Introduction

How young are you? Are you satisfied with your life? Do you have fresh challenges ahead and new things to look forward to? Are you suffering from unfulfilled expectations? Have you come to terms with who you are and what life is about?

I am already closer to sixty years *young* rather than fifty years *old*. Sounds like a contradiction? I don't think so.

I have been writing these thoughts for well over ten years now; a bit here and some more there. It has been challenging as well as fun. My thoughts rush through my mind, but move from pen to paper ever so slowly. I print each word in bold characters, letter by letter. No clear plan initially, just a flow of ideas and experiences. My left hand struggles to keep up and smudges over the inked lines written on the sheets of paper as it steers my pen.

Although I have a very busy life with no spare time, I always have the impulse to write: a bit in airplanes, some more during vacations, occasionally taking an hour off on the run or late at night. Even a few minutes in the car, in between the normal rush, but always moving forward, finding just little snippets of time to write, then to write a bit more and to write in between everything else.

Thomas Nisell is more like a brother than a friend. Affectionately called *Schwedi* (Swede, in Hebrew), he made *aliyah* (immigration; literally – "ascent") to Israel from his native Sweden. We have much more than salmon, herrings and fine whisky in common. Thomas is blessed to be the personal assistant of Rabbi Adin Even Yisrael Steinsaltz. I am indeed fortunate to have Thomas as a brother and the Rabbi as a soul mate.

The Rabbi read these chapters in draft form. We had an amazing time together at the Vatican in Rome over six years ago at an interfaith dialogue; we stayed there for nearly a week and made time to work on this book. I will never forget one particular session one afternoon. We were sitting by an old wooden table in the old kitchen of the old gatehouse in the beautiful garden of the old Piccolomini Estate, next to St Peter's. We became silent and just looked at each other. We felt exhausted.

I noticed the time. It was starting to get darker outside. We had been discussing and thinking and talking intensely for over three and a half hours in that session, yet it seemed like no time at all. We had battled about the nature of the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination) as against the *yetzer ha-tov* (the good inclination). It was a formidable battle. I felt weightless. I was just floating around the room feeling totally exhausted. It was difficult to keep my eyes open. I felt like drifting off to sleep.

It was time for *Mincha* (the afternoon prayer). The Rabbi just looked at me with those incredible eyes of his – eyes that can see what others do not see, eyes filled with caring, love and compassion, eyes which were tearing, eyes revealing a depth of human understanding beyond our normal experience.

I met Yehudit Shabta in Jerusalem only about four years ago. She was recommended to me by my friend Thomas Nisell. Yehudit had spent many years working in the Steinsaltz institutions. She is a translator and editor with much practical experience, which includes working on many of the Rabbi's books. Prior to my visit, we sent her a draft copy of my writings for preliminary evaluation.

It was *motzei Shabbat* (Saturday night, after the Sabbath is over). We had arranged to meet in the lobby of my hotel – a public place, yet somewhere where we could talk. Somehow, we seemed to recognise each other and sat down at a table. We ordered weak black teas and started talking. We seemed to feel comfortable. I showed her photos of my family. When we got to the subject of this book, Yehudit was very polite. Without wishing to cause any offence, she softly tried to explain that she didn't think she could do the job. We agreed to meet at the Rabbi's office the next morning.

I arrived first and had a coffee with Schwedi. "*Nu?*" he asked me. "How did

it go?" I explained our discussions and said that I didn't think Yehudit would be able to edit this book.

"Why?"

Because her world was too far away from my world and she really was not my primary audience, I heard myself respond. I am not a writer and my work is not presented in any conventional, logical manner.

Then Yehudit arrived. Same questions. She looked at me.

"Please, Yehudit," I said, "please, just tell it the way you see it and the way you feel." The Rabbi called us into his study and we sat down. He was puffing at his pipe in his characteristically Steinsaltz fashion. He was surrounded by piles of books and manuscripts. We were all multilingual and very comfortable together, but decided to speak in Hebrew because I thought that this would be the most natural for Yehudit on this occasion.

Same questions, this time from the Rabbi. Yehudit looked at me. I encouraged her just to tell him the way it was.

Yehudit looked at the Rabbi, then at me and back at the Rabbi.

"*Ze lo mesudar*." (Literally: it is not orderly; meaning: it's a mess and I really can't do this.)

The Rabbi looked at her with those eyes of his. It was as if he could read inside her mind. He said to her, "I think this will be good for you to do."

"I don't understand," she meekly responded.

"I think that this will be a very good thing for you to do," he repeated.

"But, I don't understand,", she offered. "*Ze lo mesudar*."

The Rabbi smiled and asked her in his soft, very human voice. "Have you ever seen a Japanese garden?"

"Actually, yes, I have," Yehudit replied with some surprise in her voice.

"What did you see?" he asked.

"I don't understand,", she repeated.

Then we all heard what only Rabbi Steinsaltz could say. "You see, there are all kinds of gardens. For example, consider a French or an English garden: what do you see? Everything is perfectly put in place. Every leaf is manicured. It is very beautiful to some people and is *mesudar* (in order).

"Now you walk past a Japanese garden. It is not for everyone. You might

not stop to look in. But if you do go in, what do you see? A rock over there. A tree over here. Maybe even some water. Maybe you find a seat. If you look closer you might imagine a picture – some kind of colours and patterns and textures. It is a bit like some forms of modern art where you see a bright yellow ear over here and a red shape of a leg, upside down, over there and a blue hand sticking out of a distorted green body. That is what you have here. Sometimes there is a deeper beauty, even though on the surface it appears *lo mesudar*," he said. "It is not for every person, but some people like it. I think this will be good for you." Yehudit sat silently, deep in thought.

Thus began our working relationship. It has only grown and become much deeper and open, full of mutual respect. It has also been lots of fun. You can just imagine the "in jokes" about me.

Why is the book not *mesudar*? Because real life is not *mesudar* and most people think and live in a non-*mesudar* way.

Few people have had the opportunity and privilege to be able to be truly inspired intellectually. Many people have become "turned off" by bad experiences, mainly perpetrated by bad examples. Consider the schoolroom: how many people feel excited to re-enter a classroom? Most of us lack motivation and inspiration to even give it a try!

If my book does anything positive to help people to improve their lives by exciting their imaginations to experience new, positive and creative experiences, then I am a very happy and fulfilled person.

I hope to offer some kind of a glimmer of light which shines or sparkles out through the small window of such an apparently empty classroom – out onto the street. I hope to attract some curiosity for a passer-by, who probably would not have given this simple, plain classroom even a first look, let alone a second.

If I succeed in this, if I make the passer-by pause and think and notice the window, then, maybe this person might feel like coming a bit closer and taking a little time to peep inside the window. And if this casual peep of initial curiosity yields an attractive picture, then perhaps these people might wish to step inside to gain a closer look. This is where they will personally meet my very dear friend, Rabbi Steinsaltz. Then a new panorama of life will

open up for them, a new dimension, a new relationship.

I explore the idea of happiness in life and try to build it into a framework of freedom and liberation. Liberation from what? From the mundane, the physical and the material that are devoid of the spiritual.

I play with the whole concept of rules, regulations, restrictions and limitations ("fences") in societies and in communities. We do need fences; fences define who we are and, even more importantly, who we will become.

Who makes the fences? Who defines the rights and the wrongs? What have morality and ethics got to do with everyday living? Why? Who is inside the fence and who is on the outside? Who is sitting on the fence?

The true fence lies inside each person. We can think, imagine, dream and experience life within the fence, which is healthy – or risk exposing ourselves to dangers by allowing, or even enticing and then encouraging our minds to venture outside the boundaries imposed by the fence.

This is about human behaviour.

In this book I float through water, life and numbers. An apparently strange combination? I venture out on a voyage of discovery to explore the differences and similarities between science and belief in G-d. Science? Religion? Are they mutually exclusive? Or can they coexist in harmony and equilibrium?

I question what life is and the process of living and ageing: birth and death and what lies in-between. Beginnings and endings. The forces of good and of evil. Why? What is this all about? This is the unique journey which every person experiences through living life.

I have become so enriched, personally, by applying my mind to such issues and by putting pen to paper. I have discovered the joy and the privilege of growing and of understanding, the pleasure of fulfilment, the peace and serenity of being.

Living through ageing is the voyage of our body and mind, as they encounter the very essence of their being. It is the confrontation of one's *yetzer ha-ra* and the coming to terms with one's "fence".

I challenge how one's personal belief can engage with communal bureaucracy and then I confront the issue of continuity: continuity of what?

4: Behaviour

If I am not for myself,
Who will be for me?
And if I am for myself,
What am I?
(*Pirkei Avot* [Wisdom of Our Fathers] Chapter 1, *Mishnah* 14)

This most profound statement was made by the very famous first century BCE (Before the Common Era) Sage, Hillel, and continues to be applicable for all time and for all people, on both the individual and the collective levels.

Me, myself, so what?

Karin was a well groomed young lady in her mid-twenties who worked at the Dan Carmel Hotel business centre lounge in Haifa, Israel. She had a certain presence about her, a caring efficiency and graceful intelligence. She helped solve a network communications problem I was experiencing with my Australian cellular telephone and we chatted for some time before the arrival of my next business appointment. Her Hebrew was very good, with a slight European accent; her English was even better. Karin had immigrated to Israel from the western Ukraine (in Russia) only four years previously. She had actually enjoyed a good standard of living in Russia, but had uprooted herself to become relocated into a new culture for a new beginning, which had offered a brighter and more secure future. Karynna Byalkanaya had become reborn as Karin Bat-Ami (*bat ami*; literally: "daughter of my nation").

As we chatted about life and I enquired into her experiences adapting to living in Israel, Karin told me the following story.

She had been born to Jewish parents, but communist Russia openly forbade religion and thus Karin and her friends actually knew close to nothing about Judaism and had experienced even less than that. I suppose that it was the mystical "Jewish spark" which had connected her to her people, with the help of the Jewish Agency that had hosted her *aliyah*. She and some of her Russian friends had found adjusting to Israeli culture difficult at first. The climate and the Middle Eastern attitudes were very different from those of her homeland. *Ulpan* (a crash course in Hebrew) had gone well and she had found a job which was an OK start. However, her work consumed six days of the week and there was little free time for leisure, or to explore the new country.

Finally, they saved up for something very precious: the first free time off work, which they had planned and coordinated for their first *tiyul* (excursion). It was so exciting. They had already lived in Haifa for nearly a year and had not yet had the opportunity to visit other places in Israel, or to personally experience things they had heard so much about. They were planning to visit Jerusalem, a two-hour drive southeast from Haifa. They happily rented a cheap car and were looking forward to being in Jerusalem for the first time in their lives. It was like a treasured dream about to come true.

It was a Friday afternoon when they finally set out on their way. They chatted lightly as they drove along with the traffic, exchanging recent work experiences, laughing, joking, singing songs and generally enjoying each other's company, merrily anticipating what was to come.

As they drove into Jerusalem, dusk was already falling and there was little traffic. The streets were narrow and winding and the street signs were hard to read. The road map they had was no great help either in the gathering dark and they were unsure about where they were. They stopped to get their bearings and to ask for directions.

People were walking around them. It felt strange.

Suddenly Karin heard a thud, followed by another sharp noise. She was startled. Their car started to rock and shake. There was the crash of metal against metal. She looked through the window and was instantly seized by fear.

People were milling outside the car. They appeared to be angry, shaking their fists in the air and shouting abuse. Karin heard some of their ugly words: "Filthy Russians", "Russian prostitutes", "Desecrating the Shabbat and polluting the land", "You should be stoned for driving on the Holy Sabbath" ...

Karin saw a young man running towards them waving a steel post in his hands; another young man threw a rock that landed on the roof of their car. Fists were banging onto their windows. She screamed and urged her friends: "Let's get away from here, quickly!"

There was a surge and a screeching noise. The car was skidding. Karin felt nauseous and found it difficult to breathe. She saw the blurred vision of people starting to disappear through the windows, as she sensed their car accelerating up the street. A few minutes later they were driving in a wide street that was well lit and quite deserted. They stopped and sat in silence, hearts still pounding, senses numb, a kind of exhaustion overcoming their breathlessly breathing weightlessness.

After some time, Karin mustered enough courage to wind down her window, sucking in a breath of cool, fresh air. She breathed and breathed. How good it felt to be alive!

Stop! Hold it! Rewind the video!
Sound, lights, action! Take two!

Karin and her friends arrive in Jerusalem at dusk. The time is about 4.30 p.m. on a cool winter's Friday evening. As they start driving through the narrow, winding streets they become disoriented and confused.

It is already dark. The street signs are difficult to read and the map is hard to follow in the darkness. They stop to get their bearings and to ask for directions. It is 5 p.m. and people are walking along the street all around them. Karin winds down her window to seek assistance.

"Excuse me please," she calls out to a passer-by, "Can you please help us?"

She hears a friendly greeting: "Good *Shabbos*, we are on our way home

from the synagogue. What are you doing here, driving on a Friday night?" the Jerusalemite continues.

Karin responds, "We are visiting the Holy City of Jerusalem for the first time. We live in Haifa and this is our first ever excursion here in Israel. But we seem to have lost our way. Can you please direct us to the *Kotel*?

"The *Kotel* is only a half hour's walk from here," responds the man, "but it is Shabbat and you must be hungry, or at least a little thirsty! Would you like to join us for a Shabbat meal? It doesn't seem like you have any major commitments. Please come and be our guests at the Shabbat table. After dinner we'll walk with you to the *Kotel* and show you around our beautiful city."

Karin instantly feels warmth, a bond, some kind of inexplicable connection with her heritage and with her people. There is a trust there that seems to reach beyond cultural and geographic boundaries and extends deeper than the many masks of custom, clothing and cuisine (that seem to categorise so much of humanity). She senses a collectivity that transcends her individual consciousness.

She glances at her friends and notices their smiles. There is no need for words.

They park their car, get out and introduce themselves to their hosts.

Me, Myself, Who Am I?
Where am I going? Why? Who cares?

The Talmud (tractate *Avodah Zara* 17a) tells an interesting story about a man who had been very selfish and sinful throughout his life – mostly because he had overindulged in sex for his own insatiable enjoyment and pleasure. Until one day he realised his sinfulness and began asking for forgiveness for all his wrongdoings.[17] When this man passed away, the story continues, he found that not only had he been forgiven, but also that the angels regarded him

[17] In his *Hilchot Teshuvah* (Laws of Repentance), Maimonides writes with great clarity about the principles and practice of repentance. He explains that a person must undergo a

as having a higher status than that of many other souls who had lived much purer lives on earth.

How is it possible? It seems like such a contradiction and so unfair! The Talmud answers: a person who is knowledgeable in Jewish law and who has accepted upon himself to live a moral and ethical life must be judged accordingly. For them, even small details and minor points are significant. In contrast, a person who has never had a proper sense of right and wrong is not likely to become self-motivated to genuinely repent; if such a person does repent it is such a major change, that even if it occurs only during the last few minutes of life, that person has actually achieved a much higher level of holiness than that achieved throughout an entire lifetime of an "ordinary" good person.

Why does this particular story come to my mind at the moment?

Thus far, in my own life, I have felt disturbed about the growing division between the observant and non-observant (or, should I say, the "outwardly observant and/or non-observant"). The "middle ground" is under attack from both sides and its legitimacy keeps shrinking, for no truly justifiable reasons. I observe this accelerating process, see the human psychology of how this is being driven and ponder the logic of this otherwise illogical transition.

Fundamentalism is a very unhealthy phenomenon. It is a condition of sickness with fatal ramifications; its symptoms badly affect the vast majority of innocent "middle-of-the-roaders", who generally are not even consciously aware of having become infected.

I am a religiously observant Jew but no extremist; by choice I refuse to wear any "uniform". I view myself as a human being who accepts the Torah,

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three-phase genuine, heart-wrenching process in order to successfully effect change and gain repentance from sin. These three phases are:

(i) identifying and admitting the fact that a sinful act had been committed and acknowledging all its details;

(ii) feeling and expressing remorse about having done that sinful act (in other words, taking responsibility for one's actions and feeling the pain of having done wrong);

(iii) taking upon oneself unequivocally not to repeat that particular sinful act, whatever future circumstances and temptations one may encounter.

believing that it was given to us on Mt Sinai over 3,300 years ago and is still alive and relevant today. I believe in G-d with all my heart and soul. I am one of His many servants. But I am not G-d's policeman. Nor am I His salesman, as He doesn't need to sell anything.

Strange? Perhaps; but I certainly don't feel strange or embarrassed. Neither am I an unstable person, nor in any way suffering from psychiatric abnormality.

Why do I feel compelled to say these things? And why here?

My analysis is non-partisan and it is based on many years of practical observation. Most problems that we encounter are the result of misperceptions, misunderstandings and misinterpretations born of partial truths, pre-assumptions, bias and suspicion; sometimes they are the result of premeditated manipulation. Whatever the cause, the victim is always the innocent majority.

Another fascinating Talmudic story (tractate *Bava Metzi'a* 59b) revolves around a passionate intellectual debate between the leading Talmudic giants of the day about some delicate points of Torah law. All of the rabbis ruled one way, except for one dissenting rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer, who argued most eloquently for the alternative. Then the Talmud relates an amazing series of events:

> "If the *Halachah* (law) agrees with me, let this carob tree prove it!" (says Rabbi Eliezer, the dissenting Sage). Thereupon the carob tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place ...
>
> "No proof can be brought from a carob tree," they (the other rabbis) retorted. Again he said to them: "If the *Halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards.
>
> "No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they rejoined ... Again he said to them: "If the *Halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!"
>
> Whereupon a Heavenly voice cried out: "Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *Halachah* agrees with him?"
>
> But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: "It (the Torah) is not in heaven!" (Deuteronomy 30:12).

The point is that we were all created as equal human beings living real lives on earth, imbued with the power of thought and free will to make conscious as well as subconscious choices. We were not created as humanoid robots that can abrogate our responsibility for this Divinely-given freedom of choice, nor did we come into this world as artificial clones.

We are what we are and there is an incredible amount of ingenuity, individuality and beauty in what and who we all are. None of us human beings was created perfectly, nor does the Divine Creator ever expect us to function to perfection. More importantly, none of us should ever have the arrogance of even thinking that we, human beings, can ever be perfect. G-d made each and every one of us individually; He knows our weaknesses.

Many third-world societies have very highly developed social structures. People in these communities live and work together, helping and caring for each other. They are very moral and ethical groups of people; their members do not kill or injure each other, nor do they steal, rape or take advantage of each other. Their economy is honest, with no inequitable bartering or claims for goods or services of unfair quality or quantity. People listen to one another attentively, without raising their voices or interrupting each other. The elders and the leadership are not corrupt and are highly respected. There is natural harmony in such social structures which respond collectively to outside threats.

This takes me back to my story of Karin's first encounter with the Sabbath which, so unfortunately, is symptomatic of the fundamentalist division.

The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers 1:1) instructs us to "make a fence around the Torah". The Talmud (tractate *Bava Metzi'a* 58b) decrees that embarrassing a person in public is akin to murdering them and should be punished accordingly. What could possibly be the connection between these two sayings?

The Talmud in tractate Shabbat laboriously and logically analyses the 39 forbidden kinds of work derived from the Torah and lists the commanded and recommended conduct for Jews during the Sabbath.

Karin's and her friends' experience is most probably very foreign to many readers. The actions of her aggressors were the actions committed by "holier

than thou" people, people who set themselves up over everyone else, a perverted version of "G-d's Army".

It is bad enough when one human being sins and unduly harms another. But in my opinion, what is far worse is when a group collectively "flies its flag" in the name of whatever cause and acts aggressively towards other people, whose sole crime is that they happen to be different. And when this is done in the name of religion, it is a terrible offence against that religion. Worse still, it is a desecration of G-d's name (*Chillul Ha-Shem*, in Hebrew).

So then, what about the "fence" and the "making of the fence"?

A fence is most usually designed as a barrier. In farms, for example, it keeps animals in so that they should not stray, or else keeps other animals out so that they should not feed on crops within the fenced area. In public domains – such as in a park, a forest or a coastal foreshore – a fence defines a boundary. Fences are often erected between adjacent properties as a line of demarcation. And when someone adopts a neutral or non-committal position, we say that he or she is "sitting on the fence". In many societies, both past and present, there are societal fences based on class distinction, genetics, wealth, power and the like.

Jews are instructed to create a boundary between our Torah and everything which may lead us astray from a Torah way of life. On one hand this boundary, this metaphoric fence, is designed to protect our holy Torah from being changed, diluted or corrupted in any way over time – or, in other words, to remain unchanged and unchangeable. The interpretation of the law in every generation and its application to modernity is called the *Halachah* (literally – "the way"). In the *Halachah*, the majority rule applies, even though a dissenting minority opinion is recognised as such. The Torah was given to humankind on earth and survives in the earthly realm due to this fence (or stipulation).

On the other hand, this boundary, or fence, is designed to protect people from themselves, because when left to their own devices, humans can be extremely dangerous and destructive. Freedom of choice is based upon the concept of ethics and morality; it cannot and must not be a random choice of "today's personal feel-goods", but are Torah-specified absolutes. Thus, the creation of fences helps create a self-protection mechanism, designed to keep

wrongdoing out (or at least subdue the temptation to do wrong) and to keep oneself within, so to speak.

From a group or communal point of view, collective boundaries are created and maintained by the leadership for the perceived benefit of their communities. Thus, the perpetuation of these fences is often intertwined with pressures to conform and caveats against non-conformity.

Think about any group, club or organisation: its very existence is based upon its constituency. There are collections of people who belong to this or that particular group. These people may have chosen to belong to the group, or may have been recruited, enticed or even forced to join it. Some groups – mostly older, more established ones – comprise only members who have been born into them and sometimes they have to find ways of attracting new membership. But in any case, the very existence of a group implies a code of ethics and conduct, sometimes also certain qualifications (paying financial dues also helps), commitment to the cause, or acceptance of certain beliefs and rituals.

There are, however, other kinds of clubs too. For example: joining the very special, international and exclusive "grandparents club" requires no skill, no effort and no application forms. It's a great "club" to be in for any person lucky enough to have attained this status. All you have to do is enjoy – and spend quality time, if you choose to.

Everyone needs to feel wanted. Everyone wants to feel secure, to give and to receive, to talk and to listen, to love and to feel loved. People need to be part of something – to belong. Even extreme non-conformists or hermits connect with their own realities and what they are seeking, and separate themselves from what they cannot identify with.

This is the great voyage of discovery in life upon which each individual embarks, to a greater or lesser extent. Personal frailties, restrictions and limitations affect both the outward and the innermost manifestations of this great journey from birth through to death. Birth and death are the only

two certainties in life. The first one is simply inflicted upon the person, who then starts to grow and develop and tune in. The second one is certain yet unpredictable, time-wise. It is the in-between, with its many uncertainties, which is the life of every person.

Many psychologists point to three major shells (or defence mechanisms), that people create around their psyches. The outer shell reflects the persona, which is what we show to other people in general. This shell is fairly readily open to penetration in situations of friendship and trust. When penetrated, it reveals an intermediate shell containing values, feelings, fears and aspirations. Then comes the deepest shell, one that hides the innermost personal makeup of each individual and which remains unrevealed – often even to ourselves.

These shells are like fences – barriers established to protect the inside and also to demarcate it from the outside. They split into sub-shells, depending upon life experiences and environment. Moods, self-esteem and quality of life all have a share in influencing the overall balance.

What is the difference between a boundary and a fence, a fence and a wall, a wall and a fort? Surely it is only a matter of intensity.

Every group of people includes a large sub-group of middle-of-the-roaders and a smaller, more intense sub-group of both extremes. Whichever way we define the average, we will always have to accept a statistical spread falling on either side of the middle. In different groupings, one might find oneself either in the average, or above or below it – depending on the definitions.

Two obvious phenomena can be observed:

- Most people can readily associate with multiple groupings of people simultaneously;
- In any grouping, whether formal or informal, some people will fit in better than others and feel comfortable and accepted.

It is easy to picture how some people find it much easier than others to fit into a group and to feel comfortable and accepted. It is also easy to picture how some people would find it difficult to fit into a particular group and would feel uncomfortable and unaccepted.

These self-erected fences become automatically adjusted (or even tailored) to one's environmental circumstances. This phenomenon is usually

a subconscious defence mechanism, which turns into awareness only when the person's comfort zone is being challenged. In such situations, uncharacteristic behaviour may be triggered to compensate for the lack of comfort, unfamiliarity of the environment or the insecurity.

Personal fences are very complex and also very variable in nature. When fences are created for the benefit or control of a group, all kinds of additional complex issues arise. Some fences are designed to cater for the perceived average of the group, while others need to cover "worst-case scenarios".

In a military system the rules must be clear, precise and readily applicable for the simplest foot soldier. The entire machine must be able to achieve specific objectives under stressful and dangerous conditions, in which individuals can be sacrificed expeditiously for the overall survival of the group.

Religions offer comfort, security and purpose in life not only in the here and now, but usually also in the hereafter. Participation is made easier by belonging and contributing, as well as by abstaining from certain things. Questions are often perceived as threatening – even though questioning is a positive activity which should be encouraged, as the answers can strengthen the entire fabric of the group – because they are perceived as threatening: they might shake one's belief, encourage putting an end to blind faith, or even present an open challenge to religious rulings or teachings. So often in our human existence there is a disparity between the practical and the theoretical. In many religious orders the leadership is unable to relate to the members; and worse still, it fails to set a living example.

People need mentors, role models they can respect and trust, look up to and emulate. As we all know, when there is a discrepancy between word and deed, children will behave according to what their parents do, not according to what they say.

Karin and her friends, who were frightened by the violence of their fundamentalist attackers, did not have the slightest idea what the problem was. As for the attackers, I do not believe that their aggressive behaviour was motivated by an evil intention; rather, I believe that in some distorted way they had a sense of Divine mission, accompanied by a misguided fear of witnessing the desecration of religious belief. I am also quite convinced that

they had no idea about the possible consequences of their aggressive and frightening behaviour. Blind obedience and robotic observance are terribly dangerous, especially within a fundamentalist or cult framework.

I believe that a positive approach towards those perceived to be on the outside of the fence – where "can" is given priority over "don't" and where living examples of "what's nice/good" are deemed more important and valuable than behaving like self-appointed judges and executioners – will yield far better results than mere concern for the fence itself.

The old cliché of not being able to see the forest for the trees seems quite appropriate, especially since some trees also make good fence posts.

When you place yourself on the inside of something, you usually identify with it – at least to some extent – or wish to identify with it. Thus, the "don'ts" become easier to live with, if priority is given to learning about them alongside the "do's".

To me, the real problem was the fence.

A religiously observant Jew should be able to maintain some kind of reasonable fence around the observance of the Shabbat laws, yet that must be done within the overall context of Torah laws. Torah law does not allow the contravention of one law in preference to performing another law. A great deal of Torah law deals with priorities: in case of a clash between two values, what should take precedence? The most extreme example is the preservation of life itself. Saving a life is equated to saving the whole world and in order to save a life, a Jew is exempted even from the laws of *Yom Kippur* (the most awesome day of the year).

This strongly contradicts the actions of those who, in order to "defend" the sanctity of the Shabbat, do things that are hurtful and harmful to others. Their actions can be likened to a driver who focuses only on maintaining speed limits, while ignoring all other traffic laws. Such a driver could approach an intersection at maximum legal speed, anticipating that the green light remain green; but what if the totally unexpected happens and the light changes to red? That driver may well believe that he is strictly observing the law; but others who observe his behaviour would certainly call it dangerous driving.

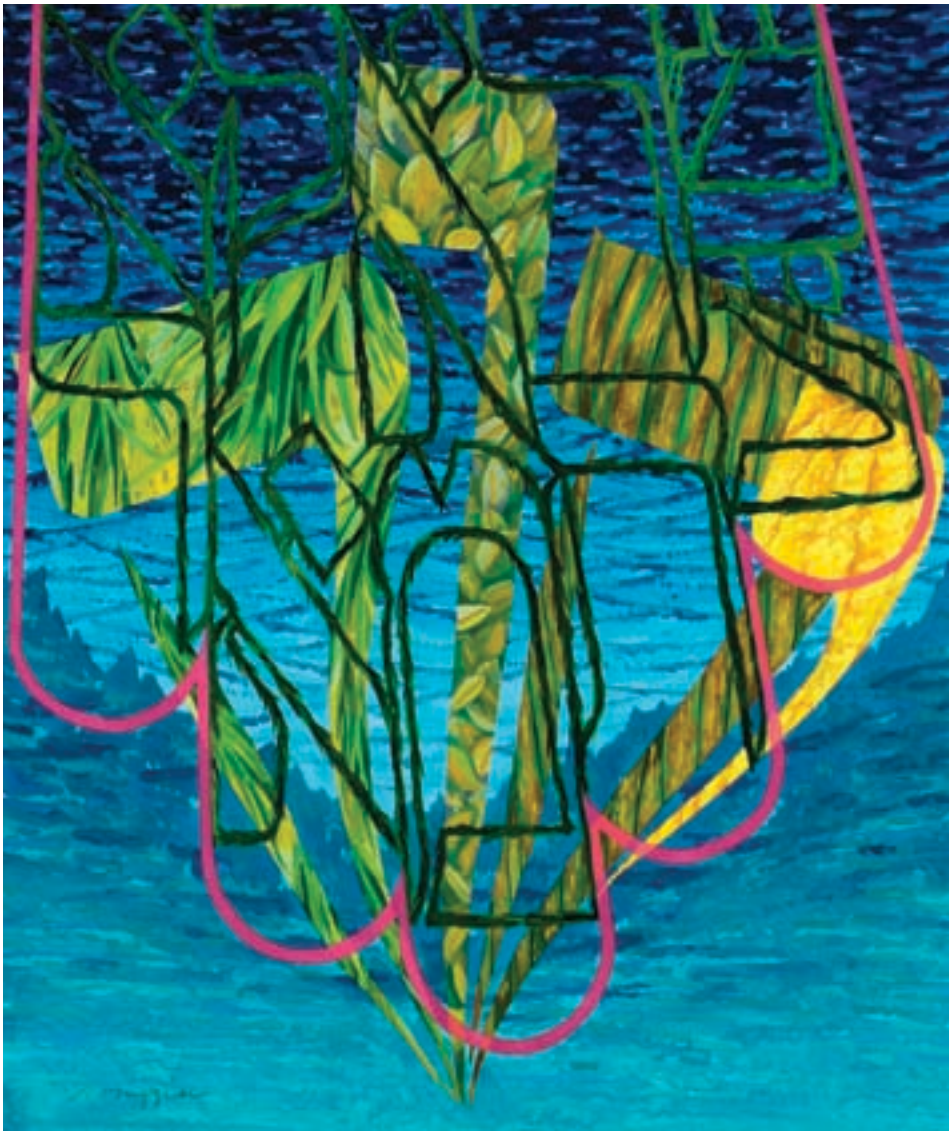
It is quite obvious that observance of the law must go hand in hand with

7a: Nisan – the idea of the two first months

(watercolour, each 57 x 51 cm) 2009

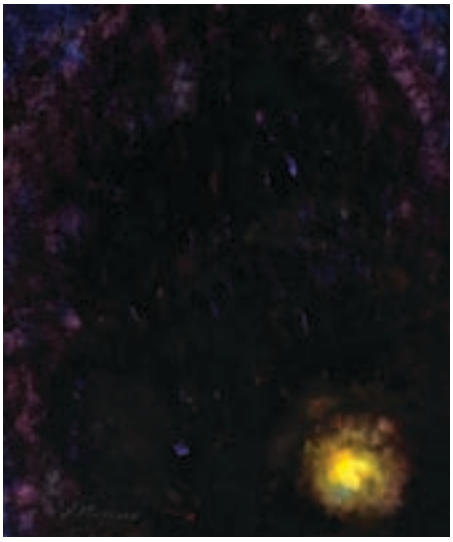
7b: Tishrei – the idea of the two first months

(watercolour, each 57 x 51 cm) 2009



8: Unification of G-d's Name

(watercolour 57 x 51 cm) 2009



a

b

c

d

9: Yetzer Ha-Tov versus Yetzer Ha-Ra = the constant battle

(watercolour, each frame 29 x 25.5 cm) 2009

the spirit of the law. Undue emphasis on certain aspects only, without proper understanding of the bigger picture, creates a distortion of the original intention of the law, which is fundamentally offensive to the entire foundation of the entire system. In such situations confusion reigns and fences, originally designed to beautify and protect a domain, turn into fortresses that repel everything that lies without.

This is a primary responsibility of the leadership of any group. Living groups are dynamic by nature. Regular positive communication, effective education and consistent and constructive example are necessary to maintain the health and balance of the membership. This, in turn, helps to ensure the longevity of the group.

Here is an experience I had some years ago. I was walking to synagogue one Sabbath morning. I was dressed in my suit and was carrying my prayer book together with my prayer shawl bag under my arm. I was singing to myself as I strolled happily along the footpath, happy to be alive and just enjoying nature. Suddenly I was jolted harshly back into reality by the voices of two young boys calling out: *Muktzeh*!"

Muktzeh is a term that refers to a group of objects that are not to be used on the Sabbath and therefore should also not be moved or handled on that day – e.g. a pen or a hoe. At first, I was puzzled: what were those boys trying to say? Then it dawned on me that they found my carrying on Shabbat to be offensive. Carrying things in the public domain is forbidden (unless there is an *eruv*, as will be explained further on). The kids had a point, they were just using the wrong term; but more importantly, they approached the whole matter in the wrong way. In my mind, I had always been careful to differentiate the Sabbath and thus my actions during the Sabbath from the rest of the week. For example, I would never have taken a pen or a garden tool in my hands during the Sabbath, but my prayer book, to me, was totally appropriate (even though, as I understand it today, carrying things in the public domain on Shabbat without an *eruv* was wrong).

For in addition to the fences – the boundaries, the "do's" and the "don'ts" – there are also the "how's" and the "why's".

Our community had employed a new rabbi who was a controversial kind of personality. He decided to build an *eruv*.[18] In preparation, the rabbi gave a series of lectures on the subject. Sure enough, the community was seething with arguments. Some people supported this idea enthusiastically, claiming that it was high time for Melbourne, Australia, to take its place among so many of the world's major Jewish communities that already have an *eruv*. Others questioned the rabbi's qualifications for such a specialised and complex project. Others yet argued that if Melbourne had managed without an *eruv* for so many years, this matter would best be left alone. Another group voiced the fear that an *eruv* might encourage people to become too lax with their Sabbath observance, whereas another argued to the contrary: that an *eruv* would improve the quality of Sabbath observance (e.g. it would enable strictly observant mothers to push their prams on the streets and elderly people to ride in their wheelchairs or use their walking sticks outside their houses, etc.). Another opinion stated that an *eruv* would prevent many people from unknowingly desecrating some of the Sabbath laws ...

Opinions. Opinions. Opinions. People's comfort zones were being challenged. New fences were becoming established, while some of the old ones were facing attack. People were thinking. People were learning. People were arguing.

Some people were growing. Others were finding it very difficult to cope. Some really didn't care and others openly ridiculed those who did care.

For me, this was a real mind expander. I had never heard of an *eruv*, nor did I even realise that there was an entire Talmudic tractate named "*eruvin*" devoted to this topic. I found the whole thing very exciting.

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[18] On Shabbat, a person is allowed to carry appropriate objects (those which are not *Muktzeh*) inside one's private domain, but not between two private domains that are separated by a public domain (e.g., a street). This is as much of a prohibition as lighting fire, building, ploughing etc. The *Eruv* is a kind of a fence that makes it permissible to carry things from the house into the street and vice versa. This is a highly complex *Halachic* issue and many volumes have been written about it.

The Fear of Loneliness

Night. Out of the darkness the cry of a little child is heard: "Mummy, come here, I'm scared of being alone, come to me." This is not the cry of a spoiled brat who wants attention; it is a cry that echoes a deep fear that shakes the child's soul – the fear of loneliness.

At first this may seem like a childhood ailment only. Like the teeth that grow and fall out, or like the dreams, fantasies and tears that come as the child develops, the childish fear of loneliness is bound to disappear; an adult person no longer fears loneliness. Indeed, so it seems from the outside.

But is that really so? Or is something still hiding behind the seeming calm of the lone adult? A grown-up person does not usually disclose a fear of being alone – not necessarily because he does not have that fear, but due to sheer shame. The adult is ashamed to express this fear publicly, and therefore must restrain himself and hide his real feelings, from himself as well as from others. Thus, the fact that adults do not cry is no proof that they have indeed liberated themselves from the childish fear: it may still be crouching deep within them.

This may, at first, seem strange: why should brave and resolute people who do not fear true dangers, fear loneliness? How could we even think that strong, intelligent people, braggart youths or fickle girls, still retain even a measure of this childish fear of loneliness?

But let us go out to the streets of big cities at times when people are at leisure and observe what is going on: the streets are flooded; people are walking to and fro, chattering in merry groups or rushing to the movie theatres – always in groups, never alone. They flock into the movie halls and are herded out of them. They go to cafés, fill club halls, attend youth movements, roam about – always in company, either in groups or pairs; never alone. In their hours of leisure, they leave their homes and go downtown, to the tumult of

the multitudes. Because they cannot bear the loneliness of their rooms and apartments, they flee from their loneliness into the crowd, the herd. Look at a lonely person walking in a deserted street; such people always move quickly, awkwardly, as if fleeing their loneliness, making their way back to the haven of society.

This shows that even grown-ups have not yet grown up: they are still afraid of being alone. Even when there is no overt reason for fear, most people, when alone, feel profound unpleasantness and dissatisfaction, confusion and vague apprehension.

The fear of loneliness, then, does not belong only to children; it may stay with a person throughout life, as a shadow in the background of the soul. Whatever changes may occur in this feeling are only external – from the overt fear of early childhood to the hidden panic and distress of the adult years. The same thing that causes the child to cry in bed is what drives the adult out onto the streets; and just as the child is eventually soothed in its mother's lap, so too the adult is soothed in the lap of society, once again feeling calm, happy and reassured.

But why do children cry? Why is the baby afraid of loneliness? A young child who was feeling happy at a certain place will often start feeling distressed when left there alone, and this feeling grows and grows until it becomes a profound fear that erupts in tears. People say that children fantasise about all sorts of scary beings. Perhaps; but why does this happen only when they are alone? Clearly, it is not something about the place they are at, or any objective change that occurs there. The fear of loneliness exists in the light as much as in the dark, in a familiar room full of toys as in an unknown place. This fear, then, is an internal fear. It is not caused by anything in the outside, but the self. In fact, the cause for this is not even a change that occurs within the self, but rather the uncovering and removing of a veil from existence.

A child cries and asks for help and reassurance because it feels insecure, weak and insignificant. So long as the child is surrounded by adults, it feels it has someone to lean on, and can thus forget its weakness and inability to do things or to defend itself against danger. This feeling of weakness is the core of the fear of loneliness; this is what makes it so terrible for the child, but it is not what creates the fear. The child, whose heart and mind are filled with scary images and realises that it cannot defend itself against them, becomes frightened. But what is it that actually evokes these frightening images in the child? What creates in the child such a desire and need for defence?

Let us look at a little child that has been left alone somewhere; let us assume that it was given enough toys to keep busy for a while. So long as the child is taken with its games, it pays no heed to its loneliness. The same applies to the child who wakes up at night: at first, it will spend some time in thought, and only then will it begin to feel the fear of loneliness. And then, instead of being bored – as would have been the case were the child in the company of other people – the child feels emptiness. For when a person – child or adult – is alone, he feels things more deeply. When in society, lack of occupation or interest brings about a feeling of boredom, which is the external expression of emptiness. Boredom is the result of lack of content, and therefore a person who has inner content is never bored. In company, people always find someone or something to blame for the boredom. But when a person is alone, he can blame nobody; only his own emptiness. Obviously, little children cannot define or understand what emptiness is; but they certainly can feel it right away.

The distress that the child experiences when alone and with nothing to do is the feeling of emptiness. This feeling is far deeper than merely having nothing to do. Unlike pain or pleasure, emptiness is relative. An adult who is occupied with things that concern a five-year-old is undoubtedly a very empty person, whereas for a five-year-old it would have been perfectly all right. Emptiness, then, as in the physical world, is the gap between vessel and content. A person whose vessel – namely, spiritual powers and capacity of understanding – is relatively large, whereas its contents are poor, is an empty person. Emptiness is a fact; but the *feeling* of emptiness is created when the great desires and ambitions of the soul are confronted with a meagre, petty psychological reality. The child who feels emptiness when alone is, in fact, victim of the gap between its relatively great desires and its limited capacity to fulfil them; for children usually do not yet have enough in them to nourish their own souls.

So long as the child is among people, adults or peers, this has no practical importance, since he *does* feel the reality. Social life being a relative network in which one always compares oneself with others, can make one evade self-criticism. But when one is alone one is assaulted with this feeling of emptiness, which is created by the unquenched thirsts of the "I". This emptiness, the vacuum within the self, is what awakens the fears that torment the lonely child. The subject matter of these fears is the inner emptiness; the actual form they may take varies according to the education and the environment, and can assume the shape of devils and witches, thieves and robbers, or nightmares.

So little children are afraid of being alone; why should adults not feel the same? The inner emptiness of the adult person can take different shapes, not necessarily the form of a devil; but so long as it exists, it is accompanied with the feeling of loneliness. So long as there still is this enormous gap between vessels of the soul – which have the potential of containing the whole universe – and their actual content, which may be almost negligible, there is room for the fear of loneliness. It is with good reason, then, that people flee from their empty, frightening homes into the safe streets.

The most common expression of this emptiness in adults is the nullifying of all values. All those things that are so thoroughly enjoyable in company seems so utterly pointless, insipid and insubstantial in solitude. For instance: people who read jokes when they are alone hardly ever laugh. It is as if there is no place for laughter and merriment in the gloomy hours of loneliness.

The reason for this is that the lonely hours are a time which stimulates people to look into themselves. Since no one else is around, one just has to confront oneself. All good manners and external achievements melt and vanish outside of the society that endows them with meaning. When one is alone, one is forced to wonder: "Who am I? What am I?" Indeed, in society one can always compare oneself with others: "I'm wiser that this one, greater than that one"; but when alone, all these relative measurements become meaningless. Then one asks: "When I am by myself, what am I?" This is, indeed, the big question. When one is alone and feels one's own emptiness, then one becomes aware of the fundamental gap between what one could and should have been and what one actually is. Then, all kinds of strange questions begin to surface: Is this the true purpose? Is this the right way to live? What is my life, except for standing in the void and feeding on nothingness? Who am I? … Nothing.

These are the kinds of thoughts that people have when alone. They feel that they cannot stand their own selves. They feel that the loneliness, and the thoughts about and feelings of emptiness, destroy all of their well-established notions and the false persona which they had built for themselves. They then remain naked within the nothingness of emptiness.

This is why people leave their rooms – so as not to remain alone. They flock together, they stick to each other, lean on each other, in an attempt to sustain their faltering entities.

Death Shall Be Defeated

It is one of the many paradoxes of Jewish history that whereas the Jewish people has known premature and unnatural death as a constant companion, probably more than any other nation, culturally and spiritually the Jews are remarkably not preoccupied by death and the hereafter.

In the Exodus from Egypt, the Jews left a vast civilisation that was obsessed with death and devoted much spiritual energy and material resources to preparations for the hereafter. This cult of death was one of the evils from which Moses led the Children of Israel, guiding them towards a more wholesome outlook that put the stress on life.

The Jews never equated death with holiness. Cadavers, far from being treated as objects of sanctity and adoration, are regarded as impurities from which one must keep a distance. Of all the many forms of ritual defilement listed in Jewish law, the gravest is that caused by a corpse. And when a Jew, like a Cohen in the synagogue or a priest in the Temple, is called upon to serve in holy function, he has to take special precautions to avoid contact with death in any and every form. The same is true of the *nazir* (a man dedicated to G-d), who voluntarily undertakes to follow an especially holy way of life.

In Judaism, holiness is first and foremost the sanctity of life. Where life abounds, holiness is at hand. "Life" is a synonym for all that is most exalted in Creation. One of the names of G-d is "the G-d of life". The Torah is described as "the Torah of life". The Torah itself speaks of "life and goodness" as of one and the same thing (Deuteronomy 30:15). "Living waters" are seen as a source of purity. It is thus not surprising that the Jews rejected all forms of the myth of the Dead G-d. Death is the negation of the Divine reality in all its manifestations.

The Jewish belief that "this world is the antechamber to the next" may well have inspired massive Gentile speculation on heaven and hell and purgatory but, by contrast, Jewish literature and tradition engage in scant exploration of paradise. Judaism makes no attempt either to forget death or to smother it in false jubilation. "The dead praise not the Lord, nor do they who go down into the silence of the grave. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and fore ever more, Hallelujah!" proclaims the Psalmist (115:17-18); characteristically, he disdains death, but he does not, he cannot, ignore it.

The natural reluctance to accept death is expressed in the conviction that the truly righteous do not actually die but rather "depart" or "ascend" to a different realm. Thus Maimonides writes of Moses (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, part 3, ch. 51) that there occurred in him what in other people is called death. It is said that "the righteous live on even in death, while the wicked are already dead when alive" (Jerusalem Talmud 15b). Here again we have the parallelism – goodness is life and life is goodness, whereas evil is death and death is evil.

The Jewish approach to death is that it is a problem to be solved by and for the living. Death, preparation for death and mourning are all worked into the fabric of day-to-day life. The essence of mourning is not sorrow for the deceased, but rather compassion for the surviving relatives in their loneliness. "Weep not for the dead man who has found rest," said an ancient eulogist, 'but weep for us who have found tears" (tractate *Mo'ed Katan* 25b). Jewish law prescribes that all eulogies made at funerals are to life and to the surviving members of the family. Grief is defined within, as it were, concentric ripples of diminishing intensity. The ripple on the first day of death is the strongest and most critical. Also powerful, but somewhat less so, is the first week of mourning. The succeeding periods, the first thirty days and the first twelve months, are getting less and less grievous. At all times, precautions are taken against unseemly outbursts of violent keening. There is an express injunction against self-mutilation as a token of sympathy for the dead, let alone suicide in order to accompany the dead (see Deuteronomy 14:1 and Ibn Ezra there).

The personal confrontation with death, perhaps the harshest test of a personality and of a culture, is of course frequently encountered in Jewish lore. But all the many variations of this theme have one feature in common – the encounter with death is looked upon as a major moment of life, which must

be met worthily. Unlike many other cultures, Judaism does not accept that any particular kind of death is glorious per se – with one exception, to which we shall return.

Even in Biblical times, a hero's death was not regarded as a glorious achievement; the ideal was for a man to "sleep with his fathers" and to pass on the wealth of his life and strength to those who come after him. A special tome called "The Book of Departure", which describes the deaths of the fathers of the nation, harps constantly on the need to maintain a calm, confident stance in the face of the archenemy death, to stand up to the Angel of Death and to be prepared in all tranquillity to return "the bond of life to the Lord your G-d" (I Samuel 25:29).

Nevertheless, there is one exceptional kind of death which the Jews do consider glorious, and which we term "sanctification of G-d's Name" (*Kiddush* HaShem) – martyrdom endured for the sake of sanctifying G-d's Name. It is a public act performed in the midst of the holy community, whereby the sacrifice imparts an added sense of sanctity to the living. Yet even when martyred in this way, the Jew embraces death for the sake of the survivors, so that their dedication to the Jewish way of life may be strengthened.

In this context, we can understand the extraordinary character of the *Kaddish*. Initially this ancient prayer had no connection with death or the dead, and was an ordinary part of the liturgy. Only at a relatively late period – in the early Middle Ages, when mounting persecution brought frequent martyrdom – did the *Kaddish* become a death-related prayer. However, there is no mention of death in it, and it is also devoid of even the slightest insinuation of reproach to G-d, who is throughout praised, glorified and sanctified.

The basic attitude of Judaism to death – which, it is said, was ushered in with Adam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden – is that it is not a natural, inevitable phenomenon. Death is life diseased, distorted, perverted and diverted from the flow of holiness, which is identified with life. So side by side with a stoic submission to death, there is a stubborn battle against it on the physical and cosmic level. The world's worst defect is seen to be death, whose representative is Satan. The remedy is faith in the resurrection. Ultimately, "death and evil" – the one being tantamount to the other – are dismissed as ephemeral. They are not part of the true essence of the world. And as the late

Rabbi Kook emphasised in his writings, man should not accept the premise that death will always emerge the victor.

In the combat of life against death, of being against non-being, Judaism manifests disbelief in the persistence of death, maintaining that it is a temporary obstacle which can, and will, be overcome. Our Sages, prophesying a world in which there will be no more death, maintain that we are getting closer and closer to a world in which we shall be able to vanquish death, in which we shall be above and beyond death.