

The Strife of the Spirit
A Collection of Talks,
Writings and Conversations



Shefa



MAGGID

Adin Steinsaltz
(Even-Yisrael)

The Strife of the Spirit

A Collection of Talks,
Writings and Conversations

SELECTED AND WITH A FOREWORD BY

Arthur Kurzweil

Maggid Books

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First Maggid Edition, 2011

Maggid Books
A division of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 91040, Israel

www.korenpub.com

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Published in cooperation with The Shefa Foundation

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ISBN 978 159 264 3189, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in the United States

We feel very privileged to be able to dedicate this wonderful book to Adin and Sara Steinsaltz.

Written by our dear friend, Adin Even Yisrael Steinsaltz, in Israel and during his many travels, it is filled with warmth, wisdom, humor and inspiration.

Our close personal relationship was enhanced by our partnership in “The Mystery of You – A journey through the paradoxes of life,” published in 2010.

We dedicate “The Strife of the Spirit” on behalf of our children and grandchildren:

*Tony and Sharon Goldschlager,
Yasmin, Noa and Maya*

*Sharonne and Michael Slonim,
Gabrielle, Abigail, Livia and Jacob*

*Tammy and Joel Gerschman,
Gilad, Ezra, Miriam and Benyamin*

*Dalia and Adam Sable,
Yasmin*

Dina and Ron Goldschlager
Melbourne, Australia

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Foreword

A legendary Hasidic personality, Aryeh Leib, the son of Sarah, is known to have returned from a meeting with his mentor, Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezhirich, at which time Aryeh Leib said, “I did not go to the Maggid of Mezhirich to hear his words but to watch him tie his shoelaces.”

Of the many impressions this episode has made over the decades, a popular one is the notion that the Jewish student must not only learn from his teacher the words of wisdom handed down through the generations, but must also learn the practical wisdom, ways of doing and approaching things, appropriate perspectives, orders of priorities, down-to-earth information. This, too, is Torah.

An encounter with an authentic teacher of Torah is therefore an opportunity to learn many things on many levels. At times, the transfer involves sublime wisdom, blinding in its luminousness. At other times, the lessons learned consist of fresh and original approaches to old, familiar questions. Sometimes the master teacher is the bearer of secrets of esoteric insights into the complex nature of reality; at other times, the student is satisfied with simple procedures for the commonplace.

It is in the spirit of Aryeh Leib, son of Sarah, that I have collected

these pieces. They were surely not written with this collection in mind. Rather, I have searched for these pieces, with the cooperation of their author, for the sole purpose of bringing them together – for myself, for other students of the rabbi, and for those who might want to get acquainted with some of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's work.

This collection of essays, discourses, and interviews is an opportunity to encounter an authentic teacher of Torah. Rabbi Steinsaltz himself has become a legendary figure in his own time; his wisdom, understanding, and knowledge have nourished many in seemingly diverse sectors, both within the Jewish world and without.

Adin Steinsaltz is perhaps best known for his own new edition of the Babylonian Talmud; its potential impact is being compared to that of Rashi. Today's most learned sages, among them the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein and the Lubavitcher Rebbe – as well as the absolute beginners of Talmud study – all sing praises for Rabbi Steinsaltz's edition. He has also made a considerable impact with his books which have been translated into English, foremost among them, his "discourse on the essence of Jewish existence and belief," *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*.¹

The Thirteen Petalled Rose, whose publishing history includes a translation into Russian, known to be circulating in the Soviet Union, is a brief, 181-page introduction to Judaism, but unlike any primer on Judaism heretofore written or made available in English. Rooted firmly in the teachings of the kabbalistic masters, *The Thirteen Petalled Rose* presents a vision of reality that is a sophisticated analysis by a modern teacher, and at the same time offers a description of a series of worlds within worlds, populated by seraphs and angels, multileveled human souls, divine commandments countless in number, and the process of reincarnation. (Its publication prompted a full-page article in *Newsweek*; indeed the rabbi has been the subject of articles in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time*, and the press world-wide.)

Rabbi Steinsaltz has also written an introduction to the Talmud,² a collection of commentaries on several tales by the Hasidic master,

1. *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*. Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010.

2. *The Essential Talmud*. Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,³ a Passover Haggadah,⁴ a guidebook for individuals who are returning to Judaism,⁵ and a series of brief, penetrating portraits of biblical personalities.⁶ Simultaneous to the original publication of this present collection was *The Long Shorter Way*, an extraordinary series of discourses on Hasidic thought.⁷

In Israel, where the author has lived all his life, his public lectures, radio and television appearances, and prolific writings have attracted a wide following. In the United States and Europe, Rabbi Steinsaltz has also inspired a significant and growing group of students through his writings and public lectures. Representative of the esteem in which he is held in academic circles are the invitations he has received from Princeton's Institute for Advanced Research and Yale's illustrious Terry Lectures.

This volume, *The Strife of the Spirit*, is an eclectic collection of samples of the thinking of Adin Steinsaltz, written or spoken in varied circumstances during a long span of time. Their audiences were, moreover, quite diverse, as are the lengths, styles, and formats of these selections. While they all have, to one degree or another, a shared concern for the spirituality of human existence, the primary common thread is the author himself. Students of Rabbi Steinsaltz have long awaited this collection, which brings together writings that otherwise might never have become readily available.

Some of the chapters in *The Strife of the Spirit* are fragments of larger works in progress, some are occasional journalistic pieces, and some others are self-contained explorations of age-old theological questions. Neither the selections nor their order are the work of the author himself but rather that of one of his devoted students.

Part I, containing the title essay "The Strife of the Spirit," consists of six essays that, in one way or another, are concerned with inner aspects of human existence. Particularly noteworthy in this section are

3. *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*. Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010.

4. *The Steinsaltz Haggadah*. Jerusalem: Karta, 1983.

5. *Teshuvah*. Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010.

6. *Biblical Images*. Jerusalem: Maggid, 2010.

7. *The Long Shorter Way*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988.

the original, longer version of Rabbi Steinsaltz's essay, "Soul-Searching" (the shorter version having originally appeared in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*), and a slightly different version of the first chapter of *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, "Worlds, Angels, and Men." Also in this section is a discourse on the paradox as expressed by Rabbi Akiva: "All is foreseen and free will is given."

Part II is comprised of essays that focus on the Torah. "The Imagery Concept in Jewish Thought" is a concise statement that was more fully explored when the rabbi delivered the Terry Lectures at Yale University. In this section we also have a brief response to a biblical passage, offering the student an opportunity to see how a master teacher approaches an ancient text.

Part III gathers pieces of special interest for the newcomer to traditional Judaism. Rabbi Steinsaltz, having been born into a secular family, has himself experienced the trials and challenges that confront the returnee, the *ba'al teshuva*. Each of these selections speaks powerfully to the individual working his or her way back to Jewish tradition.

Part IV brings together a few samples of original pieces of a unique nature. In a form that most resembles fiction, Rabbi Steinsaltz retells stories found in our classical religious texts. The results are narratives that are simultaneously rooted in tradition yet highly original.

Part V, "Threads," has no related themes or forms and perhaps best illustrates the usefulness of such a varied collection as the present one. These pieces give the student an opportunity to see how basic Jewish approaches apply in varied contexts. What the student often needs most desperately from his or her teacher are examples of "applied" Torah – not abstract, theological notions alone, but the application of these notions to real-life situations or events.

The volume concludes with a remarkable collection of interviews with Adin Steinsaltz, all originally appearing in *Parabola*, a quarterly journal that is a forum, from time to time, for the rabbi. Although the contents of these interviews are in and of themselves highly informative, the special aspect of these dialogues is found in the way in which Rabbi Steinsaltz receives questions, restructures them, and sheds light on the topics at hand by challenging basic assumptions that are frequently hidden in the questions themselves.

I am grateful and honored that Rabbi Steinsaltz responded positively to one loving student's request for access to some of his work. In making these chapters available, I only hope this volume can become a vessel through which the light of Torah nourishes and sustains us.

Arthur Kurzweil

Acknowledgments

Warm gratitude is due to those who devoted their time and energies to the translations of the articles in this collection. First among them was the late Dr. Aryeh Toeg, friend of my youth, who was killed in the first days of the Yom Kippur War. Amongst the others who are now scattered in various places in Israel and the United States are Jonathan Omer-Man and Michael Swirsky. In particular, Yehuda Hanegbi translated most of the essays and literary pieces. There are still others whose names have escaped me but who are no less deserving of my thanks.

Adin Steinsaltz

Part I

Soul-Searching

Chapter One

The Strife of the Spirit

Peace of mind has come to be regarded in our time as one of life's highest ideals. Clergymen, leaders of cults, psychologists, advertisers – all seem to agree that this is the thing most to be desired. And of course all of them are in some measure prepared to provide it. Rest and relaxation are no longer the exclusive province of resorts and sanitariums. Peace of mind is regarded not merely as something pleasant and desirable but as a spiritual ideal and significant life goal, the final achievement to which various schools of thought and meditation aspire.

The reasons for this longing for tranquillity are not hard to find. Modern life, particularly in its characteristic urban form, is beset by political and economic upheaval, insecurity and fear. It is an unquiet life. Global tensions impinge not only on the body politic and its functionaries but on each individual citizen. People in general, even those most concerned with peace of mind – be it for themselves or as a “commodity” to be sold to others – have very high *material* expectations, which in turn necessitate ceaseless striving. The shattering of accepted values and the distrust of established frameworks create confusion and changed, sometimes contradictory, expectations. All this makes modern man tense, pressured, discontented. Hardly anyone escapes this stress

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or the measure of difficulty it adds to life. Home, family, friends, and good works all gradually disappear or are drastically altered in form, and to the extent that they survive at all they tend themselves to become sources of tension and competition. Thus, beyond all the internal and external turbulence, what man seeks is tranquillity, relaxation, and peace, at least with himself. The almost physical need for quiet and surcease quickly received legitimation and even reinforcement from psychology, philosophy, and religion. Tension and stress of all kinds have come to be seen not only as discomfiting and harmful but as morally invalid. Peace and quiet have become the great motive forces of all striving, including the spiritual.

Of course, the quest for peace in all its forms is quite ancient, as old as mankind itself. So, too, is the elevation of peace as a supreme value. Nevertheless, there is still room to question the notion of peace of mind and its place in the hierarchy of human needs. What, first of all, does it really mean? One important definition is provided by the Jewish sages in the context of a lengthy discussion of the many virtues of peace: “The Holy One, blessed be He, found no vessel but peace which could contain all blessing.” This beautiful passage, which makes peace the very basis of all good things, goes on to make a telling distinction: peace is a vessel that can contain blessing, but it can also contain nothing at all, can be an *empty* vessel. Here is a truth with wide applicability, be it in the international or the interpersonal realm, or in the life of the individual soul. Peace with no content, meaningless tranquillity, rest without sanctity – all are empty vessels. At best, the emptiness is soon filled with positive content. In all too many cases, however, the empty vessel becomes a repository for whatever comes along. In the absence of anything else, rubbish and abomination can fill the void. It is the same with empty peace of mind: the tension and pressure seem to be gone, but nothing positive comes to take their place. A vacuum results, an existence devoid of effort or thought, which is in no sense better than what preceded it. A life of vain struggle can be relieved of pressure and anxiety and yet remain as vacuous and meaningless as before. Furthermore, while stress is likely (particularly when unremitting) to be unpleasant, it has the potential of achieving meaningful, valuable change. An equilibrium from which stress has been eliminated can be a terminal state, a

condition from which all further development is likewise excluded – in short, the peace of death.

The notion of peace of mind as a supreme value, as a standard by which to judge all other aspects of life, is worse than inadequate. It carries with it the real danger of apotheosizing emptiness and negation – negation of good as well as evil, release from achievement as well as from stress. The Torah's identification of life with good and death with evil (Deuteronomy 30:15) is cast in different, less exalted and more down-to-earth imagery in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "Better off the living dog than the dead lion" (9:4). And the reason given has to do with the potential for change, however bitterly expressed: "For the living know that they shall die, while the dead know nothing at all" (9:5). In other words, as long as there is activity, as long as there is struggle – however lowly, however reduced to the level of the "dog's" struggle for bare existence – it is better than the empty tranquillity of death, the peace which contains nothing and points nowhere beyond itself.

The underlying issue here has to do with the positioning of a scale of values. As soon as there is some kind of ordering leading to a final goal – be it material, spiritual in a broad sense (knowledge, truth, love), or specifically religious (divine enlightenment, etc.) – one must judge each situation and each action, not according to its "comfortableness" but according to whether or not it is likely to bring one nearer to that goal. In our case, peace of mind may come as pleasant relief to one sorely pressed by the exigencies of life; but as long as he aspires to more in life than escape, such peace cannot be for him an end in itself. Inner tranquillity and turmoil, relaxation and tension, must be judged in light of the ultimate goal. And there are goals that cannot be attained except through struggle waged within the soul.

The path of inner conflict is neither easy nor pleasant. Every struggle, first of all, carries the risk of an undesirable outcome. Every attempt to reach a higher level of existence, to break out and ascend, entails not only the possibility of failure to rise but also the possibility of falling even lower than the point where one began. Then too, no spiritual ladder can be ascended without constant effort, tension, and anguish. In many ways, this struggle is between different and often opposing values. But in a much broader sense, it is an ongoing struggle between the given,

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present reality and that which has not yet come into existence but waits to be created. The inertia of what already exists is always the great enemy and can never be fully overcome. The never-ending conflict between the existent and not-yet-existent is at the root of man's whole inner struggle.

In fact, it is in the nature of inward, as opposed to outward, political or economic struggle, that it knows no termination, no clear-cut end point at which victory or defeat can be pronounced. There may be brief pauses for rest or changes of pace along the way, alternations between stretches of acute, violent exertion and stretches of slower, more measured progress but there is no real conclusion. Not only are the goals of spiritual struggle loftier and more difficult to attain than other kinds of goals, they are enlarged by the very process of achieving them, by the inward growth of the struggler himself. Thus, when quiet overtakes the spiritual struggle, it is in itself a sign of backsliding and descent. There can be no greater danger to one laboring to reach a higher spiritual and moral plane than the feeling that he has achieved it. Such feelings of self-satisfaction generally indicate a blurring of the vision of the goal itself.

In every serious discussion of spiritual matters there arises from time to time the question of whether man is capable of reaching any goal whatsoever except through such protracted inner conflict. This is not just a theoretical question. In fact, everyone whose life is oriented toward goals beyond his present reality, goals that are not simply the direct and natural outcome of his present way of life, is already involved in such a conflict. Is there no alternative? For most of us, the answer is no. There does not appear to be any magical way, without deception, to resolve, conclude, and thus dispense with the inner struggle.

True, there are in this world people with extraordinary gifts who are able to bring the opposed forces in their own souls into genuine harmony with each other, harmony that these forces energize rather than undermine. But such abilities result not from following any particular teaching or path but from rare inborn attributes. The latter are not unlike other sorts of native endowments – natural beauty, for example, which radiates from every movement and gesture and needs no artificial enhancement; or genius in a particular discipline, which is reflected in nearly total mastery. People with such endowments do need to make a certain effort, but it is mainly to avoid spoiling what they already possess.

There are, likewise, rare cases of people especially gifted in the moral realm, and here too, the quality is not one that can be achieved by any sort of exertion. Of course, many who are not particularly gifted are responsible for significant and even decisive achievements in this realm, but never without effort or by taking an easy way. The extraordinarily talented are like rare works of nature – orchids or birds-of-paradise – whose character is something to marvel at and enjoy but not imitate. Nor do such people usually reach the same heights or depths as others in their grasp of truth. For there are certain precious insights that cannot be acquired except through tribulation, things born of struggle and effort that can never be harmonized, and it is the pursuit of these that makes for the highest levels of aspiration. It is, in any case, the unavoidable lot of most men to choose, not between turmoil and tranquil perfection, but rather between a harsh struggle to find themselves and a degeneration that in the last analysis offers no peace of mind either. Instead of waiting for a miraculous rescue, let a man take the other path, the only meaningful one, and prepare himself to do battle within.

Part of the preparation lies in this very recognition, that without inward strife there can be no life, that what a man endures is no mere “punishment” being exacted of him as an individual but the way of all men. And in a wider perspective, man’s inner struggle is part of the larger process of life itself. On one level, the struggle within the human soul is likely to be between good and evil, while on another level it is between the natural (animal, biological) and supernatural (divine) elements in the human makeup. Taking yet a broader view – and one that does not contradict but complements the picture already presented – it is a struggle in cosmic terms between chaos and Creation, or, in physical terms, between entropy and life. In a sense, all physical existence represents the struggle of mute form to preserve itself, its weight, its volume, its component elements; and the same is especially true of life forms whose very being is a perpetual process not only of maintenance but of metabolic transformation, not only of self-preservation but of growth. This ceaseless tension between being and nothingness is no mere epiphenomenon or superstructure but part of existence itself, at all levels and in all manifestations. It is thus impossible for man to escape this tension or negate it entirely. It can be ignored or not recognized, but there is no release from it.

Part I: Soul-Searching

Indeed, man's question should not be how to escape the perpetual struggle but rather what form to give it, at what level to wage it. The tension of existence is to be found even in a molecule of inarticulate matter; in man, as in all living creatures, there are the tensions of biological growth and change. He can live his life and carry on his struggle entirely on that plane. If he does, that, too, will be the plane on which his spiritual life is lived, for even at its basest, human life cannot be lived without consciousness. At whatever level man struggles, there will his consciousness be involved. What differentiates the saint from the lowly creature of instinct, cunning, and cruelty is not the life-tension within him but the level at which his conscious being joins the struggle he must wage for survival. The choice between good and evil is preceded by an even more fundamental choice: whether to give spiritual or moral expression to the contradiction inherent in one's humanness or to try to ignore that contradiction. Difficulty and tension, bitterness and pain, are to be found as much in the ash heap as in the heavens. Each human being must decide where to take his stand and fight his battle.