

## Middah Reflection #6

### Actualizing One's Potential

By Shmuly Yanklowitz



Our work is never done! This is what makes Jewish activism so intimidating and also so invigorating. We never complete the larger goals. We are never whole. Until the day that we pass from the earth, we are unable to fully step back and “throw in the towel.”

The **Maharal M’Prague** taught:

*“Man is not created in his final wholeness. Man was created to actualize his wholeness. That is the meaning of the verse ‘Man was born to toil.’ Man is born and exists for the aim of this toil, which is the actualization of his potential. He can, however, never attain the state of actualized being. He must toil forever, to actualize his wholeness. That is the essence of his final wholeness. Even when he attains a certain level of actualization, he still remains potential, and will forever have to go on actualizing himself.” (Tiferet Yisrael).*

Born to toil, we must constantly strive to actualize our wholeness. I would argue that this human need for a sense of completion and wholeness can only be achieved through partnership, in which finite souls embrace in search of love, care, and justice. Wholeness is found in the union of disparate souls.

**James Fowler** attempted to articulate the highest faith stage of human development (termed "Stage 6") that a person could reach through spiritual growth:

*“Fascinated with the charisma, the authority and frequently the ruthlessness of such leaders, we must not fail to attend to the descriptions of Stage 6 to the criteria of inclusiveness of community, of radical commitment to justice and love and of selfless passion for a transformed world, a world made over not in their images, but in accordance with an intentionality both divine and transcendent.”*

In addition to working to improve the world, as spiritual wrestlers, we can also crave to feel whole and spiritual fulfilled. This spiritual yearning should further our attachment to justice. The Gemarrah says (Avoda Zara 19a) that *Ain adam lomeid Torah ella mee’makom sh’libo chafaitz*. One only learns Torah in areas where one’s heart has desire (interest). So too in our leadership-justice work! Too often, we choose service that deadens us rather than awakens us. Awaken! Awaken today! Awaken everyday! There is no time to wander or escape! It lies right before us! We must pursue the work that our souls crave. We must build our spiritual activist communities with an inclusivity that allows for this diversity of desire.

This spiritual hedonism may be justified when the radical joy it produces is converted back into more freedom fighting. This is the underlying value of what **Rav Soloveitchik** argued (Out of the Whirlwind, 206):

“Compassion is the socialized expression of joy. A person is summoned to serve G-d by serving his fellow man **when he is least inclined to place himself at the disposal of others, when he is preoccupied with himself and the only service to which he attributes any value is self-service.** He is contented with himself; he has been successful, he rejoices at his own great achievements, and he is ready to shut out the world in his exultation over his marvelous self. Exactly then, the call to service sounds.”

This is complex and contrary to what we've been taught! There is, in fact, virtue that can be produced from egocentrism, self-indulgence, and perhaps even arrogance, although obviously only within limits. They may even lead to the ideal religious path. When **spiritual fulfillment and self-actualization** are sought and elevated to the most pressing moral tasks (even at the risk of taking oneself too seriously) perhaps some of the most holy work can be done. The other should still remain our primary focus but, at times, we must embrace that which enables our actualization in order to properly reach the other. Let's go to it!