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## LIVING INSPIRED

By Akiva Tatz

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*Reviewed by Yaakov Branfman, author of a forthcoming book on the teachings of Rabbi Simcha Wasserman, z'tzl. This review appears in the latest edition of The Jewish Observer.*

In his first book, *Anatomy of a Search* (ArtScroll), a best-seller in the Jewish world, Akiva Tatz recounted his journey from medical school in South Africa to yeshiva in Jerusalem. Through the interesting medium of relating his own story and those of others who found their way back to Jewishness, he applied his power of incisive and penetrating analysis to a number of aspects of Torah observance.

Now, as a lecturer of Jewish philosophy to audiences throughout the world, his insights inspire thousands and draw many to explore a Torah lifestyle and Torah observance. His most recent book, *Living Inspired*, is based on a number of his lectures. In it, he uses his unusual powers of analysis to reveal some of the underlying patterns of Torah thought and experience, and shows how these can illuminate our daily life. His stated goal: to make the deeper levels *manifest* and provide a guide to inspiration.

Rabbi Tatz succeeds in presenting profound concepts that are essentially beyond the ability of words to describe. The subjects on which he focuses are fascinating: silence, desire, intellect and imagination, beauty, inspiration and disappointment, the nature of laughter and its relationship to ordeals, and more.

This is a challenging book that is not to be casually read. It exercises the mind. But for one who desires to break through the limits of his own understanding, it has much to offer, crafted as it is to develop consciousness. While reading it, I often found myself digging into my own experience in order

to grasp completely; then, suddenly, I would find that rather than being in the middle of an intellectual idea, I was actually living it. The experience is exhilarating.

Rabbi Tatz states: "To be spiritual one must be able to *see around corners!* One has to be able to see into a dimension which is essentially invisible from here." We find that we want to see around those corners, into the realm of the invisible, indescribable, ineffable. Rabbi Tatz gives a picture of *good* and extraordinary beauty that one begins to experience. Everyday life becomes full of fascinating clues to a greater knowledge of the way the world works.

Common life experiences and complex Torah ideas are woven together in a wonderful tapestry. Every moment in life takes on a significance, as if it carries a message being encoded just for us, challenging us to read those messages and understand what we are perceiving in the most elevated way. We are drawn to find untapped resources of imagination and understanding within ourselves.

It is clear why Rabbi Tatz's lectures are so popular and have drawn so many into Torah life. He has an extraordinary ability to make the deepest Torah thoughts accessible to newcomers to Torah without simplifying them, while at the same time inspiring people who have been Torah-observant all their lives to reach further and grasp what has always seemed just beyond them.

EXCERPT FROM "LIVING INSPIRED" - CHAPTER 2:

**CH 2**

## **Inspiration and Disappointment** **(or Why a Good Time Never Lasts)**

The natural pathway of all life experiences begins with inspiration and soon fades to disappointment. Let us analyze this phenomenon and understand it.

Human consciousness and human senses are tuned to an initial burst of sensitivity and then rapidly decay into dullness. Sights, sounds, smells, even tactile stimuli are felt sharply at first and then hardly at all - a constant sound is not registered; one suddenly becomes aware that it was present when it stops! We are incapable of maintaining the freshness of any experience naturally - only in the dimension of miracle is that possible: the sacrificial bread in the *Beis Hamikdash*, the Temple, remained steaming fresh permanently to manifest the constant freshness of Hashem's relationship with the Jewish people. The natural pathway is that things which are fresh become stale.

One of the Torah sources for this idea lies in the sequence of events surrounding the exodus from Egypt. At an extremely low point in our history, during the intense misery of slavery in Egypt, literally at the point of spiritual annihilation, the Jewish people were uplifted miraculously. Ten plagues revealed Hashem's presence and might, culminating in a night of unprecedented revelation with the tenth. This spiritual high was amplified by many orders of magnitude at the splitting of the sea - there the lowliest of the Jewish people experienced more than the highest prophet subsequently. And suddenly, once through the sea, they were deposited in a desert with many days of work ahead of them to climb to the spiritual status of meriting the Sinai experience, the giving of the Torah. Mystically, a desert means a place of intense death-forces, a place of lethal ordeals. No water means no life. (And we see later the potency of the ordeals which faced them in the desert.) <sup>1</sup>

What is the meaning of this pattern? The idea is that in order to save the Jewish people in Egypt outside help was necessary. Hashem appeared and elevated us spiritually *although we did not deserve it intrinsically, we had not yet earned it*. But once saved, once inspired, once made conscious of our higher reality, the price must be paid, the experience must be earned, and in working to earn the level which was previously given *artificially*, one *acquires* that level genuinely. Instead of being *shown* a spiritual level, one *becomes* it.

And that is the secret of life. A person is inspired artificially at the beginning of any phase of life, but to acquire the depth of personality which is demanded of us, Hashem *removes the inspiration*. The danger is apathy and depression; the challenge is to fight back to the point of inspiration, and in so doing to *build it permanently into one's character*. The plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the sea are dazzling beyond description, but then Hashem puts us in the desert and challenges us to fight through to Sinai. In Egypt He demonstrates destruction of ten levels of evil while we watch passively; in the desert He brings ten levels of evil to bear against us and challenges *us* to destroy them.

This idea recurs everywhere. Pesach occurs in Nissan - the zodiac of this month is the sheep, an animal which is passively led. Next comes Iyar - the ox, an animal which has its own wilful strength. And thereafter comes Sivan - twins, perfect harmony. It is like a father teaching his child to walk: first the father supports the child as he takes his first step, but then the father must let go; there is no other way to learn, and the child must take a frightened and lonely step unaided. Only then, when he can walk independently, can he feel his father's love in the very moment which previously felt like desertion.

Unfortunately most people do not know this secret. We are misled into thinking that the world is supposed to be a constant thrill and we feel only half-alive because it is not. Let us examine some applications of this fundamental principle.

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In *aggadic* writings we are told that the unborn child is taught the whole Torah in the womb. An angel teaches him all the mysteries of Creation and all that he will ever need to know in order to reach perfection, his own *chelek* (portion) in Torah. A lamp is lit above his head, and by its light he sees from one end of the world to the other. As the child is born, however, the angel strikes him on the mouth and he forgets all that he has learned and is born a simple and unlearned baby. The obvious question is: why teach a child so much and then cause all the teaching to be forgotten?

But the answer is that it is not forgotten; it is driven deep into the unconscious. A person may be born with no explicit knowledge, but beneath

the conscious surface, intact and rich beyond imagination, is *all that one wishes to know!* A lifetime of hard work learning Torah and working on one's personality will constantly release, bring to consciousness, innate wisdom. Often when one hears something beautiful and true one has the sensation, not of learning something, but of *recognizing* something! A sensitive individual will feel intimations of his or her own deep intuitive level often.

The pathway is clear - a person is born with a lifetime of work ahead, spiritual wisdom and growth are hard-earned. *But the inspiration is within;* you were once there! And that inner sense of inspiration provides the motivation, the source of optimism and confidence that genuine achievement is possible, even assured, if the necessary effort is made.<sup>2</sup>

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A second application: a characteristic feature of childhood, and relatively, of the teenage years, is inspired optimism and the lack of a sense of limitation. Children believe that they can become anything. The world is larger-than-life to a child, a child is not oppressed by a limited sense of what is possible. A child has simply to be exposed to almost any form of greatness (unfortunately, all too often physical and meaningless) to begin fantasizing about becoming or achieving that same thing.

However, later in life one is lucky to have any inspiration left at all. Many adults wonder why life seemed so rich when they were teenagers, why they could laugh or cry so richly, so fully, back then; and why life seems so flat (at best) now. But the idea is as we have described above. First comes a phase of *unreal* positivity, a charge of energy. And then life challenges one to climb back to real achievement independently.

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A third application is to be found in the *ba'al teshuva* world (*ba'al teshuva* describes a person who has discovered a Torah-oriented way of life after living a more secular lifestyle). Many *ba'alei teshuva* experience an unexpected and disturbing letdown. Often the pathway is as follows. A young person discovers Torah, becomes inspired by a Torah teacher, and begins to

study. Every Torah experience, whether in learning or in contact with the Orthodox world, is spectacular. Every text studied is alive with significance, every Shabbos experience is high, and there is a phase of euphoria. Somehow though, subtly, this changes and growth has to be sought. Learning may be very difficult. Often the difficulties seem to far outweigh the breakthroughs. Many are tempted not to persevere in learning. Of course this is exactly the way it must be, real growth in learning comes when real effort is generated. Just as physical muscle is built only against strenuous resistance, so too spiritual and personality growth is built only against equivalent resistance. A person who understands this secret can begin to *enjoy* the phase of work; a maturity of understanding makes clear that the first phase was artificial, it is the second phase which yields real development.

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Perhaps the sharpest application of this idea in modern Western society is in marriage. Marriage today is to a large extent in ruins in the secular world. In many communities divorce is more usual than survival of marriage, and even in those marriages which do survive it is common to find much disharmony.

One of the prime factors in this disastrous situation is the lack of understanding of our subject. Marriage has two distinct phases: romance, and love. Romance is the initial, heady, illogical swirl of emotion which characterizes a new relationship and it can be extreme. Love, in Torah terms, is the result of much genuine giving. Love is generated essentially not by what one receives from a partner, but by the well-utilized opportunity to give, and to give *oneself*. The phase of romance very soon fades, in fact just as soon as it is grasped it begins to die. A spiritually sensitive person knows that this must be so, but instead of becoming depressed and concerned that one has married the wrong person, one should realize that the phase of work, of giving, is just beginning. The phase of building real love can now flourish. In fact, in Hebrew there is no word for "romance" - in its depth it is an illusion. However, in the world of secular values, the first flash, the "quick fix", is everything. "Love" is translated as "romance" and when it dies, what is left? No-one has taught young people that love and life are about giving and building, and so the tendency is to give up and search for a "quick fix" elsewhere. Of course, the

search *must* fail because no new experience will last. Understanding this well can make the difference between marital misery or worse and a lifetime of married happiness. Jewish marriage is carefully crafted to transition from initial inspiration, not to disappointment but to even deeper inspiration. The menstrual separation laws are just one example - instead of allowing intensity to dull into tired familiarity, phases of separation generate new inspiration and the magic never fades.

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In all these applications, and in fact in all of life, the challenge of the second phase is to remember the first, to remain inspired by that memory and to use it as fuel for constant growth. The Rambam describes life as a dark night on a stormy plain - lashed by the rain, lost in the darkness, one is faced with despair. Suddenly, there is a flash of lightning. In a millisecond the scenery is as clear as day, one's direction obvious. But just as soon as it is perceived it disappears; and one must fight on through the storm with only the memory of that flash for guidance. The lightning lasts very briefly; the darkness may seem endless.

That is the pattern of life, short-lived inspiration and lengthy battles. The tools needed are determination, perseverance and a stubborn refusal to despair. Personal ordeals which make despair seem imminent are in reality a father's hands, withdrawn so that you can learn to walk. And the work of remembering the flash of light when it seems impossible is *emuna*, faith.

The third phase, and happy is the one who attains it while yet alive, is transcendence. It is a regaining of the level of the first phase, but now deserved, earned, and therefore far beyond it.

There is a statement of the Sages which describes the final transcendence, the transition from this world to the next, and it describes the angels which come to greet a person at that time. One of these angels comes to search out "Where is this person's Torah, and is it complete in his hand." The Gaon of Vilna points out, chillingly, that the higher being which asks this question is not a stranger. Suddenly one recognizes the very same angel with whom he learned Torah in the womb! And the question to be answered is:

Where is that Torah which inspired you then? Have you brought it into the world and made it real? And can it now be called yours?

<sup>1</sup> There are mystical sources which state that the plagues in Egypt were ten in number in order to destroy the ten dimensions of evil with which the Egyptians had "contaminated" the ten sayings of Creation (and hence occurred in reverse order: the Creation developed from an infinite point in concentric layers, as it were, and the plagues reversed this order to peel away the layers of impurity from the outside to arrive eventually at a pure center - the first saying of Creation was "In the beginning"; the last plague was destruction of the firstborn, the manifestation of "firstness", of new creation; the second saying was "Let there be light"; the second-last plague was darkness! And these sources proceed to work out the entire sequence thus). However, in the desert the Jewish people faced ten trials, each representing a battle with one of the ten dimensions of evil on a cosmic scale, their challenge being to defeat all evil on their journey to holiness and thereby return the world to its perfection; had they succeeded they would have arrived at the borders of Israel able to usher in the final and permanent redemption with their entry into the Land. The desert, in other words, is the dimension of cosmically concentrated evil.

<sup>2</sup> This also gives an insight into how a person can generate a *chiddush* (novel idea) in Torah. How can a human being originate Torah? Torah is a gift from a higher dimension, surely. But the answer is clear: a human being can bring original, genuine Torah into the world because it is contained within him already, at a level deeper than the conscious. All that is needed is to lower a bucket into the deep well of the *neshama* (soul) and draw that wisdom!