

Sparks

by **Rabbi David Aaron**

Founder and Dean, Isralight

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What Do We Know?

Humble Words to Console

When we try to understand G-d, we face an inherent obstacle with the very process of knowing. When I attempt to know anything, I am the subject and the thing that I seek to know is the object. In addition, there must be some degree of distance and separation between the subject and the object. Your eye can see almost everything, but it cannot see itself. “Knowing” implies two separate entities: the knower and the known.

However, you cannot know G-d in this normative way, because G-d is the source of all knowing. G-d is the source of all consciousness. Your very ability to think comes from G-d, who is the source of all thinking. How can you think about the source of all thinking? How can your mind hope to comprehend the source and ground of all minds? Yet if you want to know G-d, then you must seek the source of all knowing. You must search for the source of all searching.

This is why we cannot come to actually know G-d by philosophical inquiry. The philosopher tries to make G-d into an object of his mind. He thinks that he is the subject and that he can understand G-d as the object of his inquiry. Even if the philosopher comes up with a brilliant thesis about G-d, he has gained an idea, but he has lost G-d. G-d is not an idea. G-d is the source of all ideas.

In general, you are the knowing subject and everything else is the object to be known. But with G-d the relationship is just the opposite. G-d is the subject and you are the object. G-d is the knower and you are the known.

In truth, G-d is like the thinker, and the entire universe is His thought. According to the Kabbalah, creation is an act of divine thought. We come into existence through G-d’s thinking of us, so to speak. We exist only as long as G-d continues to think of us. If at any point G-d forgot us, poof! We would have no existence.

Now take a moment and create in your mind a woman. Don’t think of someone that you know. Rather, create a totally new character. Where does that woman exist? In your mind. Therefore, you are the knowing subject and she is the known object. Now imagine this woman in your mind trying to find her creator—you. How is she going to do that? How would this woman who is the object of your mind make you the object of her mind? How could she possibly understand you?

This is the same problem we have in our search for G-d. Relative to anything that we seek to understand, we are the knower and it is the known. But when we turn our thoughts to G-d, He is the knower and we are the known. He is the subject and we are the object.

Each one of us is like a drop in the ocean trying to comprehend the ocean.

Imagine a sphere encircling you. If this sphere were to represent G-d, you would describe yourself as being encompassed by this embracing reality that is G-d. From your perspective, what would you see? You and G-d. From G-d's perspective, what does G-d see? Just G-d.

From the perspective of the woman you have created in your mind, there is her and you. From your perspective, there's just you.

When something painful happens to you, you may find yourself accusing G-d: "How could You do this to me?" But from G-d's perspective, there is just G-d. No perpetrator and victim. Just G-d. From that perspective, your accusation appears as ludicrous as your stubbed toe shouting at you, "What are you doing to me?"

In the Book of Isaiah, G-d exclaims, "My thoughts are not your thoughts." This means that G-d's perspective is totally different from our human perspective. Just as a theoretical being who lives in a two-dimensional reality cannot possibly conceive of the perspective of three-dimensional beings such as ourselves, so we cannot possibly conceive of G-d's perspective.

This essentially is G-d's answer to Job. Job suffers a series of tragedies: the death of all his children, illness, and material loss. He tries to fathom why G-d has done this to him, given that he is a good person who has only done good. His friends and his wife offer various perspectives, all of which Job rejects as lacking the ring of truth. Finally G-d speaks to Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements, if you know?" G-d is telling Job that he simply does not have the cosmic perspective to understand what happens in this world. Job is left with not knowing the answer to human suffering, not because G-d refuses to tell him, but because there is no way a human being can understand reality from G-d's perspective, which is ultimate truth.

The Sages say that when we get to the next world, we are going to look back at all of human history, and see everything as perfect. Even the most tragic events in history will look totally different. This means that in that future world, without the limitations of time and space, we will see everything from G-d's perspective. But now, ensconced in this world of time and space, that perception is simply inaccessible to us. Human beings trying to fathom the Divine plan are like trying to run a Windows 2000 on a 286 computer. We simply do not have the hardware to understand G-d, Who is the ultimate all-inclusive reality.

The answer to all human suffering is:

I don't know.

Rabbi David Aaron

Author of Endless Light, Seeing G-d, The Secret Life of G-d, Inviting G-d In, Love is My Religion, Soul Powered Prayer, Living A Joyous Life, and The G-d-Powered Life