



FINDING JESUS, DISCOVERING SELF:
PASSAGES TO HEALING AND WHOLENESS
by Caren Goldman and William Dols
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FROM CHAPTER 7:
Loving with All

Reflections by Caren

While quietly sitting on the porch of my multicolored, gabled Victorian home, I suddenly decide to fish my mother's mind for the reasons she became an Orthodox Jew after sixty-something years of living the secular life and loving shrimp and lobsters. I begin with a baited question about an ancient Hebrew prayer known as the *Sh'ma* to entice this five-foot, ninety-pound, seventy-something great-grandmother into a conversation destined to last the afternoon. "It's the most important prayer for Jews everywhere," I say with a confidence that comes from a lifetime of knowing that truth. "But what does it really mean for you to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind?"

Discerning that I'm not casually trolling around her heart and soul but deliberately probing her mind with a barbed hook, my mother smiles and takes a diversionary tack. She, who usually tells me how to build a clock when all I've asked for is the time, sits in silence. As moments become long minutes, I'm lured into believing her answer will fill volumes. At last words come. "Why do you ask?"

If I were completely honest, I would answer: "Mom, I think I know what you're going to say, but it's not what I really want to hear." Instead, I reply with a half-truth that warns her that I'm out to catch her but to do no harm. She, in turn, knows that whenever this familiar outing ends, she will be gently released. Of course I, in a state of lingering adolescent arrogance, determine that from this point on I will not be hooked by other silences.

"Late in life you decided that your God—our God—was a God worthy of your time, energy, devotion, heart, mind, soul, strength, and kosher kitchen. I need to understand how you got there."

"What's to understand?" she questions in a way that assures me that she, not I, will answer. "It's very clear," she continues. "The *Sh'ma* says to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul. So I do. I go to *shul* [synagogue], I keep the Sabbath, I keep kosher, I study Torah, and . . . Look, I just don't keep this and do that like I'm spinning a wheel and each time it comes around say, 'There, God, I keep and do so that means I love you.' What I keep and what I do is done with love and respect in my heart."

Her words entice me. I know she means what she says, but I decide to risk rocking the boat anyhow. "I know everything you do to please God is done with love in your heart. But the commandment is to love God with *all* your heart. Tell me about *all* your heart. Tell me about *all* your mind. Tell me about *all* your soul."

Poet Robert Bly often writes about our shadow side. He likens this constant companion or alter ego to a long black bag that we drag behind us. In my case I imagine an unwieldy sack stuffed with disenfranchised parts of my mind, body, and spirit. Whenever I rummage around in that sack, I realize that most of the contents resemble my thoughts, emotions, attitudes, feelings, actions, deeds, body parts, and projections on others.

On closer examination I'm apt to note that some of the contents of the sack actually look like "good" qualities—but in others' eyes, not in mine. For me it's best that whatever has been allocated to the bag is kept secret and in the dark. Every time I look in this bag, I sigh because it's so heavy—a burden that weighs me down—and so I want to give it away instead of owning all of who I was and who I am. However, when in a default mode, I realize that most of the time I don't have to look in the sack at all unless I really want to. That's because this bag, like my back, is behind me, and without a mirror to remind me it's there, I can always pretend it doesn't exist.

That afternoon as my mother allowed me to peek into her sack of sorrows, regrets, shattered dreams, and betrayals, I realized how many times she must have crawled into that dark, messy abyss during her attempts to love God with all. I asked if she took those forays when deciding to give up her addictions, self-hatred, and abiding resentment of those who had hurt her in the past, and she said, "Yes." I also asked if it was such rummaging that allowed her to finally reconnect with her grandchildren and me after years of unexplained silence. "Yes." But I didn't have to ask if she looked from the inside out on the day she realized that only she could accept or reject all that comprised

her burdensome load. Looking into her teary eyes as she took my hands in hers, raised them to her lips, gave them a kiss, and pressed them to her cheek, I knew the answer.

I know my faithful Jewish mother of blessed memory would probably roll her eyes at the thought of me quoting a Christian saint in a discussion of the *Sh'ma*. "What's the matter—aren't there enough good rabbis to make your point?" she'd ask.

"Of course there are," I'd say to appease her before throwing out a line. "However, some of the rabbis I know quote saints, too—saints like Francis of Assisi, who said, 'Love the leper inside.'"

Wanderings and Wonderings

"Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

In this exchange between Jesus and the lawyer, the gospel writer chose his words and characters carefully. Think about the lawyer. If he knows nothing else, he does know the law. So why a test? To see whether or not Jesus knows the law? To uncover hidden truth? Or for some other reason?

Next, mull over the broader implications of the lawyer's question. Begin by contemplating what it means to inherit something, what kinds of things we inherit, and how inheritances happen. List items, characteristics, attitudes, and legacies that you have already inherited in your lifetime, as well as those things you hope or plan to inherit someday.

Also ponder the phrase "eternal life"—your own understanding of those words as well as others' explanations and definitions. Now, in your own words, say or write what you believe the lawyer is asking—what he really wants to know.

Interestingly, Jesus replies not with an answer but with another question. In response, the lawyer references the *Sh'ma*, ancient words from Deuteronomy that express a core tenet of Jewish people. According to Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, "Although Judaism has no catechism, the biblical verse '*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Edhad*—Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One' comes

closest to being Judaism's credo." When Jews recite the *Sh'ma* three times daily, the six opening words are followed by text that contains the first part of the lawyer's response.

*Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.
Blessed be His Name whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.
And thou shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul,
and with all your might.
And these words, which I command thee this day,
shall be upon your heart,
and thou shall teach them diligently unto your children;
and shall talk of them
when thou sit in your house
and when thou walk by the way
and when thou lie down, and when thou rise up.
And thou shall bind them for a sign upon your hand,
and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.
And thou shall write them upon the door-posts of your house
and upon your gates.*

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."

Look up the word *all* in a dictionary and a thesaurus and then ask yourself:

- What do I know about the heart? *All* my heart?
- What can I say about *all* my soul?
- *All* my strength—what does that refer to?
- And what might the word *all* mean when it comes to my mind?

God commanded Moses, the wandering Jews in the desert, and every generation to follow to love with *all*.

- Why do you think God wants and values *all*?
- And the word *love*—why might God choose the verb *love* instead of *respect, obey, submit, follow, defer* or *comply*?
- In what ways do we demonstrate what it means *not* to love?

Write the equation "loving with all =" on a piece of paper. Now fill in what one is required to do without using the word *love*.

In this encounter, Jesus affirms the lawyer's answer. Reflect on your

whole heart, your whole mind, your whole soul, and your whole strength.

- Which of these parts do you rely on the most?
- The least?
- Which have you loved with?
- Which do you love with the best?

Consider the next admonition: "*and your neighbor as yourself.*"

- Can you describe what happens when you love your neighbor with all but love yourself with less than all?

The sequence is heart, strength, soul, and mind, and then neighbor as yourself. However, the *Sh'ma* doesn't begin with the words "you shall." Instead, it begins with, "Hear, O Israel." Many scholars consider a new translation of the Torah by Emmett Fox to be closest to the original Hebrew. Fox's prelude to the *Sh'ma* is "Hearken, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One!" Note that this means not merely that there is one God, but that God is whole, complete, perfect: One. Contemplate the differences between having one God and having a God who is One, and consider the ways in which each description impacts your understanding of the *Sh'ma* and what God wants from each of us.

Write the words to the *Sh'ma* in your journal and personalize the lawyer's response to Jesus by changing the words *you* and *your* to *I* and *my*. Say this version aloud several times, and then listen to what the voices in your head and, perhaps, your heart, may be saying or asking. Question those voices; ask them, how might the ways I love myself be related to the ways I love others and God?

Finally, wonder what Jesus may have meant by the word *live*. Then, using words, art materials, a musical instrument, and/or body movement, express your response to the question, what is the life *I* want?

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