

Buddhist retreat center. It was there that I embraced personal prayer for the first time. (Oh, God, six weeks! What was I thinking? Help!) But more important was the meditation, observing the interaction between my mind, my body, and the world. I saw that emotions always play out in the body. I experienced the feel of fear and love, sometimes as sensations in specific parts of the body (mainly the chest), and sometimes in general “body-moods.” I saw that when I did something to purposely change my emotional state, my body changed, too. I learned to gauge my emotions through body awareness and saw that different emotional states viscerally affected how I perceived the world around me.

I discovered that anger and fear cause the body to contract. The outside world is pushed away when I take a defensive posture. And when I move into mindfulness, waiting until my body relaxes and paying attention to how my heart feels, peace and love arise on their own. Open to the world, I feel the *chiut* streaming around me and into me. For me, compassion and grace feel a certain way on my skin.

→ What I now knew, in my body as opposed to in my intellect, was the veracity of certain teachings from Hasidic rabbis and Martin Buber, both interpretations of Jewish mysticism. Various Hasidic rabbis spoke about *devekut* (cleaving to God), about a mental state in which we are constantly aware of the Divine, whether praying in a synagogue or doing the dishes at home. They taught various meditative practices, such as singing a *niggun* (a simple, wordless melody) over and over again, to focus our awareness on the potential holiness all around us. Another name they used was *mochin d'gadlut* (literally, “big brain”), meaning “expanded consciousness.” They contrasted our normally self-absorbed, defensive, contracted selves with the open-hearted, egoless, spacious, and loving mode of being that enables a person to be in God’s presence.

Buber called this I-Thou relation. When you perceive the world through deep, nonjudgmental, sympathetic listening, authentic relation arises. A new mode of being emerges from a

newly opened window—Buber called it the Between—where the subject/object distinction disappears and the reality of time and space fades, as we find ourselves in a moment of eternity with a thou. In every moment of genuine relation, wrote Buber, God is here. To enter I-Thou, teaches Buber commentator and Harvard professor of education Nel Noddings, we must enter “receptive mode,” where we ethically validate and listen deeply to the world around us.⁴ Receptive mode, it seems to me, is the secular version of *mochin d’gadlut*.

Like Buber, and unlike the Hasidim, I experienced I-Thou as a deepening of experience in this world, particularly in nature, rather than the mystical union with God that comes from overcoming materiality. But unlike Buber, and like a number of Hasidic rabbis, for me I-Thou was accompanied by an increased charge of *chiut*, of divine energy flowing in my body and in the world around me. *Mochin d’gadlut* and “receptive mode” are terms that I will return to in this book, as for me, attaining this state is the purpose of many spiritual practices, including prayer. Especially prayer.

I knew from meditation that I could use my body to observe and affect my emotions. Since I learned what peace feels like, I could see if a prayer for peace might actually bring peace to me. And I could use prayer, particularly in the form of meditation and chant, to bring myself to a peaceful state. In receptive mode, I could pray for peace from a peaceful heart. I could send *chiut*, the divine energy in my heart, to others.

Does prayer work? Without a doubt. It changes me, tangibly. Because I know how to carefully observe my physical and emotional self, I can watch its effect over and over and over again. I can relax into a meditative state by praying the prayers or chanting a chant until I feel the flow of *chiut* increasing as I draw it to me. It only happens when my body is relaxed and my heart is open. Being in *mochin d’gadlut* is its own reward.

Do my prayers change anything in the world around me? I can only assume so. For everything we do sends energy of some