracing, into a form which we can grasp and which can make sense? Let us use an ancient model, which is applied by the Kabbalah to the expressions of the Divine, and also, in Chassidism, to the psychological workings of a human being: the Ten Emanations, also known as Sefirot. Chabad Chassidism also applies this structure to the process of communication and education. We will borrow this structure to attempt to describe the Rebbe's approach to empowerment of the individual.

In this structure there are three leading aspects, six further dimensions, and the concluding tenth which expresses the fulfilment of the whole endeavour.

We start with three leading aspects:

Love of G-d, Love of Torah, Love of one's Fellow

Every teaching, printed text, or audio-video clip relating to the Rebbe breathes these three qualities.

In January 1951, in a gathering on 10th Shevat, in which the Rebbe accepted the role of official leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement following the passing of his father in law and predecessor, a year earlier, the Rebbe quoted the idea mentioned in the Talmud 'when in Rome, do as Rome does'. In America, he said, every enterprise has a 'statement', what we might call today a 'mission statement'. Our statement, said the Rebbe, is Love of G-d, love of Torah, and love of one's fellow.

What is love of G-d? Both Maimonides and Rabbi Shneur Zalman speak of a passionate love of the Divine. Maimonides saw the Divine as the essence of all existence. He wrote that one can imagine that there is no universe: then there would be only infinite G-d. But if one imagined that there was no G-d, then there would be nothing at all, because nothing can exist without G-d. Maimonides spoke of love of G-d in very intense passionate terms,

like a person who is in love. Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad, speaks of love of the Divine in a similarly intense way. He speaks of different kinds of love of G-d: love which flows constantly like life-giving water, love which flares with a burning flame, love which is expressed through Torah study, or by struggling to avoid evil and do good, and so on.

Can we in our secular and secularizing epoch relate to this? Can we hope to communicate it?

A young rabbi educator told me recently that nowadays people may not be able to experience love of G-d in the intense way described by Maimonides. But they can APPRECIATE G-d, thank G-d for good things.

For the Rebbe, love of G-d, whether flowing like water, flaring like fire, or, simply in the form of appreciation of G-d – is a central focus of Jewish life.

But this love has to be expressed and communicated in tangible ways, as indeed Rabbi Shneur Zalman spells out, as we saw above. Hence we come to the next category, Love of Torah.

Herbert Wiener was a prominent figure in American Reform, the author of *Nine and a Half Mystics*. In the course of researching this book he met the Rebbe and a close relationship developed between them. Once Wiener asked the Rebbe about belief in the Divine origin of the Torah. The Rebbe responded: Do you believe in G-d? Wiener said yes. The Rebbe said words to the effect that 'if you believe in G-d, and you think logically, you will see that implicit in that belief is the belief in the Divine origin of the Torah and of the Commandments'.

One might understand this as follows: the concept of G-d entails not only belief in the divine creation of the universe, but also in the divine PURPOSE for the universe. And that means that G-d must somehow communicate this purpose and guide men and women in society, teaching them how to fulfil it. This communication from G-d is the Torah.

The Torah is infinite Divine Wisdom contracted into a form that the human mind can study, explore, interpret, discuss, even sometimes argue with, as Abraham argued with G-d. G-d's Wisdom is infinite and therefore can sometimes only be communicated in paradoxical ways. This includes the idea of different opinions in the Talmud and the Sages having different views about how one should behave, such as the various disagreements between Hillel and Shamai.

But then comes the concept of Halacha, the way to go, and the Divine Will becomes expressed in terms of specific modes of action, the Commandments of the Torah. Through Jews keeping their 613 Commandments and the non-Jews keeping their Seven general Noachide laws, this world currently full of strife and darkness is transformed into a dwelling for the Divine. The Rebbe loved this process, the exploration, the discussions, the final ruling and the implementation in practical action, and he sought to transmit that love to us.

The third of these three basic dimensions is Love of one's fellow.

If love of G-d is spirituality, and love of Torah is sacred wisdom, the key to the reality and the significance of these concepts is one's relationship with others. At that Chassidic gathering in January 1951 the Rebbe spoke repeatedly about the ideal of love of one's fellow, including telling a story about each of the six previous Rebbes which highlighted this theme. The Rebbe insisted that the other two concepts, love of G-d and love of the Torah, are not enough by themselves. There has to be love of one's fellow as well.

These three dimensions are the corner-stone of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, through which the Rebbe created not followers but leaders, as was famously said by Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who was himself a prime example of this process.

Following these three root categories, we can suggest a further six ways they are implemented, leading to the tenth dimension which is their fulfilment.

The first is actual Teachings of Torah, the fountain from which this flow of empowerment emerges. The Rebbe's explanations of the Sedra of the week, of the Talmud, Zohar, Midrash, Maimonides, details of Jewish Law, filling dozens of volumes, show how Torah deals with the problems of our own time and points to each individual as the key figure in their solution. There are also kabbalistic-chassidic discourses drawing from a subtle, mystical level – but also focusing on the empowerment of the individual today.

Torah flows downwards, like water from an exalted source, taking the form of a river for the people in the valley. How will the people access this river? Here we come to another dimension, the Chabad House. This is a remarkable creation of the Rebbe: a mixture of a traditional Jewish home, a Synagogue, and a Jewish cultural centre, and a Jewish library. The atmosphere is immediately welcoming, Judaism with a smile... For many people round the globe, the Chabad House is the point of entry to encounter and absorb the positive influence of Jewish teaching and values.

But then comes the next dimension, focusing on the individual and transforming him or her. A century-old image expresses this: the person becomes a Lamplighter. This is the figure who used to go through the streets lighting the street lamps. Each person is like one of those street lamps, or using a much more ancient image, a lamp on the golden Menorah in the Temple. The idea of being a lamplighter emphasises the responsibility and power of the individual to inspire all those with whom one comes in contact, as if lighting their 'lamp'. One step is that the other person should be personally illuminated, and the next step is that he or she become lamplighters themselves.

The next vital element which is crucial at every level of this structure is the empowerment of womanhood, which the Rebbe emphasised in an extraordinary way. He gave talks on the importance of women studying Torah, including at its deepest level, the mystical. The Woman, the Shluchah, is the key to the Chabad House concept, which depends on her spiritual strength and creativity. Further, as regards illuminating others, the lamplighter, the Rebbe spoke about the way men tend to try to force their opinions on others, while women have a remarkable power to make a person feel this is truly what he or she wants. The Rebbe recommended that men should learn this skill from women. The late Professor Ada Rappoport Albert, famous in the academe for her works on Jewish women, was so struck by this idea from the Rebbe that she wrote a celebrated article devoted to exploring his remarkable approach, extolling the power of womanhood.

The Rebbe's emphasis on young girls lighting a Shabbat candle concretizes his belief in their power, through the Shabbat candles, to bring peace to the world.

The Rebbe's emphasis on women is indeed remarkable, but almost unique among Jewish leaders is his vision of the spiritual needs of society as a whole, beyond the Jewish Community. Following the path opened by Maimonides, based on scattered passages in the Talmud, the Rebbe saw the positive spiritual potential in humanity as a whole: as Maimonides puts it, the Righteous Gentile inherits the World to Come. This led to the Rebbe's concern to promote Prayer or a Moment of Silence in American public schools, and his encouragement of communication of the Seven Noachide Laws, presenting basic spiritual values and teachings, incorporated in all monotheistic religions. This step too empowers the Jew to have a positive spiritual relationship with any human being. Further, it encourages all men and women of the world to become beacons of light in a time of darkness and confusion.

When a journalist asked the Rebbe in 1991 what he can tell his non-Jewish readers to do in order to bring the Messiah closer, the Rebbe answered he should ask them to carry out acts of goodness and kindness. Thus the Rebbe included them too in his global vision.

A further aspect of the Rebbe's empowerment of the individual is his direct guidance to people in their own situation. Now even after his passing we can see close up thousands of examples of the Rebbe's advice to men and women, youths and girls, in many walks of life and in different kinds of situation, whether in the many volumes of printed letters, personal notes, video clips and memoirs. Insights from this wonderful resource can help a person keep their balance in the world today, facing their own personal challenges, whether on a personal or communal level, and move themselves and all around them forward.

Thus we have the three main categories: love of G-d, love of Torah, love of one's fellow, followed by six dimensions through which these qualities take tangible form.

Through all this we come to the tenth and final dimension: the goal, the fulfilment. This is Transformation of oneself, of one's family, of one's community, of the Jewish people as a whole and of general society. Involvement in this process sets in motion a spiritual chain reaction, truly changing the world for good, bringing about a new stage of history beyond war and beyond evil, as taught by the ancient Jewish Prophets, when weapons will be transformed into peaceful technology – which has already begun. Hopefully this fulfilment on the goal will be joyfully achieved in our time, together!