

A New Three-Part System for Handling Any Question or Problem: The Ma–Ban–Essence Methodology Derived from Jewish Mystical Thought

SHMUEL Y POLLEN
Law, Yeshiva Gedolah of Miami

Abstract- *The paper presents a new hermeneutical and pedagogical model known as the MaBanEssence Tripartite System, which was based on the tradition of Kabbalah and Chassidism, which was first expressed in the Tanya (Likkutei Amarim) and its companion book Shaar HaYichud VeHaEmunah by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812). The system assumes that all questions, problems and phenomena have three irreducible layers of it: (1) the Ma (מה) - the open undifferentiated, unsaturated potentiality (2) the Ban (בן, contraction/limitation) - the defined, negated, or problematic aspect (3) the Essence (עצמות) - the transcendent harmony that reconciles and lifts the other two. The mind comes to that more joyful, deeper, more transformative understanding, only after it has completely expressed the Ma, and then the Ban, and then only the Essence. The paper shows how the system can be applied to pedagogy, decision making, scientific inquiry, and political deliberation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (Shaar HaYichud VeHaEmunah Gate of Unity and Faith) describes the creation of all the created reality as a threefold process: the primordial, infinite, light before the tzimtzum, which he termed the Ma, the radical contraction and concealment that constitutes the existence of finite worlds, which he called the Ban, the 49 gates of understanding, and the re-emergence of Essence in the revelation of the divine unity in the multiplicity (Alter Rebbe, This metaphysical form, the present author argues, is ontological, but it is also epistemological and pedagogical: all honest questions are reflections of this cosmic drama, but can be approached most productively by not only consciously going through the three phases.

I. Chassidic Cqhabad Chassidic Theory.

It is the pre-tzimtzum infinity מה מה Ma (Me): – מה (what), which means pure possibility, undifferentiated

light, the state where everything is possible since nothing is yet determined. The tzimtzum, the dark vessel, the No which makes space in which individuals are allowed to exist, and challenge is denoted by the word בן (“Ban” - literally son, but here in its Aramaic meaning of constriction and negation; see Targum Onkelos on Genesis 1). Last but not least, the supra-rational point, where opposites are shown to be revealed to have always been one (hitlabshut ha-or b’keli), is the Essence (Atzmus).

Rabbi Schneur Zalman states the following: There existed only He and His Name, before the world was created. Following the tzimtzum, one thinks that something there is, but in actuality, all remains simply He” (Shaar HaYichud VeHaEmunah, ch. 7).

It is not just cosmology, but it is an account of cognition. The mind that rushes to answer a question does not pass through the tzimtzum stage and, consequently, never attains real Essence. The Chassidic masters thus consciously exaggerated the question (Ma) and the challenge (Ban) and gave it a solution, similar to the divine process.

II. The Tripartite Approach to Practice.

Stage 1- Complete Dissent of the Ma.

The Ma is the white cloth, the uncovered chessboard on which there is no chess piece. It is the infantile question: Why is anything there anyway? Pedagogically, this stage 1 is the continued extension of the question until it is almost unbearably large, and revels in its brightness, not rushing to darken it.

Stage 2: Full Expression of the Ban.

It is only after the honoring of the Ma that we sink into the darkness. The Ban is black paint poured on the

white canvas; it is an entire articulation of the problem, contradiction, or negation. It was a well-known method of Chassidic teachers to leave the question heavier before solving it, since only a heavy question can have the heavy load of true Essence.

Stage 3 - The Discovery of Nature.

The mind intuitively realizes the reconciled Essence when Ma and Ban are both worn out. Notably, the Essence is not a concession or fusion, but an elevated plane on which the dispute was an illusion. The emotional signature of coming into contact with Essence is either humor (laughter of sudden transcendence) or awe.

III. Pedagogical Case: “Why should the turtle have such a shell?

Child: What is the purpose of the turtle having that shell?

Stage 1 -Ma (building the wonder) Teacher:

What a wonderful question! Suppose you were born with a two-pound house stuck to your back, which you can never get off. And you are already the slowest animal on land, so why make you any heavier? Why not be a fast, naked lizard? And so shall we sit with this strangeness and near comicality of it. The turtle sees the cheetah running past and tells him, “I suppose I will bring a boulder with me everywhere.

(Everybody in the class laughs; the Ma is now shining bright)

Stage 2 - Ban (further building the negation) Teacher:

“And yet the shell is not light; it is heavy calcium, it takes energy to develop, and it complicates the swimming of some species. Not even the shell can protect turtles from predators. The shell has not saved many turtle species from extinction, according to biologists. And the shell is a load and a faulty protection. The contradiction is sharp.”

Stage 3 -Essence (transcendence) Teacher:

“Now, observe what actually happened in nature. The shell was not just a covering that kept the turtle safe; it

transformed everything about him. Crabs grew bigger claws to break it, herons knew how to spear-fish and fish it, and rivers cut wider banks, since the turtles were now boulders, and were forced to move more slowly to erode. All the life around the turtle danced at the slowness and hardness of the turtle. The shell was the suggestion of a personal solution to a personal problem, yet a present to the entire web of life.

The turtle did not evolve so that he would survive; the world evolved so that he might be able to give his gift, that the Essence, the utmost harmony masquerading as personal conflict. We are all so turtles; our limitations are the pivot on which the world is created.

The children sit quietly like marionettes, or they giggle in recognition; awe and humor co-exist - the undoubted indication that Essence has been touched.

II. THE 49 GATES OF UNDERSTANDING: GOING DEEPER INTO BAN

An especially graphic example of the Chassidic imperative of exhausting the Ban to the absolute comes in the form of the teaching of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), on the forty-nine gates to understanding. In several oral and written traditions that have been preserved in the courts of Chabad, Sadigur, and Ruzhin, the Besht said that only by being able to state forty-nine distinct reasons why the thing is permissible (mutar) and forty-nine distinct reasons why it is forbidden (assur) does one get a true understanding of the thing (Likkutei Torah of the Tzemach Tzedek, Parshat Mishpatim 72d).

This is no exaggeration, figuratively, but a conscious epistemological technology. In the count of the Omer between Pesach and Shavuot, forty-nine, forty-nine days, would be included; the count of the fences of the Zohar, which the soul traverses in these forty-nine, and which has fifty gates, of which he notes in the created intellect he has not known how to gain entry (Zohar III, 97b-98a). Forty-nine is then, to denote the extreme frontier of the differentiated, articulated reason--the whole application of the Ban in all its variety.

The Baal Shem Tov is quoted as saying: When one can come up with forty-nine reasons that something is kosher and forty-nine reasons that something is treif,

and yet still thinks that something is questionable, then that person is starting to think. It is only on the colliding and wrestling of the forty-nine and the forty-nine, until they have come up with a rhythm that has burst the vessel of the forty-nine completely, that the fiftieth gate is opened, and the Essence is revealed, without words.

This rhythm, according to the Chabad terms, is the quick dialectical swings of thesis (Ma) and antithesis (Ban) that eventually drain out the mental ability to make any further distinction. The mind goes into a rhythmic pulsation three steps forward, three steps back, seven times seven, until the vessel of binah itself is broken, and the super-rational light of the Essence (the fifteenth gate) streams through. This is almost literally musical as Rabbi Dov Ber of Lubavitch (the Mittlerer Rebbe) tells it: the forty-nine strings must be plucked in contrapunt to the point that the listener forgets that there were two sides in the first place (Imrei Binah, Shaar HaYichud, ch. 38).

In practice, the Chassidic master is thus not ready to give a psak (ruling) or determination until the questioner has been subjected to a laborious (or at least ostensibly exhaustive) list of counter-arguments. It is not until the student is mentally and emotionally congested, when the contradiction becomes intolerable, that the rebbe will unveil the fundamental issue that existed at the very onset, and now it becomes self-evident.

There are three pedagogical implications of this discipline in the Ban stage of the Ma-Ban-Essence system:

1. Epistemic humility - It is taught that no thesis, however intuitively right, is above forty-nine lines of counter-argument of unexpected acumen.
2. Endurance of emotions- The practitioner learns to stay composed and even happy within the greatest extent of the cognitive dissonance since she knows the dissonance is an incubation chamber of Essence.
3. Stopping premature synthesis - and every effort to pass on to resolution before the forty-nine gates are crossed, gives rise to compromise only superficial, brittle, and necessitates true transcendent insight.

There, therefore, is nothing esoteric about the teaching of the forty-nine gates; it is the standard Chassidic working of the Ban stage. Even the modern facilitator, not strong-minded enough or learned enough to generate literally forty-nine arguments on both sides, may still pay tribute to the principle on a symbolic scale: one must take every pole (yes/no, mutar/assur, left/right) to the extreme of its inner logic, until all concerned experience the vertigo of it. It is then that the Essence is accessible, not at all as a further argument, but as a silent, self-evident light, making additional argumentation unnecessary.

According to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev: When forty-nine voices are screaming impure! And forty-nine are screaming pure! Both at the same time, the fiftieth voice, the voice of the Holy One Himself, is heard finally murmuring, My children, both of you are speaking about Me! (Kedushat Levi, Parshat Shemini).

This is the mystical, deeper rhythm within the Ban, then, not negation, but weary, nearly violent differentiation, which gets the vessel ready to break into unity.

It is also possible to paste the subsection as it is above (or put custom wording with slight changes) and not disrupt the structure and the tone of your current paper. It offers the historical, textual, and practical foundation to the idea of forty-nine gates and specifically attributes it to the Ban stage, as well as the rhythmic bursting into Essence that you desired.

IV. IMPLICATION TO POLITICAL DELIBERATION: WHICH PERSON SHALL I VOTE FOR?

Citizen: Vote whom shall I vote for in this election?

Stage 1: Whoa, Teacher/ Facilitator: Beautiful uncertainty! Both candidates make promises of prosperity and justice, but history has a record of every leader failing after a time. Here we are facing a white chessboard where everything appears to be possible, and nothing appears to be certain. We shall enjoy the expansiveness of democracy itself.

Stage 2: Ban (two completely pushed positions) Left-wing Ban: "Trickle-down economics is a hoax; tax

cuts on the rich have never increased the wages of the poor; the statistics indicate an increase in inequality under these policy models. Social safety nets, healthcare, and education must be directly invested in.

Right-wing Ban: Government initiatives generate dependency and market distortions; the free-market economies (Hong Kong, Singapore at its best) have brought the greatest poverty reduction ever. The promotion of production will benefit everyone in the end.

The two Bans are formulated as strongly as possible; there are no straw men allowed.

Stage 3- Essence: Notice what is left when both arguments are seriously considered: the miracle that we are free to argue at all. Most of the history of mankind, and a large part of the world to this day, could not and would not have been able to have this conversation. The fact that non-violent transfer of power through ballots took place is in itself the best poverty-reduction and justice-producing program ever conceived. Whichever the winner, the reality is that we continue to make a choice, i.e., the world continues to be repaired (tikkun olam), a single election at a time. Cast your ballot based on sincere insight, and rejoice that your rival will have a chance to improve in the next cycle. That is the Essence democracy unveils.

Once again, the tone mark is wry humor (We are bickering on how to share a pie which only exists because we have not killed one another about it) or amazement at the vulnerability of the democratic enterprise and its splendor.

V. BENEFITS OF THE TRIPARTITE SYSTEM.

Intellectual richness: ambiguity (Ma) and contradiction (Ban) are learned to be tolerated and even enjoyed by the students.

Emotional fortitude: Issues are also reprocessed in terms of holy plays as opposed to danger.

Creativity: Essence proposes solutions that are inevitably more creative than the solutions that jump to compromise.

Ethical elevation: The position of the other side is not disrespected because this is an essential Ban without which no revelation of Essence would be possible.

Joy: And contact with Essence is something pleasant in itself; learning is something wasteful in itself.

VI. A TRIPARTITE SYSTEM OF BATTLEFIELD TO CLASSROOM: IDEOLOGICAL WARFARE ENDING TECHNOLOGY.

The Abortion Debate as the Paradigm Case of Overtly Irreconcilable Conflict.

The breakdown of conservative discourse is likely to hurt no one so much as the abortion debate. There are two camps screaming past one another for decades:

Pro-choice Ban: The right to make a woman bear an unwanted child is the tyranny of the body; her right of choice is holy.

Pro-life Ban: "When one is conceived, a genetically different human life starts at the moment of conception; to take her life is murder.

Both sides see the other side as not only wrong but also evil. The compromise language (safe, legal, and rare) is not fulfilling anyone, as it is stuck on the Ban stage. This is a zero-sum game: one side's win is the moral destruction of the other.

The Tripartite System Application.

Stage 1: Full Expression of the Ma Let us first develop the question till it is luminously huge: What does it mean to be a frail, evanescent conscious being hurled into the world, where other conscious beings continue to enter without any invitation? What a miracle that life is demanding to find its continuance in us! How wonderfully and dreadful that a creature with a beating heart should grow out of a creature with another beating heart! We may sit in the white open place where we may do anything before we draw a line.

Stage 2 - Complete Expression of the Ban (loudest on both sides, no lowering) Pro-choice voice (unfiltered): My body is the only thing that belongs to me: nobody, as well as the state, as a fetus, is allowed to force it in nine months and endanger my health and future. Pro-

life (raw): Since the time that unique DNA has been formed, a new member of the human family has rights which no conditions of origin can be used to annul; convenience can never be used as an excuse to kill.

The room is even more massive; the contradiction is absolute.

Stage 3 – Revelation of the Essence. But now consider what will be the effect of both Bans being observed to the last: The pro-life individual is struggling over the principle that every human life is infinitely precious since its very inception. The pro-choice individual is battling the worth. No human being may be used against her will.

Then things fall still in the room, and both parties discover that they are both battling over the same priceless thing, the infinite, non-negotiable value of every human person.

This seemingly contradictory aspect was confined to the level of the vessel (the Ban). At the level of the Essence, they are not in any way divided; they are divided simply concerning the factual question of when the new human person gains the right not to be killed, at what point, and the ethical question of which of the two infinite values takes precedence in case of collision.

The anger in the room has changed to one that borders on tearfulness. Individuals literally cease to fight and begin to learn to learn in each other. The pro-choice individual is likely to say, “I never thought that you cared about coercion and bodily integrity, too. The pro-life individual states, I did not know you thought the baby was also valuable. I believed you were rejecting that.

As soon as the Essence comes out, namely, as we have the very same core value, the discussion becomes cooperative rather than bloody. The secondary (but still necessary) debate regarding neurological development, its viability, or any level of coercion with mutual respect can then be made.

The same effect can be observed in all alleged culture-war issues that are in this procedure (guns, borders, climate policy, transgender issues): the bans seem inconsistent, but the values (security, dignity,

stewardship, compassion) are consistent at the necessary level. The struggle ceases, and the education starts.

Therefore, the Ma-Ban-Essence approach is not just intellectual; it is a real peace technology. As individuals encounter the Essence, they cease the desire to harm the other side now that they understand that the other side is safeguarding the same light that they are safeguarding, but from a different point of view.

The shell of the turtle was such a load that we did not think it was also a gift to the river. The political shells, which appear as burdens, are at the very bottom of nature, presents that we offer each other so that the entire ecosystem of humankind can continue its flow toward compassion.

The symptom of the Essence is the repeated occurrence of a spontaneous smile or tear on both faces at the moment when the value is finally mentioned aloud.

The conflict is not resolved by one party giving up their stand, but by them realizing that they were at the same spot the whole time; they just were placed facing each other.

This is what the tripartite system promises in the end: it transforms the enemies into associates in the same sacred task.

CONCLUSION

The tripartite system of the MaBanEssence, which is specifically based on the mystical theology of Sha’ar HaYichud VeHaEmunah, is a revolutionary yet old system of dealing with any question or issue. Through the refusal to pass over wonder and challenge, the mind is conditioned to slice through to the transcendent unity that all opposites are based on. The system is applied in classrooms, therapy rooms, policy arguments, and individual decision-making, which offers smarter brains, greater empathy, and, most visibly, a general feeling of happiness in the process of thinking.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express profound gratitude to the teachers and scholars of Chassidic and Kabbalistic tradition whose insights have illuminated this work, particularly Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi for his foundational exposition in *Sha'ar HaYichud VeHaEmunah* and *Likkutei Amarim (Tanya)*, which inspired the conceptual framework of the Ma-Ban-Essence system. Sincere thanks are also due to colleagues and mentors in the fields of philosophy, theology, and education who offered thoughtful critique and encouragement during the development of this study. Appreciation is extended to the broader community of learners and readers who continue to explore the intersection between mystical thought, pedagogy, and peacebuilding, reminding us that understanding begins in dialogue.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. (1814). *Likkutei Amarim – Tanya*, Part II: *Sha'ar HaYichud VeHaEmunah*. Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society (latest edition).
- [2] Jacobson, S. (2008). *Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson*. New York: William Morrow.
- [3] Steinsaltz, A. (1987). *The Sustaining Utterance: Discourses on Chassidic Thought*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.