

Finding Meaning In Life: If It's Not Found Positively, It'll Be Found Negatively

Dr. Michael Laitman Interview Series

With Dr. Kalman Kaplan, Professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychiatry, and Co-Author of *A Psychology of Hope: A Biblical Response to Tragedy and Suicide*



Host: Hello. We're in conversation with Dr. Michael Laitman, Professor of Ontology, and Doctor of Philosophy and Kabbalah, Founder and President of Bnei Baruch Kabbalah Institute. Welcome Dr. Laitman. And joining us is Dr. Kalman Kaplan. Dr. Kaplan is a Professor of Clinical Psychology in both the Departments of Psychiatry and the Department of Medical Education at the University of Illinois in Chicago in the College of Medicine and he's flown all the way today to be with us and we truly appreciate that Dr. Kaplan. He's the director of the program in Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health sponsored by the John Templeton Foundation and he's author of *Biblical Stories for Psychotherapy and Counseling: A Sourcebook*, and he's also written a book called, *The Fruit of Her Hands: A Psychology of the Biblical Woman*, and his latest book, *A Psychology of Hope: A Biblical Response to Tragedy and Suicide* that deals with hopelessness, hope, and suicide. And he wrote these books in collaboration with Matthew Schwartz. I'd like to start Dr. Kaplan by asking you if you could give us a kind of a summary, an explanation of what Biblical Psychology is?

Kalman Kaplan: Well, a number of years ago, I was struck by the paradox of Freud, a Jew, using Greek foundation narratives rather than narratives from our own tradition, rather than Hebrew ones. For example, why did he use Oedipus rather than the Akeidah Isaac [the "Binding of

Isaac”], why did he use Electra rather than the Book of Ruth? Why did he use Narcissus rather than Jonah? And I became set on fire with these thoughts: Why is it our own tradition has been so devoid in modern thinking, and why has it been so estranged from mental health? And the key to this is something Dr. Laitman has talked about. The Greeks never could integrate egoism and altruism. They never could integrate individuation and attachment while in the biblical stories, we found the method of developing a self-expressive way of giving. And so when I read Dr. Laitman’s stuff, I became very, very interested.

Host: Do the structures that we see in the Bible, the stories and the archetypes of the Bible, do they tell us something about our psychology at a deep level? Can they be used in this way?

Michael Laitman: Well, of course. The whole Torah is written to help us understand ourselves and the world and what we should achieve. So, of course, every story is not a story, it is ethics and a higher ethics. It contains all the levels of the mental by which we have to correct ourselves and finally become, as it says, “They shall all know Me from the least of them to the greatest of them,” to rise to the level of Godliness. It is all presented through all kinds of stories and discussions in the Bible, in the Gemmarah, in the Talmud, in other, in Kabbalah books, in all the languages that we have, which are four basic languages: the Biblical language, the language of the Talmud and Gemmarah, the language of legends and laws, and the language of Kabbalah. And in all of them, we can find in different ways, but in all of them we can find stories “from life,” and if we look at it at a deeper level, then we can find in the stories how we truly rise in our emotions, in our hearts, on the mental level, in the soul. And the sages knew how to make it close to us.

Host: So if we rise through these levels, we’re really talking about the development of mental health, and these are proper ways of looking at how a person can develop.

Michael Laitman: Well, yes. You start from kind of your ordinary psychology, from childhood to the grown-up, and to the adults. And those who are ripe and ready for internal correction, with the same stories, you see a deeper level, and using it you can rise higher. So all the stories of our origins are very, kind of thick in terms of layers, in terms of what they can provide to people. And everyone sees it according to his degree.

Host: Are individuation, which you are calling egoism and attachment (altruism), connection I suppose, necessarily opposites? How do you see this?

Kalman Kaplan: I think they’re not. I agree with Dr. Laitman about this. I think that this is what’s wrong, we have a natural tendency to want to develop ourselves to be egoistic, but that’s not opposed to altruism. We have to transform the egoism to make us feel selfishly wanting to care about somebody else. I think this is the whole trick that the biblical mind sets. I think, I agree very much with what you say. Narcissus goes back and forth between being self-involved and absorbed in the other. With the story of Jonah I use, he learns how to give of himself.

So I give an example, sometimes, of giving a gift to somebody. If you just buy a gift and it’s very disconnected from yourself, you feel sort of disconnected from the gift, and you sort of resent that you have to spend so much time on that gift, or if you don’t give enough gift, then you feel guilty. But if you give a gift that’s expressive of yourself, say you write a poem to somebody, or you, or you compose a piece of music, or you give something that’s expressive of your own

unique, God-given personality, then you don't feel that you are put upon because you break the dualism between egoism and altruism.

Michael Laitman: This is true. Actually the whole substance of creation is a desire to receive. In other words, a desire, and it depends on how we use this desire. Initially it says man's nature is evil from his youth. In other words, initially, we have a desire and we want to use it egoistically: to use everyone, to enjoy everything, but we can invert it. With the same desire, with the same substance of creation, we can use it differently in the opposite way. In other words, it's how we use the desire: to benefit me or to benefit others. But a desire remains a desire in of itself.

Host: And is this a psychological thing, this kind of inversion that happens?

Michael Laitman: Yes, yes. It is written in the wisdom of Kabbalah that there's nothing more than a psychological trick here to understand that it's to our benefit. It's really a psychological thing. We learn from Baal HaSulam, the Rav Ashlag, how he appreciated materialistic psychology because it's truly what connects between a person and Kabbalah, this science, materialistic psychology.

Kalman Kaplan: It really is a transformation. It's a transformation from, I would call it, a Greek way of looking at life, although it's not just Greek, to a Hebrew way of looking at life. It's a profound transformation. I think what allows it is the idea of secure parenting, that the idea of a Creator is absolutely in tune with the modern psychological ideas of secure parenting. Secure parenting makes you resilient; it makes you able to withstand stressors; it gives you hope; it gives you a sense that not all is lost; you can pray to overturn things; you're not trapped in a tragic cycle, and it's feeling, even if your parents cast you aside. It says in Psalms, "God will pick you up." But in *Oedipus Rex*, if you come from a defiled family, you're done.

Host: You're doomed.

Kalman Kaplan: You're doomed.

Host: Yeah.

Kalman Kaplan: So then, why is that psychology and psychiatry have been so dense in terms, and so hostile to these ideas?

Host: You have a program; it's called "TILT." It's "Teaching Individuals to Live Together," right?

Kalman Kaplan: Yes, it's this book right here, and that's basically teaching individuals to live together. And "individuals" is the egoism, and "together" is the altruism. So we want to emphasize both aspects of it. It's the individual, the egoism, *and* the altruism. And so every word in that acronym means something: Teaching because people have to be taught, individuals, real people, not stick figures, to live, really live, together with each other in a social community, not by diminishing themselves, but where the community becomes the way in which they can best express themselves.

Host: What sort of systems do you set up around a person that helps them see these things?

Kalman Kaplan: Well, we use the system of regression where we regress the person off of what we call the oscillatory axis, the cycle between egoism and altruism. We try to bring them back

to an earlier stage where they learn how to give, but only in a way that's self-expressive. We want people to learn how to give in a selfish way.

Michael Laitman: But how do you affect a person to make people feel that they should change and how to change and with what means to change?

Kalman Kaplan: Well, often times they come in because they're miserable. They can't find any place for themselves. They either are, when they're in relationships, they feel that they're not themselves, and then when they are themselves, they're lonely, and so they often times will come in. So we try to get to the very definition of what it is to be in a relationship. We try to teach them how to slowly give in ways that are self-expressive. For example, everything that they give has to be an expression, a little bit, of oneself.

And then we also have the idea of forward regression, and then sometimes you've got to go backwards to go forwards. It's like a double helix as you're going up. So otherwise, sometimes you've got to go backwards to go forwards as you're developing that stage, sometimes you've got to go back. If you think like Erik Erikson, you've got to go backwards to go forwards. But always, the temptations, the seductions, are always to have enmeshment which is only altruism or disengagement which is only egoism. Because they're the quick fixes that we go to, but they're dead ends, and you're just going to go back and forth; you can't move ahead with them.

Host: So, as Dr. Kaplan is saying, we're talking about family functionality, either a dysfunctional family or a functional family, but the definition of family, now in terms of our mental health, is a much broader question.

Michael Laitman: Yes. We see that the crisis is not only in economy or industry or commerce; it's in family, divorce, education, detachment, alienation between parents and children, a cultural crisis; there's a drug crisis, drug abuse, and a depression problem in the world. So it's a multi-faceted crisis in every area of human engagement. We've come to a state of crisis, and the correction for that is only human relations and then of course in families too. We cannot put things in order until we take all these things as one.

Host: And one of the questions is what do we mean by distance? So, can you tell us what you mean by distance?

Kalman Kaplan: Well, I think that psychology has been very confused by what they mean by distance. When we think of far and near, neither of those words are very self-evident. Usually family therapists will say okay, like say Salvador Minuchin, a family therapist, would say, okay in a family if you're too far from each other, you're disengaged, and if you're too close to each other, you're enmeshed. So you've got to be in between, not too close and not too far.

But I don't think that's right because I think that, actually, you really have two dimensions: distance from the self and distance from the other. You can think of it as a circle. A point on the circle and distance from the self refers to individuation, and distance from the other refers to attachment. The distance from the self is egoism, and distance from the other is altruism, but there's no reason why you can't have both.

Host: So, Dr. Laitman, how does Kabbalah see this distance and closeness?

Michael Laitman: Kabbalah says that at the end of the day we have to come to a point where we are as one man in one heart. This is what we were required to do on Mount Sinai. And just like every Jew then came together, now we have to do it on a global level, the whole world. In that, we have to be the “Light of the Nations” and come to a state where first of all we implement this law on ourselves. And now is the time of the end of the exile. We have to return to the state that we were in prior to the ruin of the temple, in the state of “love thy neighbor as thyself,” to rise from unfounded hatred to love, and also to show it and the method to achieve it to the rest of the world.

The wisdom of Kabbalah says that here is the reason for anti-Semitism that we will not be able to treat this phenomenon, to cure it, until we bring to the world what we should bring. That’s one, and two, even the crisis that we are now experiencing in the world is also coming to put human relations in order. It’s showing us how selfish we are, how we repel each other, how exploitative we are of each other. Look at what happened in the financial system; how people have lost their minds and started really to use their egos outrageously and without any kind of restrictions. And it’s surfacing now to show us that we have to correct ourselves. And therefore, now our role in the world and the role of the wisdom of Kabbalah are appearing, appearing in the world. There’s a lot to do, and it’s all ahead of us.

Host: Your latest book, *A Psychology of Hope* deals with the tragedy of suicide, *A Biblical Response to Tragedy and Suicide*, and I suppose the worst degree that a person can come to in their life is to feel that it has no value, that there is no purpose to it. How do you apply these ideas to a person in such an extreme case?

Kalman Kaplan: What’s striking is how much we romanticize suicide. Somebody like Camus will say, Albert Camus will say that suicide is the only important philosophical question. From the Hebrew point of view this is absolute nonsense; this is absolute silliness. We don’t even spend that much time forbidding suicide because we’re promoting life. Life is felt to be lived.

Michael Laitman: There’s, there are no stories about it, about suicide in the whole Bible. It’s something that’s imperceptible, you know that a person could do that.

Kalman Kaplan: It’s, it’s just irrelevant because you’re; you don’t even have to condemn it because it’s irrelevant. If you’re living your life fully and your life has purpose, why would you want to kill yourself?

Host: So when somebody does get themselves into a corner like that where they begin to see life as irrelevant, how is it possible to give them back some kind of purpose and connection?

Kalman Kaplan: Well, you have to center them so that they feel that they’re living in their own skin and that their being is behind what they do. If their being is behind what they do and their whole being is expressed as their actions, they’re not going to feel purposeless.

Host: But this is precisely why the person is in a situation like that. What is it that drives people that would get a person who has a natural self interest to want to enjoy life? What brings a person to such a state of feeling?

Michael Laitman: Inability to enjoy life. You just answered it yourself. Our whole nature is about enjoying, and if I don’t see joy today or tomorrow or in the future in general, then why

live? If the essence of life is pleasure, you have to show people that there is indeed pleasure, and it exists here and now, and it's accessible and if not now, then in just a few little actions. But through these actions he approaches them; he feels kind of from afar that it's coming closer.

So the important thing is to explain to people the purpose of life, the meaning of life. "Taste and see that the Lord is good," is basically the purpose of life. When we get to the greatest pleasure, and it's available for every person and every person can discover it in this life, the next world is what you see in your life at this time. You can discover it; you can see; you can enjoy; you can receive it, and then everyone, "They shall all know Me from the least of them to the greatest of them," will be filled with the Upper Light, with the Upper Force, will be like Him.

It's permitted. It is available and accessible to every person as a purpose of one's existence; otherwise, we wouldn't be created. When you show that to a person, you know, I think that this is why Judaism is right in not even discussing suicide. How is it possible, if you know you have such a sublime goal, eternal and perfect, where you extend every limitation of this world? What suicide can be? It's inconceivable. And besides, what is suicide? If you put an end to this existence, by that you don't erase yourself from creation, you come back; you continue and you carry this deed with you. So it's not even discussed in all the Jewish laws.

Kalman Kaplan: For example, one example would be the stories, if you compare the story of Zeno the Stoic, and Job. Zeno the Stoic, according to the Greek accounts, stubs his toe on the way home from the stoa, from the porch, and he interprets this as a sign from the gods that he should depart, and he holds his breath until he dies. And this is used by proponents of rational suicide as rational. There's nothing rational about this other than the fact that he's tried to find meaning in his life, and it's very important for him to over interpret this action because it makes him feel significant even if it leads to his destruction. At least the gods are paying attention. That's what's rational about it. Job, on the other hand, suffers every misfortune that a human being can suffer. He loses his children; he loses his fortune; he becomes overcome with boils, his wife tells him to curse God and die, he doesn't do any of this stuff because he has an intrinsic life meaning, so he doesn't need to exaggerate and over interpret stuff. Much of the terrible things that people do are attempts to find meaning in life. If you don't provide them with a sense that their own actions are connected to what they do, they're going to look at all kinds of crazy things to find meaning.

Host: So Job looks at life as an adventure that these things are part of something that he must...

Kalman Kaplan: He doesn't understand them, they're beyond his understanding, but he knows that God has loved him and has created him. And when he accepts this, the things are restored to him.

Michael Laitman: He doesn't understand what for, but it is not a proof for him that he needs to end his life because my mind may not perceive all the reasons, but I know there's a higher force that created me and gave me life, and the fact that I agree to continue, is in itself, a connection to Him.

Host: So a person then, in order to have that bandage, to have that shield, and to make the question of suicide irrelevant in their life, in the first place, has to have this information, has to

have some kind of an education about it. How do we give this to people? Just by saying, you know, be Jewish? I mean what do we give a person that is going to make them be...?

Michael Laitman: No, no, no, why Jewish? It's for every, for the whole world. It has nothing to do with Judaism. It has to do with the whole world. But today because life is so hard and the ego is heightening, it's breaching every boundary, and we can't fill it, we can't satisfy it. So we see that there are so many cases of suicide, but the purpose of life, to achieve the degree of Godliness, and to expose, to divulge the eternal world for everyone is, is everyone's purpose, for all people, not only for Jews. There's nothing unique about it here.

Host: So this message that's in the Bible is really the underlying message, is really a message for the whole of the world?

Michael Laitman: For everyone, of course.

Host: But how do we educate people about this in a way that it gives them hope? I mean your dealing with the subject in this book.

Kalman Kaplan: Yes, well people feel disconnected from their lives. I think maybe Karl Marx was a better psychologist than he was an economist when he talked about people being disconnected from their productions. People are disconnected from what they do, so if you're disconnected from what you do, nothing gives you pleasure. When you're involved in what you do, the smallest thing will give you pleasure.

Host: Consciously involved with what you do.

Kalman Kaplan: Yes. If you're behind what you do, life has a purpose. You don't have enough time to do everything you want to do.

Michael Laitman: But I think that in the end, the solution is in human relations. The general atmosphere, if it were positive, it would affect each of us and would give us a sensation of life, of warmth, of strength, energy to live. It all depends on this black cloud that's coming down on the world. And this is a problem. If we strengthen our good relations, we are certain to not see such incidents as suicide, depression, and all that.

Kalman Kaplan: But we have to realize that even these destructive behaviors are distorted attempts to find meaning, that, if you don't give a person a positive way of finding meaning, he's going to find meaning in a negative way.

Michael Laitman: I am hopeful that we will correct these things in the near future.

Host: I hope so.

Michael Laitman: I have great hope that this crisis that we're now experiencing will force us to truly find life's purpose, and we will reach this solution, and the skies will open, and everyone will be happy. I am certain of that. So, we'll not end our conversation on a bad note, but with a hope for the best.

Host: I want to thank you for joining us. I want to thank you Dr. Kaplan and Dr. Laitman, and I like to thank you also for joining us.