The Wisdom of Not Knowing (sources compiled by Estelle Frankel)

“The ultimate purpose of knowing is to know that we don’t know.”
(Bechinat Olam 13- Rabbi Yedaiah Bedersi, 14th century)

To become aware of the ineffable is to part company with words.--
Abraham Joshua Heschel, Man Is Not Alone

The further knowledge advances, the nearer we come to the unfathomable.
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe

“The greatest obstacle to discovery is not ignorance—it is the illusion of knowledge.” Daniel Boorstin

In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.--
Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind

1. "The first mitzvah is the commandment to acquire knowledge of the nature of G-d's existence, i.e. to understand that He is the Original cause and Source of existence Who brings all creations into being. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "I am Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh your Lord."--Maimonides, Sefer Ha'mitzvot

"It is not possible, except through negation, to achieve even that (limited) apprehension of God which it is in our power to achieve...God cannot be apprehended by the human intellect, and none but He himself can apprehend what He is, and our knowledge of Him consists in our knowledge that we are unable truly to apprehend Him." Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed Chapter 59 p. 139. translation by, Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963)

"The Holy One recognizes Its own true essence and knows it as it is, but not with an external intellect in the way that we know things, since we and our intellect are not one. Thus, Hashem is simultaneously the One that knows, the One that is known and the knowing itself, all one singularity. This subject cannot be put into words or heard, and it is beyond human understanding to recognize the creator....Therefore, YHVH knows Creation as part of its own
essence. Therefore, YHVH knows everything, for everything relies on YHVH for continued existence…"—Mishneh Torah: The Book of Knowledge by Maimonides (Ch 2:10)

2. The highest rung on the Tree of Life (Keter of Atzilut) is called "the Unknowable Head (reisha d’lo yada u’dlo ityada)—the Head which neither knows nor is known." (Zohar Idra Zuta, 289a)

3. Elijah opened and said, Master of the worlds, you are one without count. You are the supernal of all supernals, the concealed of all concealed. There are no thoughts that can grasp you at all. "Leit machshava tefisa bach klal."—Patach Eliyahu, Tikkunei Zohar

4. The depth of primordial being is called Boundless (Ein Sof). Because of its concealment from all creatures above and below, it is also called Nothingness (ayin). If one asks, "What is it?" the answer is, "Nothing," meaning: No one can understand anything about it. It is negated of every conception. No one can know anything about it—except the belief that it exists. Its existence cannot be grasped by anyone other than it. Therefore its name is "I am becoming. (Ehyeh)" Sha’aray Orah by, Joseph Gikatilla, (from Essential Kabbalah by, Daniel Matt, p. 67)

5. "The inner power is called Ayin because thought does not grasp it, nor reflection. Concerning this Job (28:12) said, "Wisdom comes into being out of ayin."—Asher ben David (ibid, p. 66) הנึกו נא ואחרי עננים

5a. “Ayn is the Source of all things and when one brings anything to its source, one can transform it.”—Maggid of Mezirich

6. "...Arouse yourself to contemplate, to focus thought, for God is the annihilation of all thoughts, uncontainable by any concept. Indeed, since no one can contain God at all, it is called Nothingness, Ayin. This is the secret of the verse, 'Wisdom comes into being out of ayin:' Anything sealed and concealed, totally unknown to anyone, is called ayin, meaning that no one knows anything about it. Similarly no one knows anything at all about the human soul; she stands in the status of nothingness..."—Moses de Leon, Sheqel ha-Zodesh, (ibid p. 69)

7. The inner, subtle essences can be contemplated only by sucking, not by knowing.---Isaac the Blind (ibid p. 112)

8. "A real question comes from (admitting) ‘Eini yodea’ - I really don't know. The admission of not knowing is the prelude to redemption and revelation. So Moshe Rabbeinu himself said: "We won't know with what we shall serve God until we get there." (Exodus 10:26) from "Journey Beyond Knowledge" by R. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

9. "Teach yourself to say 'I don't know' lest you get caught in untruth.”) אמרתי מראמר הלמד (Talmud Berachot 4a). “This statement suggests that though things may seem clear to us in our thoughts, when we express them out loud with words they have creative power, so we should couch them in doubt (safek) because we humans are prone to error...." Tzidkat Hatzadik #38, by Reb Tzaddok ha'Cohen of Lublin (translation Estelle Frankel—Berachot 4a
The text does not say “Ani,” for if it had done so, it would have suggested that the Holy One Blessed Be He revealed all of His light to Israel, in its fullness, and that thereafter they would not have been able to go deeper in His words, for He had already revealed everything. Thus the kaf [separating ani from anochi – ed.] teaches that it was not in its fullness, but rather an image, a likeness, of the light that God will reveal in the future. And all that a man will grasp in going deeper in the words of Torah will show that, until this point, he was in darkness. Day and night suggest this reality. The day is when God opens the gates of wisdom to people. The night is so that the person will not think that he has grasped everything in its entirety. For all that he has grasped is like the nighttime, when compared to the light of the future that will come afterwards. (Mei Hashiloah by R. Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Ishbitz, quoted from Sefaria)

11. Excerpt from the Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment, by D. Matt p. 65-67) “He (Abraham) was sitting in the opening of the tent…Sarah heard from the opening of the tent.” (Gen. 18:1) Rabbi Judah opened: “Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land.’ (Proverbs 31:23) Come and see: The Blessed Holy One has ascended in glory. He is hidden, concealed, far beyond. There is no one in the world, nor has there ever been, who can understand His wisdom or withstand Him. He is hidden, concealed, transcendent, beyond, beyond…For He is unknowable. No one has ever been able to identify Him. How then can you say: ‘Her husband is known in the gates’? Her (Shechinah’s) husband is the blessed Holy One! Indeed, He is known in the gates. He is known and grasped to the degree that one opens the gates of imagination! To imagine in one’s heart-mind—that is how God becomes known. Therefore ‘Her husband is known in the gates,’ through the gates of imagination. But that He be known as He really is? No one has ever been able to attain such knowledge of Him.”…Rabbi Shim’on said “‘Her husband is known in the gates.’ Who are these gates? The ones addressed in the Psalm: ‘O gates, lift up your heads! Be lifted up, openings of eternity, so the King of Glory may come!’ (Psalms 24:7). Through these gates, these spheres on high, the Blessed Holy One becomes known. Were it not so, no one could commune with Him. Come and see: Neshamah of a human being is unknowable except through limbs of the body, subordinates of neshamah who carry out what she designs. Thus she is known and unknown. The blessed Holy One too is known and unknown. For He is Neshama of neshama, pneuma of pneuma, completely hidden away: but through these gates, openings for neshama, the Blessed Holy One becomes known…”
12. "The Torah that the Holy One of Blessing gave to Moses (at Mt. Sinai) was white fire inscribed by black fire." --Yerushalmi Shekalim 6:1 (In this world we read the letters; in the future we will know how to read the spaces-- R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev)

13. "יָדָעְתִּי לֹא וְאָנֹכִי הַזֶּה בַּמָּקוֹם יְ־הוָ־ה יֵשׁ אָכֵן וַיֹּאמֶר מִשְּׁנָתוֹ יַעֲקֹב וַיִּיקַץ:"

"Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely YHVH is in this place; and “I,” I did not know.” And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." --Genesis 28:16

"Surely God was in this place and (I), I did not know." (Genesis 28) (The "I" seems to be redundant. If God does not waste words, what is the significance of the "Anochi"?) "This simple 'extra I' (which the school of Kotzk identifies as ego or conceit) leads Pinhas Horowitz, the author of a Hasidic commentary on the Torah, Panim Yafot, to an important insight. 'It is only possible for a person to attain that high rung of being able to say, 'Surely God is in this place,' when he or she has utterly eradicated all trace of ego from his or her personality, from his or her sense of self, and from his or her being. The phrase, 'I, I did not know,' must mean, 'my I--I did not know.'" -God was in this Place & I, I Did Not Know, by, Lawrence Kushner

14. "The simple meaning of this is that the land of Israel is the place where one surrenders one’s senses and desires (will) to God's will, as it is written (Gen. 12:11) ‘Go to your Self, from your land (artzecha is understood here as a pun, ratzon shelcha--your will). All externals must be abandoned for the sake of seeing God's will. Only then is it revealed to a person. And the general rule is that we must listen in order to receive what we cannot possibly understand, namely knowledge of God's infinite nature. To this end we must continually surrender our knowledge……that which we understand with our minds.” Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib, Sefat Emet on Lech Lecha (translation by Estelle Frankel)

14a. "'To the land that I will show you.' (Gen 12:1) Avraham yearned to know the place where his own lifeforce is one with Hashem, just how far it reaches…and (in response) Hashem says to him ‘to the land that I will show you,’ your devukut, or oneness with My Being, is the place called ‘asher areka’ that which I will show you; For consciousness is limitless, ein sof; Each moment your awareness of the divine infinitude, the Or Ein Sof, enlarges. And this constant expansion is found in the land of Israel.”—R. Mordecai Leiner, Mei Hashiloah on lech lecha (liberally translated by Estelle Frankel)
15. The ultimate goal of all knowledge of God is to realize that one knows nothing. Yet even this is unattainable. A person may come to realize his own ignorance, but only in a certain area on a particular level. There is still the next level, which he has not even touched. He does not know enough about the next level to begin to realize his ignorance. No matter how high he climbs, there is always the next step. A person therefore knows nothing: he cannot even understand his own ignorance. For there will always be a level of ignorance beyond his present level of perception.—Sichot Haran #3 by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (quoted from Azamra)

16. The more you draw yourself to God, the more you must realize how far you are from Him. When a person believes that he has succeeded in achieving closeness to God and understanding of Him, it is a sign that he does not know anything at all. If he did, he would understand that he is very far from God and knows absolutely nothing, because God's greatness is without limits.—Likutey Moharan I, 63, Rebbe nachman of Breslov (quoted from Azamra)

17. "Therefore Rava said: 'one is obligated to drink on Purim until he no longer knows the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordekhai.' (Megilla 7b) For there (in the world of nonduality) He (Hashem) is above knowledge, and there it is inappropriate to say 'cursed Haman' for there it is entirely good, above the middot, above days of good and days of evil, as stated above. This is the aspect of the secret of the red heifer, which is the aspect of statute (chuka), above knowledge: it defines the ritually pure and purifies the ritually impure. This secret will remain incomprehensible until the future when the hidden Torah will be revealed, as stated above.”

Likutei Halakhot, Hilkhot Purim 4, 5

18. Every definition of God brings about heresy, every definition is spiritual idolatry…The greatest impediment in the human spirit, on reaching maturity, results from the fact that conception of God is crystallized among people in a particular form, going back to childish habit and imagination. This is an aspect of the offense of making a graven image or a likeness of God, against which we must always beware.”----Abraham Isaac ha'Cohen Kook “The Pangs of Cleansing,” trans. Ben Zion Bokser, in The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness: The Moral Principles, Essays, letters and Poems. P. 261-263

19. "No one can know the essence, even of himself, and all the more so of another, of an individual, and all the more so of a nation. We go around the center of knowledge, we deal in
surmises and guesses, making determinations on the basis of manifest actions, which are also mostly concealed from us, and particularly their complicated causes, and on the basis of such testimony, we speak of unique natures and separate souls. We must decide that our knowledge in this area is based on nothing, judgment belonging to God alone" (ibid, Orot Ha-kodesh 3, p. 119

20. "And Jacob loved Rachel..." ...Sometimes one must go out to find one's mate, and sometimes one's mate comes without effort. Isaac's mate came to him. . . Jacob went to seek out his mate. . . The meaning of this distinction is connected to the fact that God has given woman as a helpmate, as it says in Genesis Chapter 4 "I will make for him (Adam) a helper (ezer)." And there are two kinds of help: When a person selects a partner according to his/her conscious understanding of what will be helpful to his/her soul, this is called "Holech el zivugo" (going to one's mate). The other kind involves a partner that God selects and sends, without the person's conscious knowledge or understanding....And this is called "Mi shezivugo ba etzlo" (one whose help-mate comes to him/her). And this is a much higher level than what one selects out of one's own conscious awareness. The Ari, (Rabbi Isaac Luria) may his memory be blessed, considered Jacob's marriage to Rachel as "One who goes to one’s mate," and his marriage to Leah as "one whose mate came to him." This is because Jacob consciously went to work for Laban in order to marry Rachel, but Leah came to Jacob on her own accord. Help that comes to a person not from their conscious intent, even when it seems at first that it is not good, later it becomes clear that it was good. This is what is meant by "zivugo ba etzlo", and this is also called the "Mother" ("Aim") like we find with Adam, that Chava came to him as it says in Genesis Chapter 4 "and God brought her to Adam". She was given to Adam as a helpmate that he should listen to her knowledge and wisdom ("da"at") and listen to her words, even when what she suggests seems to be a bad thing, as the "Mei Ha'shiloah" talks about this in his commentary on Genesis. That is why she was called "Aim kol chai" (mother of all life). And similarly, Isaac's marriage to Rivkah was of this sort (zivugo ba etzlo) and so when Isaac blessed Jacob, he was actually following Rivkah's wisdom which was above and beyond his conscious knowledge. **Jacob's marriage to Leah is called in the Zohar (Vaiyetzeh Ch.153) alma d'itkasia--the hidden world. This is because is it above and beyond conscious comprehension.** Leah's children, on the surface, were not beautiful. Their deeds needed rectification (berurim) as we see with Judah's test with Tamar and Reuven's (boundary crossing) with Bilha. Only later it became clear that they were very great souls. But ordinarily a person does not consciously want to put himself in a doubtful situation.... People like to feel certain about their actions. But sometimes God chooses to bring about a situation that doesn't seem so good, and only later it becomes clear that it was from God and that it was simply above and beyond one's comprehension. We find this to be true with most of Leah's children and ultimately the House of King David is built through Judah and Tamar, and Ruth, the Moabite. And even King David's birth is shrouded in mystery as it is described in the legend (Midrash) (Tazria Ch. 14). Therefore this is called "zivugo ba etzlo" and this is from "alma d'itkasia" (the hidden world), because God brought about the situation without the protagonist's conscious awareness or desire. Only later it became clear how deep the holy intention (kavanah) was, and how dear these tribes (Leah's sons) are. But Jacob's marriage to Rachel is called "alma d'itgalia" in the Zohar (Genesis 153), also known as "holech etzel zivugo" and this refers to those situations which a person consciously understands and approaches with open eyes.... **Beis Ya'acov Parashat Va'Yeitzei, Reb Yakov Leiner of Izbitz (translated by Estelle Frankel)**