

Mekadeish Yisrael v'HaZemanim

Lessons in self-awareness through the holidays

Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin

Haskamos and Divrei Brachah



Kehillas Beis David
Ropshitz Pilzno
Anshei 'Ohev Shalom V'Rodef Shalom'

*Rabbi Yehoshua Gerzi
5/2 Rechov Teviria
Ramat Shilo - Ramat Beit Shemesh
Eretz Yisrael*

Divrei Bracha

Shalom U'Bracha,

I have had the honor of being in touch with Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin for a number of years now, and I can say I am moved and inspired by him. He has a real drive to learn and grow, and to share with others, in order to connect them to the Boreh Olam, Torah and mitzvot.

Kalil Shmuel does not allow his Torah learning to remain only a cerebral experience. He desires a Torah of transformation, not just information, and works hard in order to creatively actualize this in his life, and to share his wisdom with others in this way. I am excited by his projects and wish him the best.

In this new book, *Mekadeish Yisrael v'HaZemanim, Lessons in Self-Awareness Through the Holidays*, Kalil Shmuel weaves together a kaleidoscope of sources with precision, creating a beautiful tapestry. He gifts his readers with the opportunity to learn from an array of wonderful and wondrous teachers, and to find themselves within the text.

May you, Kalil Shmuel, continue to gift yourself and others with the ability to be moved, impacted and inspired.

- Yehoshua Gerzi, written here in Eretz Yisrael on the third of Av 5785 on the yartzeit of my forbearer Rabbi Shimshon ben Rabbi Pesach Ostropolier, may his merit protect us!



Wishing you well with all of your endeavors!



בס"ד

David Hamelech says in Tehilim "Ve'ata Noten Lalem Et Ochlam Be'ito"

The Ribbono shel Olam gives us exactly what we need, exactly when we need it.

It brings me great joy to know that this beautiful Sefer, Mekadesh Yisrael Vehazmanim, written by yedid nafshi R Kalil Shmuel Zaldin, is being provided for the hungry and thirsty souls in Am Yisrael.

This is a Sefer that will help us not just get through the holidays in a deeper way, but rather the holidays themselves will get into us, and become part of our existence.

B'ahava

Shlomo Katz

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It is a pleasure to share a good word about Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin and his Torah writings. Kalil Shmuel is a true mevakeish, searching out opportunities to be inspired and share authentic Yidishkeit with others. His latest collection of essays, Mekadeish Yisrael v'HaZemanim, filled with meaningful ideas and uplifting messages to help us prepare for Yomim Tovim, is a wonderful work and Kidush Hashem. May he continue to grow, teach, and strengthen others!

*B'vracha,
Judah Mischel*

Haskamos to a previous work, "Where G-d and Humanity Touch", (2022)

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ב"ה

Balancing the modern day psyche with the Torah of our Sages, Kalil Shmuel Zaldin gives a tremendous introduction to connecting to Hashem and to one's self in a deeper way. This balance of self-knowledge and knowledge of our creator follows in the footsteps of the Talmidei HaBaal Shem, including my Rebbe HaRav Osher Freund zy"a. It is my brachah that Jews of all backgrounds will find this a worthwhile read. May the Torah and insights presented here continue to bring you closer to HaKadosh Baruch Hu and to your true self.

הרב משה ווייס
הרב משה ווייס
מספינקא

You are holding in your hands a remarkable kuntres (treatise), authored by a remarkable young man. My dear student and friend Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin has chosen to live at that part of existence where G-d and humanity touch. A brilliant and articulate seeker, he has gifted us, the readers, with his fresh, hard-earned, Torah perspective of what it truly means to be a person of faith.

Unless one believes in himself and his unique purpose in Creation, he cannot nurture an authentic relationship with the Creator. Kalil Shmuel's intelligence, insight, and prolific familiarity with the world of pnimius HaTorah is astounding for a young man whose own journey began just a few years ago.

Moshe Rabbeinu pleaded with his father in law, Yisro: "Please do not leave us! You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you have been as eyes for us" (Bamidbar 10:31). We are living in a strange and often frightening wilderness, and are in desperate need for the vision and clarity of Kyle Zaldin.

י"ג ניסן ה'תשפ"ב

משה וויינבערגער

"ה' יזכה אותך שתעשה רצונו בשלמות לעלות נפשך ונפשות אחרים, ולכתוב רק דברים אמיתיים וישרים המועילים לך ולזולתך."

הרב איתמר שוורץ שליט"א
מחבר ספרי "בלבבי משכן אבנה"

Introduction- Moadei HaShanah: Points of Connection

In the 1950s, as an assistant rabbi in his father's shul, Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski recognized that the younger generation was not coming to the rabbi to seek counsel and guidance like previous generations had. He realized that psychiatry was taking on that role. It was then that he decided to go into the field. In a 1988 interview with the National Council of Jewish Women, he said, "I went to medical school to become a psychiatrist to do what I wanted to do as a rabbi." Growing up, I always said that I wanted to be a rabbi "because rabbis help people". Throughout my Jewish journey, I have come to recognize that before a person can work on their relationship with G-d, they first need to become a person. Meaning, that in order to have a healthy relationship with Hashem, a person must have a healthy relationship with himself. When engaging in avodas Hashem, people ought to be happy, healthy, and wholesome. They have to dig up all that is buried within, beneath the "stuff" that gets in the way of coming into contact with their true selves. Through my journey, I had what I call my "Twerski moment" and thus have chosen to pursue a Master's of Social Work.

I am not a rabbi, nor am I particularly wise. But, over the past few years, I have merited to learn and share the Torah of inner expression that my teachers and mentors have shared with me. This work is a continuation of my attempt to share timeless Jewish wisdom clearly and concisely, in a way that is relevant to every person, with the goal of bringing people closer to themselves and their Creator regardless of levels of observance and prior knowledge.

For far too many, the holidays are overshadowed by feelings of constraint, restriction, isolation, and frustration. What should be times of joy and celebration have become moments of anxiety and dread. Instead of elation at the thought of a three-day Yom Tov, people are often bored, overwhelmed, and scared. Why is this? How have we so tainted the days that Hashem has given us to reconnect with Him? The answer is obvious, but often ignored. We are missing the point of Yom Tov! In many Jewish communities, the meaning of the holidays has almost become secondary to the external expression of these days. Shavuot has become a holiday of ice cream and cheesecake. Pesach has become about who has the longest seder. Yom Kippur has become a competition to see who has the longest or shortest break before Mincha. Chanukah has

been downgraded to a holiday of *fressing* on latkes and sufganiyot. With all the external trappings, the soul of the Moadim has been lost on us.

Unlike Shabbos, which comes every seventh day whether or not man sanctifies it, the holidays are not predestined, but rather they are sanctified by the People, based on our ability to sanctify time.¹ This is why on Shabbos we use the words “mekadeish haShabbos,” while in our Yom Tov prayers we say, “mekadeish Yisrael ve’hazemanim”. The sanctity of the holidays stems from our inherent holiness.² The holidays are not just a time to connect to Hashem, but to connect to ourselves as well. It is a time to reset, recharge, and renew ourselves. It is a time for strengthening our relationships with family and our community. And yes, it is a time to enjoy the physical pleasures of this world that G-d has given us.³

We Jewish people cannot live without holidays. The Moadim are what keep us alive, they sustain us in this chaotic world. They are a consistent reminder of who we are and Who we believe in. They are not “days off”; they are “days on”. The rest of the world is simply an illusion. The Moadim are “real life”. Through recognizing the meaning and depth of the special and holy days that fill the Jewish calendar, may we be zocheh to see the beauty in ourselves and in others, and through that may we merit to celebrate the Moadim together in Yerushalayim, with Aliyah L’Regel and all the other inner and external aspects, with the coming of Mashiach and the building of the Beis HaMikdash speedily in our days.

Kalil Shmuel (Kyle) Zaldin
Rosh Chodesh Elul, 5784
Yerushalayim In HaKodesh

For more on this work, other sefarim,
speaking engagements, tzaddikim tours in
Eretz Yisrael, personal guidance, and more:

[Thoughts from Kyle](#)
[Email](#)

¹ Shemos 12:2

² Rashi on Beitzah, 17b

³ Beitzah 15b; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 579: 1,3

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Prologue- Returning to the Essence of Torah: One Trunk, Many Branches⁴

One Tree, Many Branches

The Torah is called the *eitz chaim*, the tree of life for those who hold onto it. Like any other tree, there is one trunk, a stable core, firmly rooted in the ground. This growing tree has many branches, a variety of ways to extend and express the essence of the tree, each one a little bit different from the other. Just as no two faces are alike, no two minds are alike.⁵ Everyone is different. Everyone is unique. As discussed earlier, Torah is for everyone. Each person has their own unique place in Torah.

Rav Itamar Schwartz, in his work *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*, explains this further:

“Every Individual has an individual derech to get close to Kudsha Brich Hu... People's nefashos, souls, are not the same as one another. For some, their primary involvement in learning Torah is with pilpul. There are others whose main involvement is with bekius, etc. One might ask which one of them is correct? Which one has the true path? The answer is clear. They are all holy, pure and true. But each person learns according to the root of his neshamah. But, it is possible that one will learn not according to his root. In a situation like this, he destroys his world and he is involved in a world that is not his. It takes a long time to merit to recognize what one's specific portion in Torah is. It requires toil, much effort, and tefillah. A person is obligated to try many paths until he clarifies to himself which is his portion.

Just as it is clear to us that when it comes to learning Torah that there are many paths and a person must clarify to himself which is his individual portion, so too when it comes to one's portion in serving Hashem, all souls are not the same. Some should focus more on ahavah and some on yirah. Some are more inclined to hisbonenus, meditation, and some focus more on breaking their desires, etc... A person cannot immediately decide which is his portion, and thereby exempt himself from all of the other paths. Each person is obligated to

⁴ Excerpt from a previous work- “Why Torah”, p. 19-22

⁵ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Brachos, 58a

clarify to himself, with an internal, deep and very fundamental clarification, where the root of his soul is and what its portion is.”⁶

One of the biggest tragedies in the post-Holocaust rebuilding of Torah Judaism is the suffocating lack of space for individuality in our communities. Yiddishkeit is taught based on conformity. The Torah of the individual, of inner expression, has been largely ignored. The beauty and sweetness of Torah has been extracted, sucked out and replaced with skepticism and judgmentalism. One of the main goals of so many rabbanim, askanim, and *mosdos* today is an attempt to introduce the various paths of Torah and Yiddishkeit that have been kept from Jews who could very much benefit from those teachings and perspectives.

We must continue giving over information. Yet, we cannot abandon our obligation to give over the Giver of the Torah along with the information that we teach. We must teach people the body of Judaism, but we can only do so when we're also giving over the *neshamah*, the soul of Yiddishkeit. Torah is deep, and it is also wide. Within the path of *halachic* observance and *hashkafic* sensibility there are many correct paths.

Branching Out

Rav Moshe Weinberger, based on the words of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook,⁷ speaks about a major reason why people veer from the path of Torah and mitzvos.⁸

“Some have gone off the derech of Yiddishkeit because in their learning and in their path to spiritual perfection, they betrayed their own personal, unique nature. Some are more fit for Aggadah, and halachah (pilpul/lomdus) is not in their nature as a primary way of learning. Because such people have not been taught to value and recognize their unique talents in Aggadah, they immerse themselves in Halachah as is customary in yeshivos today.

Such a person feels an inner opposition to what he is learning because that which he is investing himself in is not in accordance with his essential nature. If, however, he would find the area where his talent and interests lie, and he would fulfill that by making that area of Torah which fits with the

⁶ Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh, Vol. 5, Maamar 9, Pirkei Avodah u'Machshava

⁷ Oros HaTorah 9:6

⁸ Rav Kook - Oros Hatorah - Why People (Internally or Externally) Go off the Derech

nature of his soul his primary area of learning, he would immediately recognize that the inner opposition he used to feel was not due to any deficiency in the holy and essential study of Halachah. Rather, he would know that his soul simply required a different area of learning as his primary study. Such a person would remain faithful in a beautiful way to the holiness of Torah. He would become great and strong in the area of Torah which speaks to him. In addition, he will assist those whose primary learning is in Halacha to also taste the sweetness of Aggadah.

But when a person does not, or is not given the option to recognize the true reason for his inner opposition to what he is learning, he attempts to overpower his own nature, because he is taught that there is only one correct way to learn Torah. The moment some options for a non-Torah way to live are opened up for him, he will break out and then hate and become any enemy of Torah and emunah. He will go from one sin to another, and we know what such people have wrought. They attempt to create that which they envision as the ideal way of the world and they attempt to blind ‘the eye of the world.’”

Chazal have taught us, “אל תקרי מורשה אלא מאורסה”.⁹ We have the greatest gift in the world! Our fiancée, the Torah is waiting for us. Inasmuch as we are faithful to the Torah, its ideas become ours. That being said, we can only get to a place of “מאורסה”, of a loving relationship with Hashem and His Torah, if we hold onto “מסורה”, our tradition that has kept us as a people for thousands of years. We must learn to find the balance of being faithful to the Torah while creating a unique and personal relationship.

Restoring the Soul of Man and of Torah

The Piacezna Rebbe, in his spiritual diary, writes:

“The soul craves excitement and sensation. This does not only apply to joyful feelings alone. Rather, it merely loves “feeling.” It even desires sadness and crying. People love to watch horrifying scenes, and to hear scary stories, even to the point of causing one's self to cry, just in order to feel something. This is an absolute requirement of the soul, like any of a person's other natural needs. Therefore, only one who fulfills this requirement with Avodas Hashem and with exciting Torah and tefillah will guard his soul. But if someone does the work of serving Hashem without feeling, then the soul will gratify its need for excitement with other, cheaper things, even through aveiros, just in order to fulfill its fundamental need for excitement. Or, if it is unable to achieve

⁹ Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 49b; Midrash Rabbah, Shemos 33:7

excitement through anything at all, it will become diseased, as it would if any of its other physical needs were not met.”¹⁰

The Nesivos Shalom expounds on this in greater detail:

“Sometimes, a person wallows in sadness and he does not even know the reason why. It is because his life has no substance and he lives without satisfaction. When a person fulfills his role and accomplishes what he is meant to accomplish, even if he has a broken-heart and low self-esteem, he will remain full of simchah. It is known that with the middah of simchah, when a person is satisfied and satiated with what he has, he brings himself into all the good of Olam HaZeh and Olam HaBa. We can only come to this simchah through the power of Torah. Only when a person learns Torah can he be truly happy. One who wastes his time in the vanities of this world cannot stay b’simchah. This is how G-d created man. After a few unproductive days, a person feels sadness and dissatisfied.”¹¹

The Torah has the power to restore the soul.¹² If learned and taught in a healthy and holistic manner, without all the labels, barriers, and pre-defined boxes, the Torah will be the water¹³ that we need to blossom and grow. With proper education and exposure, each and every Jew will find their unique place within the Torah.

The Torah that can heal and elevate can and often does destroy and demolish *neshamos*. We must take a look in the mirror and make sure that we are giving over the Torah in a way that gives space to those who need to travel on the roads less taken. There are seventy facets of Torah.¹⁴ Each *shevet* had their own gate through which their *tefillah* ascended to heaven.¹⁵ The Torah is not controlled by one group or community.

The Torah did not remain in the heavens.¹⁶ It is a living, breathing document in the hands of man. As we have discussed, we have the opportunity and ability to study and interpret it. Yet, we must not forget that it is still Hashem’s. He gave us this gift. *Toras Hashem temimah meshivas nafesh*,¹⁷ only when we learn and live with the reality that Torah is Hashem’s manifestation in this world, that it belongs to all of Klal Yisrael

¹⁰ Tzav Veziruz 9

¹¹ Nesivos Shalom: Shovavim, p. 69

¹² Tehillim 19:8

¹³ Bava Kamma 82a

¹⁴ Zohar 1:47b; Zohar 3:20a; Zohar 3:216a; Zohar 3:223a; Ibn Ezra on Bereishis, Hakdamah; Ramban on Bereishis 8:4; etc.

¹⁵ Magen Avraham 68:1; Mishnah Berurah 68:4

¹⁶ Devarim 30:12; Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 59b; etc.

¹⁷ Tehillim 19:8

equally, can it restore our souls and the souls of mankind, to bring us to the Era of Mashiach, may it be speedily in our days.

Rosh HaShanah: Man's Place in Creation

Ayeka? Who are you?

After Adam HaRishon ate from the tree, Hashem called to him and questioned him with the word “Ayeka”, meaning “Where are you?”¹⁸ The Piacenza Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro hy”d, in *Derech HaMelech*,¹⁹ teaches that G-d was asking Adam, “Where are you within yourself? Do you know who you are? Do your actions match the person that you want to be?”

The primordial sin, and every sin that followed, is a form of rebellion against one's true self. The sin of Adam was that he sought something that was beyond him. In seeking external satisfaction and approval a person rebels against oneself. Sin is moving away from our inner desire to be good and do good, which emanates from the Divine Will. This distances us from ourselves and from Hashem. Sin is a person's attempt at escaping, leaving a life of emptiness and vanity by engaging in something productive. However, it will never give him the satisfaction he is seeking, as he is still running away from himself and his inner desires. As Rabbi Reuven Sasson writes: “If a person does not find meaning in what he is doing, he is forced to fill himself up in another way, and that is how he falls into sin.”²⁰ Elsewhere, he writes that “in order for man to connect to the light of Hashem, to the Source of his existence, he must be connected to his own neshamah. When he disconnects from himself, he also disconnects from G-d, Heaven forbid.”²¹ One can only live a life of true meaning when their religious life is congruent with their inner self. Service of G-d that prescribes negating oneself is unhealthy and has no place in Judaism.

The desire to live is not simply an innate desire to stay alive; it is also the desire to live a life of meaning. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once said that worse than someone else telling you what to do is when “I don't know myself what to do.”²² If a person cannot find meaning, if there is some dissonance between one's various identities, it can lead a person to want to put an end to their suffering. That is why, after a time period filled with a lack of productivity and feelings of unworthiness, the neshamah arises and says “enough”. The pain of misery can, and often does cause a person to act.

¹⁸ Bereishis 3:8

¹⁹ *Derech HaMelech*, Shvi'i shel Pesach

²⁰ *Ayeka, The Bris, A Person's Loyalty to the Self*, p. 199

²¹ *Ayeka, Loyalty to Oneself*, p. 50

²² *Seder Night Mysteries, The Mystery of Seder Night*, Torah 3, 5747

Megillas Eichah, which is read on Tisha B'Av, begins with the word "Eichah"- "Alas, [the city] sits alone?". Our sages teach us that Yirmiyahu is asking "how can it be that Jerusalem is desolate?" In Bereishis,²³ after Adam HaRishon ate from the tree, Hashem calls to him and questions him with the word "Ayeka." The Midrash draws a parallel between Yirmiyahu's use of the word "Eichah" and HaShem's questioning of Adam with the word "Ayeka," both words being spelled with the same letters, only vowelized differently.

We live in an unideal world, a world of destruction and desolation. This is not how it was "supposed to be". Man was created to enter a world that was *kulo Shabbos*, but we messed that up with sin. The fall of man post-sin was twofold. Firstly, man was banished from Gan Eden. Secondly, man was forced to endure the length of history—six thousand years of hardship. We live in this reality, attempting to shine G-d's light in the cold, dark world in which we find ourselves.

Tikkun- The Ability to Fix

Rebbe Nachman famously taught: "If you believe that you have the power to destroy, believe that you have the ability to repair."²⁴ The fact that Rebbe Nachman used the term belief as opposed to saying that "just as one has the ability to destroy, so too he can repair" is itself the chiddush. Meaning, that if, for whatever reason, you believe that you are actually capable of destroying, then by the same token, you should believe you can fix, because you can never really destroy. In this vein, we can say that to the degree you believe you can destroy, you can also fix. In essence, however, you can neither destroy nor fix. Rebbe Nachman is teaching us a profound lesson: The same mechanisms of belief that apply value to transgression and failure can be equally applied to positive actions as well. In other words, Rebbe Nachman is telling us that if you believe in one side of the coin, that destruction exists, you must naturally believe in the other side of the coin, that you have the power to repair and rebuild. The Chovas HaLevavos teaches us that "anything which has a beginning or finiteness necessarily must be subject to origination and destruction."²⁵ Like a seed planted in the ground, all physical things must wither and rot before they can grow and develop.

This is what Sorah Rosenblatt was trying to convey in her poem "Now, Flowers," written under her pen name, Ruth Lewis.

²³ Bereishis 3:8

²⁴ Likutei Eitzos, Hischazkus, 44

²⁵ Chovos HaLevavos, Shaar Yichud, chapter 8

*Now, flowers,
 they don't ask any questions.
 They don't ask, as seeds,
 Why am I locked from light,
 destined, doomed to darkness?
 Why do I rot here, mired deep in mud? Why am I so small, so nothing, so
 alone? Why must I keep pushing ever upwards? Why are there so many
 worms and bugs?
 Breaking through the soil,
 into light, into warm sunshine and fresh air,
 they don't ask,
 Why am I yet so lowly?
 Is this the reason for my struggle, for my pain?
 Is this all there is?
 Budding, blooming, as their leaves unfold,
 They don't ask,
 Why must this take so long?
 Tiny petal by tiny petal, tiny leaf by leaf?
 In full bloom, they don't ask,
 Why are other flowers taller, stronger, more fragrant, more richly,
 brightly hued?
 When bees buzz round, flowers do not ask,
 Who are you to drain me of my sweetness?
 Where are you taking everything that's mine?
 When winter comes, they don't ask, Why must my lovely colors fade?
 Why must my pretty petals fall away? Why must I wilt and droop?
 Why was my time so fleeting?
 Why must all things, and I, too, die?
 No, flowers—
 they don't ask questions. They just grow.*

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook wrote: "What a person can fix, it is for him to think about it and not be negligent in fixing it, and what he can't fix, let him not deal with it frequently. He should busy himself with the repair of his soul and the repair of the world, with the clarity of an elevated mind, as far as his hand reaches,"²⁶. In this powerful statement, Rav Kook is teaching us that it is up to us to make the world a

²⁶ Middos HaRiayah, Tikkun

better place, but that task is not as daunting as it might appear; we have to do what is reasonable and within our capacity, and Hashem will help complete that which exceeds our abilities.²⁷ As Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld framed it, prayerfully: “G-d, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot fix, the courage to fix the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: “The world is a broken place, literally a broken vessel, and our human task is to put those fragments together—to repair the brokenness.”²⁸ With sin, man is only tainted externally; inside, man is still pure, elevated, and lofty. That is why we can make tikkunim- we only have to fix the outside. Tikkun is not fixing something that is broken, nor is it creating something anew. Tikkun is getting rid of the barriers and blocks that prevent you from being who you are. Tikkun is returning to yourself. This entails two things. Firstly, a loyalty to Torah and mitzvos—the basis for living a life of spirituality and holiness. However, this must come hand in hand with a sincere loyalty to one’s mission and purpose in this world. One without the other is unhealthy and is surely not the path of authentic Judaism.

*In Modeh Ani, we say “rabbah emunasecha,” that Hashem believes in us. The question is asked, wouldn’t it seem to make more sense to say “rabbah emunaseinu”— as the mitzvah of emunah is for us to believe in Hashem? The seforim hakedoshim explain that indeed, we need to have emunah in Hashem, but every morning we need to internalize that He believes in us. Every single yid has the trust and belief of Hashem that he can accomplish greatness. This realization can help you achieve the seemingly unimaginable.*²⁹

As Rabbi Shlomo Katz put it, “Believing in Hashem means believing that He believes in me.”

Living a Life of Passion and Warmth

The Baal Shem Tov once approached a number of his students in the beis medrash and said, “Let’s go on a trip together.” This was something he did very often; he would go on these mysterious journeys, selecting particular chassidim for each one. On this occasion, he came to a group of them and said, “We’re going on a trip together.”

²⁷ Rabbi Oury Amos Sherky, Summary of Shiurim,
https://ravsherki.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8778:2022-04-08-08-40-07&catid=605

²⁸ To Heal a Fractured World

²⁹ Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz, Erev Shabbos Chazon, 5773

They all get into the wagon, the Baal Shem Tov whispers the destination in the ears of the horse, he sits back and continue on. After a number of hours they find themselves in front of a frozen lake. Now, just to appreciate the scene, this was, the dead of winter in Russia by a frozen lake. The custom was in those days, a particular religious custom that the non-Jews had, that in the middle of the winter during the time when they had their holidays in December and January the whole community would come out to the frozen lake, the children would ice-skate and so on. The children would also take sticks and carve crucifixes in the ice, that's what they would do. then the priests would come, they would have ceremonies there, they'd have Mas there and it was a whole thing. Obviously not the place for a jew, not a place for the Baal Shem Tov, but this is where the wagon ends up in front of the frozen lake while all of this is going on. This is very strange, the students look at the Baal Shem Tov, and say "Maybe we took a wrong turn somewhere."

The Baal Shem Tov sees where they are and all of a sudden he becomes very excited. He jumps out of the wagon, he sees what's going on, all the children making crucifixes, he sees the priests doing their services over there and the Baal Shem Tov gets even more excited. He puts on his gartel, straightens his shtreimel and walks over there. All the non-Jews see this rabbi coming, they're so shocked by the scene. They're frozen solid and they didn't know what to do. The Baal Shem Tov begins to close his eyes, daven and shuckle it's mamash a whole Avoidah. The students don't know what is going on over here, first they try to tell him, "Rebbe, this is maybe not the right place for us" but the Baal Shem Tov is completely fixated on this scene, completely in a state of Dveykus. After about half an hour or so, of being in that dimension he would go to and doing his avodah. The Baal Shem Tov says okay, "Ois Gepolt" mission accomplished. He takes off his gartel and they go back to their hometown back to the Beis Medrash.

After all this the students go over to the Baal Shem Tov and ask him what in the world was going on?" The Baal shem Tov says, there's something in reality, the Ribono Shel Olam created the world in such a way that water is the source of all life. All good things, all delicious things, all holy things come from water. Water can be a mikvah, water sustains vegetation. Life comes from water, it's unbelievable. But look at this, that lake that we visited is the same water. You see what happens when water freezes over, it can become an avodah

zarah mamash, it becomes an idol. A crucifix can be etched on the ice. There is such a phenomenon.

The Baal Shem Tov says I came to the world to try to fix that. There shouldn't be such a thing that water should turn into a crucifix. What's the eitzah, how does a person stop this from happening? The Baal Shem Tov says that such a thing could happen, when it's extremely cold the water turns to ice and it can become mamash a crucifix. What's the eitzah?

Very often the world is cold outside, you can't snap your fingers and make it summer time. So what can you do? The Baal Shem Tov said even if it's cold the only reason the water froze is because the water was still, it wasn't moving. If water is moving then no matter how cold it is outside, moving waters are not going to freeze. The Baal Shem Tov said the eitzah for a Jew is you try to stay warm. You try as hard as you can, but sometimes it's the winter and sometimes it's the winter inside of us and it's very difficult to maintain that heat and warmth. So then what do you do? The Baal Shem Tov said you keep on moving, Shachris, Mincha, Maariv, ma'asim tovim, emunah, strength. We don't stop. If you're moving then we don't freeze.

The Baal Shem Tov says that's my avodah in life, it's to keep Jews warm. If they can't stay warm you create that warmth by moving, do more mitzvos, be proud of what you accomplished, go further, and don't stop.³⁰

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, in his famous article in Klal Perspectives, wrote:

The Nesivos Sholom (Tzav) cites a mashal (parable) in which a certain fellow would like to build a housing development on a huge piece of property that he owns. The property, however, is covered by a forest, so he grabs an axe and begins to chop away. After falling a tree or two, he realizes that even if he were to have a whole crew of lumberjacks, this effort would take many years. It dawns on him that what he needs is a fire – a powerful, controlled conflagration that can destroy the forest in a matter of minutes. The Nesivos Sholom explains that it takes a fiery, passionate, and soulful Yiddishkeit to overcome the vast forests of filth and confusion that dominate our environment.

In every generation, the outside world stands as a tempting alternative to Yiddishkeit. History and common sense prove repeatedly that wielding the

³⁰ Hold on to Shabbos with Stories of Tzadikim, Staying Unfrozen

axe can never provide more than a short-term, superficial respite from the onslaught of secularism. Hashem sent the Baal Shem Tov and R' Yisroel Salanter to set Klal Yisroel on fire! Only a deep, introspective, passionate Yiddishkeit bursting with a tangible consciousness of Hashem's presence can expose the emptiness of any alternative. ³¹

Rosh HaShanah: Why Now? What is the Purpose of This Day?

Speaking about the day of Rosh HaShanah, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach taught:

All year long I'm doing teshuvah without hearing the shofar. If I do something wrong, I say to myself, "G-d I'm sorry, I won't do it again" and that's enough. After I made the golden calf I realized that I sinned because I wasn't connected enough. So Rosh Hashanah is a Day of Remembrance, the day I say every word in the Torah touches me deeply. The service of Rosh Hashanah is not for fixing mistakes, for atoning for sins. That is on Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is when I re-establish my connection with G-d. ³²

Rosh HaShanah, the Day of Judgement, is not about judgment or punishment in the way we think about it. We do not recite the Viduy, the confessional, or do any other acts of seeking repentance. Simply put, Rosh HaShanah, Yom HaDin is the day of recognizing that we matter, that there is meaning and purpose in our lives, that there is a Creator and we are created by Him in His image.

On Rosh Hashanah, we delineate two modes of the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people: King/subject and Parent/child. [This is the basis of Avinu Malkeinu.] One of the absolutes in traditional Jewish philosophy is that between G-d and I, when something is not going according to my desires, then I must defer to G-d, the Loving parent who, with lovingness, snatches me from the inevitable consequences of my actions and saves me from a far worse outcome, the equivalent of a speeding truck. What is necessary, if we are incapable of sharing Hashem's eyesight, is at least acknowledging that G-d always has my best interest at hand. When we are armed with this understanding then we can experience happiness, even in the face of tragedy. ³³

Rabbi Reuven Sasson explains:

³¹ Klal Perspectives, Spring 2012, Symposium on Connectedness, Just One Thing is Missing: The Soul

³² Please Open the Gate, 5755

³³ Torah from the Heart, 5759

*“This is the reason why we mark the creation of the world on Rosh Hashanah, even though the beginning of creation was on the 25th of Elul. The world was created so that man would be a partner with G-d. This was actualized with the creation of Adam HaRishon. Therefore, the day of man’s creation is the day we say “HaYom Haras Olam”, today the world was born.”*³⁴

³⁴ Ayeka, Freedom and Yearning for the Infinite, p. 131, footnote 14

Yom Kippur: The Joy of Self-Alignment

What is Happiness?

When a person's values and desires are properly aligned, thought out and actualized, can he be happy enlightened and free. The desire for money or power will never breed true happiness. All the money and power that the world has to offer will never be enough. Even the wealthiest of people cannot escape life's difficulties. Anything and everything in the world cannot satisfy nor satiate the soul of man, for it is from the loftiest places. Studies show that as wealth increases so does depression. Isn't that proof that money can't buy happiness!?

Material pleasures and external gratification will never make a person happy. Joy and fulfillment are not external to us, they are found within! Despite what the media and advertising tell you, true happiness comes from within and is not dependent on external factors. As long as a person seeks external satisfaction and gratification, he will have a hard time actualizing himself. When he learns to let go, to work to align his thoughts and behaviour with his true, inner self, then he will find the happiness that he has been chasing for so long. This is what Rabbi Noach Weinberg meant when he said that "happiness is choosing to take pleasure in what you have."

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, in his monumental work of Jewish thought, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, explains this in the following manner:

*Some people gauge their value by what they own. But in reality, the entire concept of ownership of possessions is based on an illusion. When you obtain a material object, it does not become part of you. Ownership is merely your right to use specific objects whenever you wish and no one has a right to take them away from you. How unfortunate is the person who has an ambition to cleave to something impossible to cleave to? Such a person will not obtain what he desires and will experience suffering. Fortunate is the person whose ambition is to acquire personal growth that is independent of external factors. Such a person will lead a happy and rewarding life.*³⁵

³⁵ Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Vol. 1, p. 42-43

It's Never too Late

Why is it that we say “Baruch shem k’vod malchuso l’olam va’ed” out loud at the Maariv at the very beginning of Yom Kippur? At that time, we haven't even davened one Yom Kippur Shemoneh Esreh yet; we are still full from our seudah hamafsekes. How can we be like malachim? At Ma’ariv after Yom Kippur we cannot say “Baruch shem k’vod malchuso l’olam va’ed” out loud, even though we have already been fasting for an entire day, and have had five uplifting tefillos over the course of Yom Kippur. Isn't that a holier time than the Ma’ariv at the beginning of Yom Kippur? The difference is where the person is heading. Even though your stomach is full going into Yom Kippur, since you're headed into a Yom Kippur experience and gearing up for all of that growth and connection, you're already at the level of malachim. At Ma’ariv after Yom Kippur, you're on your way out the door, headed towards a meal, building your Sukkah, and perhaps even returning to “life as usual” for the few days in between. It's all about what direction you're heading in.

One year, before Ne’ilah, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger told the following story and explained the lesson we can learn from it.

Rav Yitzchak Hutner zt”l spent the last few years of his life in Yerushalayim. During that time, his Rebbetzin passed away. Two of the great Mussar masters of that time, Rav Shlomo Wolbe zt”l, and Rav Meir Chodosh zt”l, paid him a shiva call. Rav Hutner told them the following story during that visit.

As a yeshiva boy in Slabodka, he was a talmid of the famous “Alter” of Slabodka. He said that in those days, Rav Hutner was known for having a very sharp mind for studying Torah, but also for his sharp tongue, which he unfortunately sometimes used to make other yeshiva boys feel bad. He said that he was known as a talented Torah scholar, but not as tzadik because of his sense of self-importance.

A few days before Yom Kippur one year, the Alter sent another boy over to him to ask him something. He replied sharply to the other boy, “I don’t need anyone to send a message to the Alter. I can speak to him myself.” The boy was taken aback. The young Yitzchak Hutner walked over to the east wall of the Beis Medrash to speak to the Alter but as he approached, the Alter yelled to him, “Don’t come within my Daled Amos [near me]!” The Alter was known for his sweetness, so this was a particularly hard slap in the face. Young Yitzchak

walked away and did not speak with the Alter about it. He said that he thought about it throughout Yom Kippur, but only from the perspective of his own ego. By the end of Yom Kippur he decided that if the Mashgiach spoke to him that way, he should find somewhere else to learn.

Motzei Yom Kippur, he went to the Alter's home to say goodbye and ask for a blessing before he departed. He knocked on the door and the Rebbetzin answered. He asked for the Alter and she asked who he was. He answered, "Hutner," and she responded, "So you're Hutner!" Expecting to get an earful, he waited to hear what she would say. She told him, "For the last six months, my husband has been crying, davening, and fasting for you!"

Rav Hutner realized that the Alter saw great potential in him, was very worried about him, and was davening very hard for him to improve. Because of what the Rebbetzin said, he continued learning in the yeshiva. How could he leave a rebbe who cared so much about him that he spent six months davening, crying, and fasting for him?

Perhaps many of you feel as I do that after a year in which we have not been as good as we hoped to be last year on Yom Kippur, we may feel, "How could Hashem want me near him after I wasted this past year, or have become even worse?"

Perhaps we also feel we have experienced a slap from the One Above this past year. We may feel that the great "Alter" in Heaven, Hashem's attribute of justice, Midas HaDin, must be saying "Don't come near me!" But then, we knock on the door of the attribute of mercy, Midas HaRachamim, our loving mother, the Divine Presence, and She asks our name. We answer with our names and then she says "Oh you? The Holy One has been crying and hoping for you to return to him for years! You mean so much to Him!" It is never too late. Even in this last hour of Yom Kippur, we can make the decision to be better and seek forgiveness.

Yom Kippur- The "Day of Atonement"

The Rambam writes: "Yom Kippur is a time of teshuvah for every individual and for the multitudes, and it is the climax of forgiveness... therefore everyone is obligated to do teshuvah and to confess on Yom Kippur,"³⁶. Sometimes, the intensity of Yom Kippur

³⁶ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah, 2:7

and the prayers on this Day of Awe can bring a person to tears. On Yom Kippur, we cry for two reasons. Firstly, we cry out in sadness because we worry that haven't done enough. But more importantly, we cry out in joy because we know there is more time, that we have another chance, another year to do better.

The question is often raised, why do we say "Slach Lanu" in Ma'ariv right after Yom Kippur? What could we be asking forgiveness for immediately after Ne'ilah?! The answer is quite simple. If we internalize this message, we can change our entire lives. It's possible, over the course of Yom Kippur, that we may be guilty of the biggest aveirah of all, which is not believing that Hashem truly has forgiven us. Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin used to say, "The worst fault a person can have is to forget his intrinsic greatness as a human being,"³⁷. Don't disturb yourself over what you have already lost. Just guard what you still have³⁸. You can always move forward.

The message of Yom Kippur, one that Rav Hutner learned as a bachur at the close of Yom Kippur many years ago, can be found in the words of the Alter of Slabodka himself.

Your feelings of self-worth need not depend on any external situation. Every human being has intrinsic value regardless of what he does. If you make mistakes and transgress, do not feel discouraged and lose your feelings of importance. There is no greater danger than that. Rather, when you have transgressed, strengthen yourself and elevate yourself above those transgressions. Keep your mind focused on your great potential for accomplishment. Regardless of how much wrong you have done in the past, you always can elevate yourself. ³⁹

Yom Kippur is a day of atonement and forgiveness, a day of redemption and liberation from our mistakes and misdeeds, a day of recognizing our inner selves and choosing to live in alignment with who we truly are. It is, in short, the happiest day of the year⁴⁰.

On Yom Kippur, over the course of the day, we map out the direction we want to head in and make it known to Hashem and to ourselves. On this day, we can take a step back, to see our potential, cry, fast, and daven for us to improve. We don't want to change, we don't want to become like someone else. Amidst the tears, the al chets, and

³⁷ Dor De'ah, Vol. 1, p. 172

³⁸ Keser Chochmah, 14:12

³⁹ Tnuas Hamussar, Vol. 3, p. 273

⁴⁰ Mishnah, Ta'anis 4:8

the words of Shemoneh Esrei, we are crying out to Hashem that we want to become who we know we are deep down inside.

Sukkos: A World with No “Stuff”

Just Passing Through

The following famous story is told about a wealthy businessman who was travelling through Radin.

Wanting to take advantage of the opportunity to visit the Chofetz Chaim, the businessman hurried to the home of the saintly sage. He was astounded by the lack of furniture in the Chofetz Chaim's home. Unable to contain himself, he asked, "Where is your furniture?" The Chofetz Chaim responded by asking him where was his furniture. The man, a bit surprised by the question, explained that he was only passing through. The Chofetz Chaim smiled and explained that in this world, he too, was only passing through.

The holiday of Sukkos is quite paradoxical. On the one hand, we leave the comforts of our homes and venture into a hut, internalizing the temporary nature of this world. On the other hand, we fully move into the sukkah. We live in the sukkah as we do in our permanent homes, so much so that we bring all of our best household items and utensils into the sukkah. Our sages teach us that the Sukkah is essentially a permanent, temporary dwelling⁴¹. On Sukkos we live full lives while recognizing what we have is fleeting.

Building an Inner World

Why does a person go through life lost? Why does a person travel around the world “searching for himself”? Because his neshamah is telling him that this is not his place. He does not know where his place is, but he knows for certain what is not his place. A life of true freedom and self-expression can only be actualized when living connected to spirituality. Rav Kook teaches that the only way to understand the ratzon, the inner desire of man is when we recognize it is a spark of the Divine Will⁴². Our spiritual pursuits are intrinsically connected to our inner selves.

Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, whose sefarim Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh and Da Es (Getting to Know...) have become wildly popular, explained the necessity for one to know and connect to their inner world in the following manner:

⁴¹ Maseches Sukkah 26a; 27a; 28b

⁴² Orot HaKodesh, Vol. 3, p. 39

“Hashem, the Torah and the Jewish people are one⁴³.” Just like the Torah is “more vast than the sea and wider than the earth”, so is a Jew’s soul endless, because it is part of Hashem and His Torah. The Raavad, Rabbi Avraham ben David, explains that our task in this world (to come to “know G-d”) requires self-knowledge of our own soul. He wrote, “You must know that everything which Hashem created on His world is all inside man, for it is written, “Let us make man in our image and in our likeness.” All of this was so that we should see the hidden wisdom in what is revealed, for it is written, “And from my flesh I shall see G-d⁴⁴.” What we learn from his words is that a person was created in a heavenly image, and that in order to know the ‘heavenly’, a person has to know what’s first down here, below. (In other words, one must know the essence of the human self). That is why “From my flesh I shall see G-d” – when I truly recognize myself, I will be able to recognize my Creator from there. ⁴⁵

In the words of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach:

Remember all the things [Hashem] did for you personally, how He took care of you. Remember also what He did for all of Israel. Remember all the unbelievable miracles. How can you forget how much G-d is taking care of us? Why are you so lazy when it comes to doing good things? Why don't you accept the yoke of Heaven to learn and to serve Him with strength? How long will you live in the world of fantasy? Of lies? How long will you despise your own holy soul? How long will you live asleep? How long will you not have rachmanus, have pity on your own self?

The world we know of is unbelievably big, Then there is the spiritual world which we don't even know of, There are thousands of worlds, millions of angels, and trillions of beings, and they are all completely annihilated before G-d's greatness, yet G-d forgets everything in the world and just takes care of you.

⁴³ Zohar, Achrei Mos, 73a

⁴⁴ Iyov 19:26

⁴⁵Getting to Know Your Inner World - 001 The Roots of Our Inner World

Please remember how holy it is to be a Yiddeleh, a simple Jew. Don't you know G-d created you to learn Torah and to fix the world? Do you know that every holy thought you have makes a crown for G-d? If you really make yourself strong, then a flow of sweetness and purity and holiness flows right into you, and all the gates of light and joy are open for you. just keep away from sadness, from all evil sadness. I know it takes a lot of strength, but realize what you are doing! Utilize the strength of the whole world; the whole great, awesome and holy world is waiting for you! Even the angels in Heaven can't do anything without you. How can you leave that which is so sweet and so beautiful, and exchange it for something which is meaningless? How can you spend one hour with nothing, when you could spend it in great Heavenly bliss? How can you be so cruel to yourself?... Please remember who you are. Don't you know you come from the most hidden, most awesome, most beautiful, most blissful world? Don't you know that your soul comes from such a place that it cannot live without having bliss? ⁴⁶

Penimiyus vs. Chitzoniyus

R' Yosef (Joey) Newcomb's song, Pnimius, poignantly exclaims:

There is penimiyus; there is chitzonius. There is body; there is the soul. But the main thing is the penimiyus. There are the clothes you wear; there is the car you drive. There is the shul you daven at; there is the neshamah. But the main thing is penimiyus.

Yochanan Gordon, in a remarkable column, penned the following:

Chassidus isn't external. To the contrary, the famous Chabad aphorism says: "Chabad mont penimiyus," Chabad demands inwardness. That means that anything which seems chassidic on an external level needs to be born from a deep intense feeling. In fact, the Maggid of Mezeritch once taught that Chassidus without love and awe of G-d is precisely the definition of Amalek. With Shavuot just two weeks out, the yom tov when we famously read the Ten Commandments, one of which is: "Do not make for yourselves an idol or the image of anything," which is based upon the reality of G-d's infinitude that precludes His being defined to one image or another. Chassidic garb notwithstanding, this means that fealty to G-d is not captured by an image but is represented by a consciousness or an awareness of G-d in one's life and in the world. It follows then that regardless of which brand of Judaism someone

⁴⁶ My Soul, My Soul: A Meditation from Reb Arele Roth rendered by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach

identifies as formatively or socially it isn't in contradistinction with embracing chassidic values and a Baal Shem Tov inspired Judaism...

There are chassidic sects who despite their outward chassidic appearance and the social chassidic culture, have not done enough to emphasize the study of chassidus and honing the feeling, excitement, and passion that were the underpinnings of the movement and instead have always been sticklers for what being a chassid looks like, which has driven many of their own youth far from the homes of their forebears. The Satmar Rebbe famously said: "The path of the Baal Shem Tov has been forgotten" and although I have no doubt that the Rebbe knew what he was saying, to me, as an outside observer it doesn't seem like that statement boded too well for many Satmar youth who need the path of the Baal Shem Tov to help them succeed in mending the worlds of Torah and commerce into one seamless world with G-d at the center of it all. ⁴⁷

The external trappings of Yiddishkeit are what holds us together. Our sages teach that it was because of our unique identifying features that we were redeemed from exile in Egypt⁴⁸. Based on these Midrashim, the Chasam Sofer singled out three things crucial to maintaining Jewish survival: language, dress, and names. These have become points of immense pride for observant Jews and have undoubtedly prevented the tragic wave of assimilation that has impacted other streams of Judaism. However, in our attempts to safeguard the externality of our Yiddishkeit, we have openly disgraced the Torah that we seek to uphold. As the famed writer, Yisroel Besser, wrote, "When you see penimiyus, then chitzonius is not just irrelevant — it's false,"⁴⁹. The Sefas Emes writes clearly that "since we are drawn to the internal we know that our external experience is really a concealment, we can totally ignore the externality and through this we will be redeemed from all our constrictions,"⁵⁰. When we tap into the inner light of Torah and the light of our inner selves we will see that the externality of our lives is just a facade that we have to overcome to live Torah true lives.

After being introduced to the light of Chassidus in Rebbetzin Bailey Braun's tenth-grade class a student wrote this letter to G-d:

Dear Hashem,

⁴⁷ 5TJT, The Modern Path of The Baal Shem Tov,
<https://www.5tjt.com/the-modern-path-of-the-baal-shem-tov/>

⁴⁸ Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra, 32; Pesikta, Devarim, Ki Savo, 41a

⁴⁹ Mishpacha Magazine, Issue 911, Voice in the Crowd, The Fire Inside,
<https://mishpacha.com/the-fire-inside/>

⁵⁰ Sefas Emes, Shemos, 5631

I learned in class that you show yourself in everything. You are right there, next to me, all the time. You are always seeing me, knowing me and understanding me. I just have to open my eyes a little more and then this relationship will be mutual. However much energy I'm putting into seeing you, I have to put in a little more and never stop trying to understand you. It makes me feel important to know that you reflect yourself through me; but it also makes me realize that every single person is also a reflection of you, which makes every person special and amazing.

I need to learn to see past the fake, ugly, outer layer of people and see the real them that you are a part of. The part of them that emulates your qualities; the part that makes them amazing people no matter how bad they seem. I'm really going to try hard to see you more in myself, in others and in everything around me.

*Love,
a girl who is trying to open her eyes more.*

“Image Company”

In an interview, Lipa Schmeltzer opened up about his struggles and the challenges that many creative souls who are seeking to express themselves experience in our very rigid, structured communities. In that raw and powerful interview, Lipa spent a great deal of time describing what he had poignantly termed the image company.

And the bigger company, the name of the big company that we have, is called the Image Company. And everybody has to have an image. Hey, what's going to be with Shidduchim? What's going to be with Yeshiva?... I wanted to make a song about this guy, you know, he was in Shidduchim, and they kept on telling him: “You need to find a Shidduch. You need to behave. Don't drive a car, don't do it.” Finally, he found the Shidduch. And then he wanted to start a certain work... so he went to his Rebbe, and the Rebbe said, “But it's going to hurt your Shidduchim for your kinderlach.” The guy was thinking to himself, I barely worked out my own Shidduch, you're talking to me about kinderlach I don't even have yet!? And then the kinderlach come, and then you you need to watch out for what's going to be with cheider, with yeshiva. You have to get accepted to that moisad. So then the kinderlich finally become erlich. And then let's say in the case somebody wants to get divorced, and say, “but you're ruining the whole family, maybe wait till the kids are married”, and I know

some people who were in that case. So then you finally have Shidduchim, because the image is working. They work for the image company, without even knowing, And we have thousands of people employed by the image company. ⁵¹

In the rebuilding of Judaism after the devastation and destruction of European Jewry, there was a heavy focus on institutions, communal structures, and external features. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, in his magnum opus, Alei Shur, explains that the very notion of “frumkeit” as we have it today is instinctive.

This frumkeit, as in all instinctive urges that occur in man, is inherently egoistic and self-centered. Therefore frumkeit pushes man to do only that which is good for himself. Activities between people and actions which are done without ulterior motivations are not derived from frumkeit. One who bases his service of G-d entirely on frumkeit remains self-centered. Even if a person places many pious restrictions on himself – he will never become a kind person and he will never reach the level of being pure motivated. This is why it is necessary that we base our service of G-d on commonsense, da’as. (See Sotah 22b, which lists seven types of activities which it labels as foolish piety. Each one of them is a manifestation of frumkeit without commonsense). Commonsense has to direct our service of G-d. From the moment we desert commonsense and act only according to frumkeit, our Divine service becomes corrupted. This is true even for a person on the level of a Torah scholar. ⁵²

The Torah was given for us to express our true, innate desires. Torah is meant to foster authenticity. Unfortunately, in many circles, it has become just the opposite. Ironically, Torah is weaponized to judge, demonize, exclude, and negate others. True Torah gives space to individual experience, allowing one to express their inner self. It is quoted in the name of the Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, that he once said, “If I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you. But if I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you.” When we live for ourselves, as opposed to peering over our shoulder looking to satisfy those around us, then we can truly live as our authentic selves.

⁵¹ Lipa Schmeltzer - A Personal Journey of Mental Health - 18Forty, <https://18forty.org/podcast/lipa-schmeltzer-how-to-heal-a-personal-journey-of-mental-health/#:~:text=While%20many%20people%20know%20Lipa's.His%20lessons%20are%20immeasurably%20important.>

⁵² Alei Shur, Vol. 2, Frumkeit, p. 152-155

Rabbi Reuven Sasson points out that man is hardwired to seek the acceptance of others. He writes that “a person who is surrounded by a society which is trying to sell him a false identity is destined to run after it,”⁵³. This is the biggest subjugation for a person, being enslaved to external voices. In the words of Rav Kook: “A person should not make his soul a lie, should not lie to his inner feelings out of the stormy pressures of the acceptance of others,”. By choosing to live as yourself in a Torah true manner, in accordance with your inner essence, you can block out those external voices and live a life of authenticity.

Lech Lecha: Living for Yourself

Parshas Lech Lecha begins with G-d's command to Avraham to leave his land, his birthplace, and his father's house, to journey to the land which he will be shown. Rashi, in his commentary on this verse, has a fascinating interpretation: “Go for yourself- for your own benefit, for your own good,”⁵⁴. The Biala (Yerushalayim-Tzfas-Lugano) Rebbe, in his work, Mevaser Tov, explains:

"When Avraham left his father's home, he began a spiritual journey of self-discovery, to "forget his nation and his father's house," and cleanse himself of the corruptive influences to which he had been exposed in his youth. Only then would he be able to absorb the holiness of Eretz Yisrael."

Rabbi Noach Weinberg said that “the essence of wisdom is to know yourself.” In a similar vein, the famed mashpia and Rebbe of Stechin, Rav Mottel Zilber, once taught:

The great trustworthy rule in regards to matters of Avodas Hashem is that it is impossible to establish halachos [ie. that if you do this or that or act in a certain way] in order to guarantee that you will reach and arrive at your purpose in this world. In order to attain the desired goal for man on this earth, to be a true, elevated oved Hashem, to be firm in what Hashem truly wants and to understand the main point that He desires, one must know: There are many many matters, perhaps most matters, that cannot be learned from others. Rather, one must add and discover these by oneself. For the fact that one listens to guidance in Avodas Hashem, this is not sufficient to guarantee his progress. That's not how it works. Rather one must discover and invent for himself chidushim and discover matters that he was not guided in. Only through himself and by himself can he discover them since these things are associated with the root of his neshamah. If one feels a unique enlightenment from Heaven about a

⁵³ Ayeka, The Bris- A Person's Loyalty to the Self, p. 204

⁵⁴ Rashi al HaTorah, Bereishis, 12:1

certain matter this means they are lighting up for him the way that he should strive for in Avodah. ⁵⁵

In a similar vein, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his sefer Mei HaShiloach, wrote:

Avraham Avinu wanted to know just where the essence of his life was intensely joined to God and how far it reached. Thus God responded to him, “to the land which I will show you,” meaning that you are joined to me in a place called “which I will show you.” For He has no end, His endless light will continually increase within you, and this you will find in the land of Israel. ⁵⁶

Why does God tell Avraham that he will bring him to “the Land that I will show you”? Why not just say where it is? Why not say “Israel”? Why keep it a secret? The Mei Shiloach explains that G-d told Avraham that he will take him to “the place that I will show you,” because Israel is “the land that I will show you.” An essential component of the mystery and excitement of spiritual discovery is what “I will show you.” Meaning, the true vitality of Israel and of ourselves is not the physical composition, internal conflicts, and external expressions and pressures, but rather it is experiencing life in a conscious and meaningful way. It is an experience that can only be felt but never precisely described. Spiritual growth, such as the growth attained in the Land of Israel, needs to be seen and experienced, not just described.

The perceptive definition of freedom is that it is the opposite of constraints and restrictions. This leads to a breakdown of agreed-upon social constructs. Freedom is not holy, it is simply a tool in attaining self-awareness and self-attachment. Boundaries in life are meant to be guardrails, restraints to keep us on the journey toward our true selves. The self has to be at the top of the pyramid, and then we can begin to define boundaries and freedoms. If the self is not at the top of the pyramid, replacing it instead with the “value” of freedom it can be truly destructive. The same is true with placing rules and restrictions as the primary value, which can easily erode one’s sense of self and belonging. Unfortunately, this is something that we are seeing and is far too prevalent in frum communities today.

Noted psychologist Dr. David Pelcovitz said once, “Rules without relationship equals rebellion.” If a child feels like they have no real relationship with their parents, if they feel like all the parent does is tell them what they can and cannot do, then rebellion is sure to follow. And it is no different when it

⁵⁵ Gilyon Divrei Torah, 5772, Parshas _____, p. 21

⁵⁶ Mei HaShiloach, Vol. 1, Bereishis, Lech Lecha, d”h To the Land that I will show you

*comes to Yiddishkeit. If a child, or quite frankly any person, feels like they don't have a relationship with Hashem, if Judaism is just a set of do's and don'ts, why would they be shomer Torah u'mitzvos?*⁵⁷

One who has inner peace is truly free, for they are not bound by the opinions of others. Sometimes our intellect functions based on external stimuli and ignores our inner desires. This is because the intellect understands the physical and seeks physical comfort. Rabbi Noach Weinberg used to ask, "What is the opposite of pain?" Nine out of ten people would say, "Pleasure." His response would be to tell them that they are incorrect, "The actual opposite of pain is "no pain", comfort." For true pleasure is something deeper, something more real. True pleasure is the alignment of your thoughts, speech, and actions with your true self.

Doing the Right Thing No Matter What

Noach was called a tzaddik⁵⁸. While there is much debate about the nature of his righteousness, one thing is for sure. He went up against his lowly, delinquent generation and chose to do the right thing. The same is true with Lot, who stood up to the wicked people of Sedom. Jewish tradition is ripe with those who did the right thing in the face of those who had an alternative understanding of what the right thing to do was.

It is no surprise that out of every nation, the Jewish people have had the biggest impact on the world. Jews are always at the forefront of progress and change, founding leaders of almost every "ism" that there was. This all started with one man, Avraham Avinu, who had a vision and a mission- to spread awareness of G-d's omnipresence and omnipotence. Inherently enclothed within the DNA of the Jew is a push to make the world a better, more G-dly place, for that is the reason we were created⁵⁹.

Building the Individual Within a Community

All that has been discussed pertains to one's self-expression. This has to be done in a balanced way that does not negate or neglect the world around you. The balance between living life for oneself and one's responsibility towards others is a heavy, yet important topic which requires further discussion.

Because a person is one entity, not just a combination of parts, he must find balance, harmony, and cohesion with all the seemingly contradictory segments of his

⁵⁷ Rabbi Mordechai Burg- Nitzotzos, Penimius HaTorah

⁵⁸ Bereishis 6:9

⁵⁹ Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso, 16; Tanya, Chapter 37

life. In contrast with the society around us, we know that our inner desire is not to be physically comfortable. Deep down every person craves connection; every person desires to love and be loved by others. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach used the Purim story, when our salvation came about because of the Jewish people's unity, to teach us that "our problem is that we don't know how much we're connected."

In the introduction to Shaarei Yosher, Rabbi Shimon Shkop lays this out clearly for us:

Although it at first glance seems that feelings of love for oneself and feelings of love for another are like competing co-wives one to each other, we have the duty to try to delve into it, to find the means to unite them, since Hashem expects both from us. This means [a person must] have clear for himself and accept the truth of the essence of his "I," for with it the statutes of [different] people are differentiated, each according to their level.

The entire "I" of a coarse and lowly person is restricted only to his substance and body. Above him is someone who feels that his "I" is a synthesis of body and soul. And above him is someone who can include in his "I" all of his household and family. Someone who walks according to the way of the Torah, his "I" includes the whole Jewish People, since in truth every Jewish person is only like a limb of the body of the nation of Israel. In this [progression] there are more levels for a fully developed person, who can ingrain in his soul the feeling that the entire world is his "I," and he himself is only one small limb of all of Creation. Then, his self-love helps him love the entire Jewish People and [even] all of Creation.

In my opinion, this idea is hinted at in Hillel's words, as he used to say, "If I am [not] for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am I?" It is fitting for each person to strive to be concerned for himself. But with this, he must also strive to understand that "if I am for myself, what am I?"—that if he constricts his "I" to a narrow domain, limited to what the eye can see [is him], then his "I"—what is it? Vanity and ignorable. If his feelings are broader and include [all of] Creation, that he is a great person and also like a small limb in this great body, then he is lofty and of great worth. In a great machine, even the smallest screw is important if it even serves the smallest role in the machine. For the whole is made of parts, and no more than the sum of its parts.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Shaarei Yosher, Hakdamah- Translation from Widen Your Tent, p. 54-56

A great Jewish thinker quite succinctly wrote:

*“Every person should know and consider the fact that you, in the particular way that you are made, are unique in the world, and no one like you has ever been. For if someone like you had already been, there would be no reason for you to be in this world. Actually, everyone is something new in this world, and here we must work to perfect our particular being, for because we are still imperfect, the coming of the Messiah is delayed!”*⁶¹

Rabbi Moshe Taragin once said that “God gave us a multi-chambered heart so we can hold all of the different swirling emotions.” Just as we are required to say that the world was created solely and entirely for me⁶², we must also realize that every person has that same perspective. When we truly live as our true selves we will not be afraid to give space to the experience of others. Being growth-oriented allows others to grow alongside us.

The holiday of Sukkos teaches us to abandon the notion that we need “stuff” to be happy. Instead, we can bask in the light of the Shechinah together with our fellow Jews, for we recognize that I am enough, we are enough, and Hashem has provided every one of us with the necessary tools for surviving and thriving in His world.

⁶¹ Ten Rings: Hasidic Sayings

⁶² Sanhedrin 37a

Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah: Dancing with Inner Happiness

Holding onto the Closeness

While it is the culmination of Sukkos, and of the holiday season, Jewish tradition teaches us that Shemini Atzeres is its own unique holiday. Like Shavuot, it is a holiday where there are no specific mitzvos of the day. As Rashi put it, Hashem is crying out to us, “Children, I beg of you, stay one day more with me; it is so hard for me to part with you!”⁶³ The Bnei Yissaschar explains that this day, when we complete the Torah with the letter “lamed” and begin anew with the letter “beis” [spelling out the word in Hebrew for heart, lev] is a day of total unification and connection⁶⁴.

Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger explains the entire sequence of events over Sukkos based on the Jewish wedding.

*The Sukkah sheltering our heads is the chuppah and the simchas beis hasho'eivah is the wedding celebration. The seven days of Sukkos represent the seven brachos recited under the chuppah, the seven ushpizin are the grandparents and distinguished guests who recite the brachos, with Dovid Hamelech being honored with the final brachah. On Hoshana Rabbah, the “pitka” (kvittel) — the kesubah — is written. Shemini Atzeres is the time of the mitzvah tantz and the ultimate union of the Ribono shel Olam and the Jewish nation.*⁶⁵

Rav Kluger explains, Shemini Atzeres is like the Mitzvah Tantz, one of the most intimate and lofty moments for Chassidic Jews on their wedding night. Shemini Atzeres is a day of the Chosson and Kallah dancing with one another. It is the holiday made for holding onto the connection with ourselves and with Hashem that we have been working on since Elul.

The Kabbalists teach us that on Shemini Atzeres we go to the highest of places.

On Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah the Yechidah shebenefesh is revealed. This is when the Keser of a person, the ratzon Hashem, will of Hashem, appears. This inner will leads us to want what Hashem wants, simply because He wants

⁶³ Rashi on Vayikra, 23:36

⁶⁴ Bnei Yissaschar, Tishrei 13:3

⁶⁵ My Soul Desire, p. 68

*those things. We dance hakafos, Torah dancing circles in the center of the synagogue, on Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah, for it is a time of oros makifin, enveloping lights. We receive lights that the body cannot internalize; they are a treasure above and around the person.*⁶⁶

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach explained that our taking out the Torah and dancing with it, without reading from it, is the greatest expression of our connecting to the Almighty and His Torah. A story can help to illustrate this.

There were two tzaddikim who were the closest of friends, Reb Avraham of Trisk and Reb Mendele Vorker. At that time, each of them lived on either side of a forest that separated the two of them. They made a covenant with each other and vowed to send each other a letter every Erev Shabbos. Reb Mendele Vorker found a Jew in his village, Yankele, who happily agreed to serve as the mailman. He would deliver the letter from Reb Mendele Vorker to Reb Avraham of Trisk.

Every Erev Shabbos, instead of going to work, he would walk through the forest – not always the simplest task. He would deliver the letter and wait there while the Trisker Maggid would go into a room and come out with an envelope for Reb Mendele. This messenger was the most envied Jew in town, and he did this for quite some time.

One day, he had a big yetzer hara, and he did something that wasn't allowed. He justified it by saying that he wanted to see what tzaddikim write to each other, l'shem shamayim. As he went into the forest, he opened the envelope. He looked at the page and saw that it was a blank piece of paper. He couldn't believe it. Was this some sort of a horrible joke? He started thinking to himself, "Is this how I'm wasting my Erev Shabbos, taking an empty envelope?" He was very hurt, and he didn't know what to do. He went to the Trisker Maggid and waited for him to come back with an envelope. He left the Trisker's house and didn't even wait to get to the forest before looking at the paper. He saw that this paper was also blank. He started thinking to himself, "Either they are both crazy or they are both terrible people."

He came back to Reb Mendele Vorker. "Shkoyach Yankel! Did you bring me something?" "Yes Rebbe, here is the letter." The Rebbe saw right away that

⁶⁶ Path to the Tree of Life: Lessons on Tanya, Vol. 2, p. 34

Yankele was in a bad mood. He didn't daven in the Beis Medrash all Shabbos. After Shabbos, the Rebbe called for Yankel and he said, "What's the matter Yankel? I didn't see you all Shabbos!" "Rebbe, I'm very hurt. I did an aveirah, and I hope the Rebbe forgives me." "What happened?" "I opened up the envelope that the Rebbe sent the Trisker Maggid." "And what did you see?" "Rebbe, you know what I saw. It was a blank page. Not only that, but I went to your friend, and he gave me a letter which I brought to you. I didn't even wait to get to the forest to look at that letter as well. It was also blank. I really don't understand what kind of a cruel game you are playing with me!" Reb Mendele said, "Yankele, chas vechalila. It's not a game. The Torah is written with black letters on a white parchment. Ninety percent of the time we send each other letters with black ink. But sometimes, when we miss each other so badly, we just send the white parchment."

The tzaddikim say that the white parchment of the Torah is much, much deeper than the letters. It's that part which can't be told, those things which can't be written. That is the white parchment. Shemini Atzeres, the day of our being alone with Hashem, the day we dance with the Torah without reading from the words engraved in the parchment, is an expression of the depth of our relationship with Hashem, which can never be taken away from us, no matter the situation we find ourselves in.

The Nazis, yemach shemam, sought to attack us on our holy days. Right before Rosh Hashanah, 5705, they selected a large group of young Jews to murder. They held them for twenty-four hours in a barrack. On the night that began the second day of Rosh Hashanah 5705 these holy young men ascended to heaven in flames. The surviving young men were devastated. Unfortunately, disaster struck again shortly thereafter. On Shemini Atzeres, 5705, (Monday, October 9, 1944) they made another selection of young Jews they intended to kill in the gas chambers on Simchas Torah. The following story was recorded by Rav Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, o.b.m., in the introduction to his book, Mekadshei Hashem. I also heard it from Rav Weiss, who was there. To hopefully convey a bit of the emotional depth of this event, here are the words of Rav Meisels:

"There is one incident, the most remarkable of them all, that I must recount to future generations. On the eve of Simchas Torah, the murderers grabbed about fifty young boys who remained in the camp and brought them to the gas chambers. When they entered that terrible place the murderers told them to undress, for they were to wash themselves; this was what they told all the kedoshim who were put to death in the gas chambers. Of course, it was only

a ruse to trick the victims into thinking that soon they would be set free. But those children, who knew what fate awaited them in a few short minutes, overcame their lowly spirits and their miserable reality with sublime religious fervor. One of the boys spoke up, 'Chaveirim yekarim, yetzt iz duch Simchas Torah', 'Dear friends, let us remember that today is Simchas Torah!' 'Emes mir haben nit du kein Sefer Torah tzim tantzen', 'True, we don't have here a Torah scroll with which to dance', 'aber, der Ribono Shel Olam iz duch du mit unz', 'but the Master of the World is with us here.' 'Lammer tantzen mit Eihm, behfahr mir verrin farbrent', 'Let us dance with Him before we are incinerated.' Immediately, they all gathered together in a dancing circle and sang the verses, 'Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu u'mah naim goraleinu', 'We are so fortunate! Our portion is so good! How wonderful is our fate!' and 'Vetaheir libeinu le'avdecha be'emes' 'Purify our hearts to worship You in truth!' The voices of song and praise to Hashem penetrated the walls of the gas chamber. The enthusiasm and emotion of the youths, as they sang and danced, surpassed all.

When the Nazi guards in the outer room were ready to turn on the gas, they heard the sounds of singing and angrily stormed into the inner room. They were angry on the one hand, but also amazed and confounded that young boys with one foot in the grave could find the spiritual heroism to dance and sing songs of Godly praise. The contemptible SS commander asked the boys to explain their behavior at such a frightful time, and they replied, 'We know that we will be put to death at any moment, and that is precisely the reason for our joy--we are happy to be leaving such a base, dastardly world led by dogs like you who set the rules and the norms for other human beings. The very thought of being finished with wicked villains like you causes us supreme joy and exhilaration. Another reason for our joyous hearts is that we soon will be reunited with our parents and family members whom you murdered after the heinous torments you inflicted on them. Death will allow us to be together with our families.' The sadistic Nazi became so angry that he was ready to burst and he shouted at these heroic youths, 'I will teach you a lesson! Instead of killing you quickly, I will transfer you to a special place and then I will cut you each up, piece by piece, until you die a far more horrible death.'

But the boys ignored his words and shrieks, and continued singing and dancing with great enthusiasm. They laughed in his face until he got angry again that they were making fun of him and did not fear him or his words. In his great fury, he halted their dancing and led them out of the gas chambers back into the camp, into an enclosed bunk, until he would carry out the torture

*he had promised. With Hashem's help, a great miracle took place: In the early morning of the following day, a large transport of several hundred people was organized to various workplaces in Germany. Quickly, the vast majority of the fifty boys were able to join the transport and leave Auschwitz for workplaces throughout the country. The few that remained behind dispersed into different blocks so that they would not be recognized as a group. Thus all fifty boys were saved from death, and this incident was considered a miracle and wonder by the entire camp.*⁶⁷

On Simchas Torah, we celebrate the connection that we have to the Torah and to the One who gave it to us. It is the natural reaction to the attachment we have with the Creator of the Universe, with whom we have a personal relationship. After removing all the barriers and blocks, we can totally connect with Hashem, with the realization that our entire existence is beyond nature.

Dancing for our future

The following story occurred in Vilna in the aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry. Several survivors made their way to the city for the Yom Tov of Simchas Torah in 1946, drawn to what remained of Vilna's Great Synagogue.

It was a shell of the formerly grand shul, and of course, it had no sifrei Torah, yet the Jews who had gathered there stood in the ruins, prayed the Yom Tov davening and held hakafos. Among the ragtag group of soldiers, refugees, and survivors, my father saw a child, standing hunched on the side. He approached the man who stood near the little boy and asked him if the child was Jewish. "Yes," was the answer.

*My father could hardly believe it. My parents had just traveled thousands of miles, passed through the devastation of countless communities, but he had not caught sight of one Jewish child in all the months of his travels. He asked the man's permission and picked up the child, holding him close in his arms as he danced. "In place of a sefer Torah," he told the group, "let us carry this child, who represents the future of the Jewish people."*⁶⁸

Part of the uniqueness of our celebration of completing the Torah is that as soon as we finish the cycle of Torah readings, we begin again. Completion is not worthy of celebration on its own. It is the catalyst for further, deeper connection.

⁶⁷ Path to the Tree of Life: Lessons on Tanya, Vol. 2, p. 15-16

⁶⁸ Mishpacha Magazine, Issue 854, The Man from Vilna

A story is told of two students of the Chidushei HaRim. Both students were talmidei chachamim and were dancing on Simchas Torah. One said to the other that he was going to be too tired, and would stop dancing before his friend. And so it was. When asked to explain this ma'aseh, the Chidushei HaRim answered: One was dancing through the power and happiness of Torah that he learned in the past until now, and the other was dancing from the power and happiness of kabbalas hatorah for all the Torah that he will learn in the future, because of his reacceptance of the Torah in this moment. The Torah that was learned in the past, even if it's a great amount, it is constricted and finite, but the Torah that will be learned in the future is almost limitless.

On Shemini Atzeres we celebrate the connection we have attained thus far, and we dance in celebration of our potential and our future. Even in the aftermath of the destruction of European Jewry, even if we have to run out of shul and into bomb shelters and army uniforms, even as we remember those who will never again dance on Simchas Torah in this world, we are able to dance round and round in circles, as if our life depends on it. For a connection to the Jewish people and to the Torah necessitates lifting our heads above our current circumstances to see the light of redemption even in the darkness of the present moment.

Chanukah: The Power of a Little Bit of Light

What is Chanukah? A Holiday Above Nature

Rabbi DovBer Pinson writes:

*“Chanukah— with its unique combination of history, ritual, food and fun— is truly one of the most accessible holidays on the Jewish Calendar. But it is also one of the deepest and most meaningful. From the revolutionary historical events of the Chasmonayim, to the social and psychological dangers of assimilation, to the existential aspects of faith, courage and independence—the story of Chanukah is at once exciting and eternally relevant as it describes both the salvaging and security of the Jewish people in a time of national distress,”*⁶⁹.

Particularly in our time, when the battle for the survival of the Jewish people is being waged once again, we are provided with the immense opportunity to connect to the light of the holiday of Chanukah. So what exactly is Chanukah? That question is asked in the Gemara⁷⁰ and brought down by Rabbi Yosef Karo⁷¹. Our sages teach that on the twenty-fifth of Kislev... they searched and found only one jug of oil that was pure, with the seal of the Kohen Gadol intact. The Beis Yosef raises the famous question, if there was enough oil for one day, why celebrate Chanukah for eight days? Didn't the miracle only occur over seven days? Many answers are given. I have a sefer that gives 500 different answers to this famous question. But in any case, the Talmud teaches that Chanukah was enacted by the rabbis in commemoration of the miracle of the oil.

It is brought down by the Hornosteipeler Rebbe of Denver, Rabbi Shlomo Twerski, in the name of the holy Ruzhiner Rebbe that what the greatest tzaddik can do on the Yamim Noraim, the simple Jew can accomplish on Chanukah. Chanukah is a time to reorient ourselves. Wherever we find ourselves, Chanukah gives us the ability to reignite the spark within, to begin again. As my friend, R' Oshi Bloom so beautifully put it:

Chanukah is from the lashon of chinuch. Perhaps we had goals in Tishrei, but we stumbled and forgot about those goals by the time Cheshvan came. Kislev, specifically the days of Chanukah, is a time to reorient ourselves, to remember the goals we once had and to begin again.

⁶⁹ Eight Lights- 8 Meditations for Chanukah

⁷⁰ Shabbos 21a

⁷¹ Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim 670:1

Chanukah: Spiritual over Physical

Rabbi Shmuel Zucker, in his sefer Oros HaMoadim, writes that the goal of the Greeks, with all their decrees against Jewish practice and Jewish life, was to uproot our holiness and connection to the redemptive light of the future⁷².

On Chanukah, unlike on all other holidays, there is no mitzvah of having a festive meal⁷³. Even though it is customary to have festive meals in honour of the holiday, this custom is not part of the observance of Chanukah, as ordained by our sages. Despite the latkes and sufganiyot, the observance of Chanukah is meant to be entirely spiritual.

The Levush, quoted by the Mishnah Berurah⁷⁴, explains this incongruity as follows: Purim commemorates the time that Haman, minister to King Achashverosh, enacted a decree calling for the extermination of the entire Jewish people. Had the Jews agreed to renounce their religious practices, and adopt the customs of the nation amongst which they resided, the murderous Haman would not have been satisfied, and would still have called for the annihilation of the Jews. Thus, when Hashem miraculously caused Haman's fall from power and the subsequent salvation of the Jews, it was a salvation of their physical beings; their spiritual existence was never in danger. The most appropriate way to express our thanks to Hashem for saving our physical beings is by demonstrating our freedom to enjoy the physical gifts he has provided us with.

The oppressive acts of Antiochus and the Syrian-Greeks were of a different nature. Had the Jews agreed to abandon their own customs and beliefs, and become integrated into the Greek lifestyle, they would have been left alone. Their oppressors sought only to destroy them spiritually. And so, when Hashem granted Matisyahu and the Hasmoneans victory over the Syrian-Greeks, he was preserving the spirituality of the Jewish nation. Our appreciation for this gift, the opportunity to serve Hashem and recognize him as our G-d, is best acknowledged through spiritual expressions of Hashem's praise. All of our holiday-related activities on Chanukah should carry this significance with it. We should take the opportunities at this time of year that we are granted with to praise Hashem and reaffirm our commitment to Him. ⁷⁵

⁷² Oros HaMoadim, Vol. 1, p. 187

⁷³ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 670:2

⁷⁴ Mishnah Berurah, 670:6

⁷⁵ Chanukah, A Spiritual Holiday (Rabbi Yitzchok Pacht)

Light Amidst the Darkness

The Hornosteipler, in commenting on the words we say in the insert to Shemoneh Esrei and bentsching on Chanukah, Al HaNissim, writes:

*What is the additional miracle in that they were we wicked and we were righteous, that they were evil and we toiled in Torah? We can say that in truth Hashem created a world in which nature is that the wicked will be on top (see Eitz Chaim, Shaar 42, Chapter 4). Therefore, it was a miracle beyond nature that a group of tzaddikim and Torah scholars won.*⁷⁶

The nature of this world is that the wicked prosper. There is darkness. It is hard to see how our actions, or inactions, have an impact. And that's why we have Chanukah, to entrench within us the power of a little light to dispel even the greatest darkness. The previous Aleksander Rebbe, in his sefer Imrei Menachem teaches that the only way to connect to the light of Torah and to survive the darkness of this world is through neiros Chanukah⁷⁷. Rabbi Avraham Tzvi Kluger explains this peculiar statement in greater depth.

*The sages, with all their kedushah, instituted the eight days of Chanukah for us to light Chanukah candles, and these candles penetrate the heart of one who desires to connect to the divine light, who wants the ability to connect to G-dliness. All the holidays are in warmer times, when there is more sun and light. Most of them are in the middle of the month, when the moon is full and lights up the night sky. Chanukah is in the winter, at the end of the month, when the moon is hidden. The mitzvah of lighting Chanukah candles is at night, unlike the majority of mitzvos connected to the holidays which can only be performed during the day (Shofar, daled minim, etc.). For Chanukah is a gift given to us specifically for the darkness of exile. With the mitzvah of the kindling of the Chanukah candles our sages gave us the ability to sense the light of Hashem in the lowest of places, when we have sunken into the depths of exile and this worldliness. The holiday of Chanukah prepares the path for Mashiach's arrival, for then Hashem's presence will be totally revealed.*⁷⁸

Reb Nosson, the primary disciple of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in Likutei Halachos writes that the Greeks took away the avodah of the Menorah and the Beis

⁷⁶ Malchus Shlomo, Parshas Mikeitz, p. 11

⁷⁷ Imrei Menachem, Bereishis, Parshas Vayishlach

⁷⁸ Osecha Avakesh, Chanukah, Or HaChanukah, p. 81

HaMikdash because they knew that this is what brings a Jew true happiness⁷⁹. Do we realize that!? Do we feel that!? In speaking about Chanukah, Rabbi Mottel Zilber once pointed out that Chanukah is not just about the Misyavanim, those who assimilated entirely. It's also about the "Hellenized Jews", the Jews who see Torah as societal, routine, secondary to their worldly pursuits. While there are Jews who are further away from mitzvah observance, there are also Jews who live lives of mitzvah observance without ever seeing the beauty and depth of Torah. On Chanukah we have the power to bring them back, to bring ourselves back, too.

Chanukah is about realizing we have the truth and living accordingly. We don't need to attack anyone. We are not threatened. We know what is right and we do it. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote:

*Hanukkah is about the freedom to be true to what we believe without denying the freedom of those who believe otherwise. It's about lighting our candle, while not being threatened by or threatening anyone else's candle.*⁸⁰

In the words of the previous Biala Rebbe, Rabbi Betzael Simcha Menachem Bentzion Rabinowitz:

In the darkest, longest night of the year, the light of Chanukah shines. The yetzer hara plants in our hearts the false notion that the situation is hopeless and that we will never be able to escape our problems. The war of the Chashmonaim against the Greeks was the war of each individual against this yetzer hara...

*Each Yom Tov has its own particular blessing on the Jewish people as a whole and on each individual. The blessing of Chanukah is the strength to stay happy and optimistic, no matter how hard things get. There is an inner point of holiness in every Jew. There is a hidden jug of oil from which miraculous light will shine. We must trust Hashem to help us, no matter how hard things may seem.*⁸¹

At Chanukah, the darkest point of the year, Jewish tradition teaches us to light candles, sit and bask in their glory, reflect on ourselves and figure out how we can overcome our innate desires for physicality to light up our inner sparks of holiness, our pinetle yid, our nitzotzos d'kedushah. After all, we can only spread the miracle of

⁷⁹ Likutei Halachos, Orach Chaim, Laws of Thanksgiving Blessings 6:21

⁸⁰ From Optimism to Hope, p. 94

⁸¹ Mevasser Tov, Chanukah 5781: Light to Dispel Darkness

Chanukah, the miracle of the light, the miracle of Jewish survival, and G-d's presence in this world, if we ignite our fires and become our best selves.

As we step into Chanukah, let us renew our commitment to bring a little bit of light into the vast darkness around us. No matter our surroundings, we have the ability to rise above our current situation, to bring the light of Hashem, of the Jewish people, and of ourselves, into every moment of our lives.

Tu B'Shvat: The Potential for Greatness

Potential- Guilt vs. Shame

The word potential, though seemingly positive, often has a negative connotation. Telling someone that they have potential is just a code word for the fact that they are far away, they are not yet where they are “supposed to be”. If someone tells you that you have amazing potential, what they are really saying to you is that you are not enough. You need to do something different, you need to become someone else. This brings up feelings of shame. As Dr. Brene Brown explains, shame means that I am unworthy of love and connection because of who I am. This is different than guilt, which is a very healthy emotion, and also part of the teshuvah process. Guilt means I have dignity, I am a g-dly soul and my behavior is unbecoming of the person that I truly am.

With feelings of shame, a person can never fully participate in a relationship with Hashem or with another human being. If I am not enough for myself, how can I be enough for somebody else? For us to participate in a relationship with Hashem, we must first recognize that we are worthy of love and connection. Despite the things we have done, we are fitting to be in a relationship with Him.

In davening, we say the words, “Our G-d, who is a merciful G-d, have mercy on us and give us intelligence”⁸². What do mercy and intelligence have to do with each other? If you do not see yourself in a merciful way, if you do not see yourself through the lens of kindness and compassion, if you do not see yourself the way Hashem sees you, you do not have the intelligence to understand who you are. A great therapist wrote that “the curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change,”⁸³. “Radical self-acceptance means that I am okay just as I am. I don't need to become anything other than I am right now.

Now, you might be thinking, if I'm okay right now as I am, how am I going to grow? You can't grow by saying I'm not enough. You have to know that you have everything that you need inside of you. All of the imperfections that you have are beautiful and beloved right now as they are. As Rabbi Mordechai Burg said so beautifully:

The problem with growth, when we talk about potential, is we think potential means I'm not enough. Potential means you don't need to become

⁸² Morning Prayers, Birchos Krias Shema, Ahavah Rabbah/Ahavas Olam

⁸³ I'm Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy

*anything. You're already beautiful right now, and once you know that, there's an explosion of growth that occurs, and it occurs naturally. You don't even need to work hard for it. If you feel awesome about yourself, not because you just had a good day, but because you actually recognize your inner greatness, because you know your inner godliness, then it's not hard to change. Do you know why it's hard to change? Because we don't really believe that we are the change... The hard part is not the change. That's the easy part. The hard part is [recognizing that we] have a godly soul.*⁸⁴

At Our Core We Are Holy

The Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, in Torah Ohr describes the Jewish soul's essential desire for closeness with Hashem:

*"Knesses Yisrael", which is the source of every Jewish soul, is called by the name "Libi," – "My heart." This collective soul is the inner point of each Jewish heart whose nature is to rise, like a flame, to attach itself to Hashem. This is the essence of the soul, founded in the realms of holiness, a literal portion of G-d on high. Its only desire and yearning is to nullify itself and to become included in Hashem's Light, to allow that light to manifest within the mental powers and emotional traits which in turn express themselves in thought, speech, and action, the "garments" of the soul.*⁸⁵

The Baal HaTanya emphasizes that there is an inherent desire in every Jew to connect with their Maker. This is because the Jew contains a literal piece of G-dliness within! Being as the essence of the Jewish soul is so holy and sublime, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook allows us to reevaluate our relationship to the teshuvah process. Rav Kook teaches that the main function of teshuvah is the return to oneself, to one's natural state of being.

*When we forget the nature of our essential soul, when we divert our attention from focusing on the quality of our inner life, everything becomes confused and rife with doubt. The primary teshuvah that immediately illuminates all darkness is when a person returns to himself, to the essence of his soul. Immediately, he then returns to Hashem, the Soul of souls, and proceeds onward, higher and higher in holiness and purity.*⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Rosh Chodesh Shvat / Tu B'Shvat - Potential and Becoming

⁸⁵ Torah Ohr, Tetzaveh, Zachor

⁸⁶ Oros HaTeshuvah, 16:10

Jewish tradition is clear. A person's self-worth is not measured by their achievements or lack thereof. A person has value and is worthy of love and connection regardless of his actions.

Lessons from Tu B'Shvat

The Mishnah teaches us that there is a disagreement between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel as to the timing for the Rosh Hashanah for Ilanos, the new year for the trees. When is the Rosh Hashanah for trees? Beis Shammai says that it's on the first day of Shvat. Beis Hillel says that it is the 15th of Shvat, Tu B'Shvat.⁸⁷

Our sages teach us that Rosh HaShanah is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement. On Rosh HaShanah mankind is judged. On Sukkos, which is on the 15th of Tishrei, we're judged for water⁸⁸. This is not a contradiction. In a general sense, we're judged on Rosh HaShanah. On Sukkos, the water is specifically designated, in terms of where it will go. The Yerushalmi⁸⁹ says that until the New Year for Trees, all trees can survive on the water from the previous year. After their New Year, the trees derive their life source from the water of the new year. The question is, what's four months later? Beis Shammai says four months from Rosh Hashanah. So on Rosh Hashanah, what was the basis for the judgement of water? Potential. And on Sukkos, it was judged based on the actual becoming.

We live at the nexus, at the crossroads of two things, potential and becoming. "On what we are in potential and on what we'll become. Beis Shammai says, you are all people, you are all trees of the field⁹⁰. You have to value yourself as you are right now with all your potential before you become anything. You already have to know what you have within you. You have to celebrate that. Beis Hillel says, yes, of course, you have to celebrate the potential. But what we want to see is not just you staying in your potential, we want to see you actualizing the person you can become. And that takes place on Tu B'Shvat, four months after the beginning of Sukkos."

Self Acceptance vs. Personal Growth

Man knows that he is created with a purpose. If he is not living up to that purpose he feels it; this is where feelings of unworthiness, anxiety, depression, isolation, and aloneness come from. The tension of potential and becoming is one of the hardest things

⁸⁷ Rosh HaShanah 1:1

⁸⁸ Rosh HaShanah 1:2

⁸⁹ Yerushalmi on Rosh HaShanah 1:2

⁹⁰ Devarim 20:19

to balance in life. We have to be continuously growing, but we also must be satisfied with where we are at every stage of our journey. Perhaps a story can help to illustrate this balancing act.

It is well-known that the Amshinover Rebbe of Yerushalayim lives in his own time zone apart from the rest of the world. But with respect to Shabbos and Yom Tov, he certainly observes those at the regular times.

There is a story told that one year, erev Yom Kippur, he was eating with the chassidim and it was getting closer and closer to Kol Nidrei. The chassidim began getting very nervous but the Rebbe was teaching Torah and eating as if he was in no rush at all. The chassidim asked one of the older men among them to say something to the Rebbe. So the chassid held up a watch and called out, "Rebbe, the watch!" The Rebbe responded, "Ah, yes, the watch. I'm aware of the time. But I have two watches. One watch says, 'It's getting late!' and the other watch says 'There's still time.'"

In two seemingly contradictory teachings, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach explains to us what Tu B'Shvat is all about. We must never stop growing, but we also have to celebrate ourselves, even in our darkest places.

Tu B'Shvat is the Rosh HaShanah of the trees, of nature. Tu B'Shvat is the holiday of growing. You can be holy but if you are not growing you are also dead. Tu B'Shvat is the New Year of growth. If you have the same holiness all your life you are dead. You can do everything right, put on Tefillin every day, keep every Shabbos, but you are spiritually dead. So Tu B'Shvat is about growing.

Reb Shlomo also said:

What is exile? Lack of growth. So the growth is the beginning of Redemption. What is the difference between a tree and a vegetable? A tree is perennial. The vegetable is new every year. On Tu B'Shvat, the tree is at the point of death. On the outside, dead completely. Unless you are receiving newness, you are completely dead... This is Tu B'Shvat. When you think you're dead, you're at the end, it happens.

So on Tu B'Shvat, I am mamash at the end. Reb Leible Eiger tells us that on Tu B'Shvat we get back our soul, we get a new energy pill, we are given the

strength not to give up. Like the seed, you have to descend into such depth, such darkness to grow again.

The common understanding is that our descent into the darkness is for the sake of our ascent, our *yeridos* are simply springboards for higher *aliyos*. But Rebbe Nachman gives us a different perspective. He points out that when we fall we are just climbing higher. Although we perceive we are spiritually falling, in actuality we are being prepared for our future spiritual ascent. In the words of his primary student, Reb Nosson:

*In truth, descent is the pinnacle of the ascension, because during the descent and exile you receive from a lofty spiritual place. Thus, there is no despair in the world at all, because in all the bad and impure places in the world you can return to Him. Specifically, it is precisely there [in our failures and falling] that holiness is enclothed and hidden. If a person remembers this during his descent and fall and believes it with complete faith that Hashem is hiding Himself from him in this place, G-d, blessed be He, Himself will revive him, and gives him hints and signs to return to Him easily. Surely one can get closer to Hashem, blessed be he, from wherever he is and turn his descents to ascents.*⁹¹

The holiday of Tu B'Shvat teaches us that when it is cold and wet out, when there is no recognizable growth, when it looks like all hope is lost, the sap is rising⁹². Even though it looks like we have withered away, inside we are still growing strong. We celebrate who we are inside, for we know that who we will become is already within us.

⁹¹ Likutei Halachos, Even HaEzer, Laws of a Bill of Divorce 3:21

⁹² Rosh HaShanah, 14a

Purim: Unlocking Greatness

Greatness Buried Within

Our sages ask, where is Esther hinted to in the Torah⁹³? And they answer with the pasuk: “And I will hide My countenance on that day⁹⁴. The very name Esther, her whole story, comes from the very word for concealment, *hastarah*. She taught us, and continues to teach us that it is specifically within the concealments, even from the concealment within the concealment, that we can find ourselves, our voices, our authority, and our influence⁹⁵. Purim teaches us that when we feel G-d’s concealment, then we open ourselves to seeing His presence.

The Arizal teaches that Purim, like every other Jewish Festival, has an aura, a unique, inherent spiritual power that is reawakened every year on the day of the Festival (Shaar HaKavanot, Derush Bet Moed, p. 76d). The special “aura” of Purim is the revelation of Hashem’s hashgachah even in periods of darkness. At the time of the Purim story, this revelation came about in the merit of the great dedication and self-sacrifice of Mordechai and Esther. It is reawakened every year by our efforts to follow in their footsteps during our lengthy exile, as alluded to in the verse, “And these days are recalled and kept in every generation...and their memory will not cease from their descendants” (Esther 9:28).⁹⁶

The story of Purim is all about discovering a deeper reality, a level of being which lies beyond the shallow surface. It’s about seeing the greatness within, even when externally everything looks broken. This is what Rabbi Itamar Schwartz, author of *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh* gave over when he wrote the following:

The avodah of every person on this day [Purim] is to reach the innermost point of the soul, from his current perception, which is his current level of “orah” (spiritual light) that he has so far reached. From that point, one can draw forth simchah. There is no greater evil on Purim than one who copies others’ behavior, for this is totally ignoring the “individuality” of oneself. And although there is a custom to dress up in costumes on Purim, that is really because we are showing that the way we appear during the rest of the year is actually a

⁹³ Chullin 139b

⁹⁴ Devarim 31:18

⁹⁵ Likkutei Moharan, Kama, Torah 56

⁹⁶ Rabbi Yaakov Hillel- Purim: Emerging from the Darkness, 5781, p. 30-31

“costume” [for during the rest of the year we are not revealing our true self]. That is how we reveal our true self. How pitiful is it when a person has to completely imitate the behavior of others around him, on Purim [because he doesn’t get to be “himself”].⁹⁷

On Purim, we are not at all bothered by the world around us. We do the right thing to do, because it is the right thing to do, even though our life circumstances make it difficult to do so. Haman, and all those who rise against the Jewish people, attempt to uproot our faith, to make us give up on our greatness, to lose belief in our personal and national redemption. Mordechai, and those heroes and leaders of the Jewish people, stand up against them and remind us that "there is no such thing as despair in the world at all", At our core, we are holy and unique. We have greatness within. On Purim there is a custom to wear masks or dress up in costume. This custom, and the drinking to *ad delo yada*, teaches us that in order to dig deep down, to find out who we truly are, we have to hide who we think we are, to let all our secrets pour out, to peel off the external layers and let our inner selves shine through.

The purpose of reading the Megillah is to underscore that in all generations there are Hamans who plot our destruction. Miraculously, Hashem comes to our salvation thanks to our adherence to Torah and mitzvos. “Reading the Megillah backwards,” means thinking that the Purim narrative is a historical event with no contemporary relevance. One who takes such an attitude is missing the entire significance of Purim and the Megillah.⁹⁸

Purim: Seeing Miracles in the Ordinary

Rabbi Yaakov Klein wrote:

Purim grants us the ability to stop and recognize the wonders constantly at work in our lives. Our Purim consciousness of essentiality enables us to realize that life itself is a wonder, a complete and utter miracle. This realization moves us to express our thanks and gratitude to Hashem for the unearned gifts with which He constantly showers us.

Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky pointed out that “Purim is the first story in our history without Hashem being explicitly mentioned,”⁹⁹. The Purim story took place over many years. To someone lacking clarity, it could seem that all the events recorded in the

⁹⁷ Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh: Q & A, p 326

⁹⁸ Kesser Shem Tov, Hosafos, Siman 78

⁹⁹ Purim 5779, The New Revelation Of The Megillah, teaching from Rav Moshe Shapira, Afikei Mayim

Megillah are coincidences, they just happened. The whole avodah of Purim is to see Hashem's hand in everything. To realize everything we do is just another chapter in the story of our lives, another link in the chain of Jewish history. Hashem is so big, He's tiny. He is in every detail of our lives. The seemingly simple, random stuff, that's from G-d too. The primary lesson and takeaway from the story of Purim is the understanding of Hashem's immense love for us even when we are in a hidden and exiled state.

In the words of Rabbi Meilech Biderman:

The holy sefarim tell us that the uniqueness of the Purim miracle is that it happened within the rules of nature. When we read and study the megillah, this enables such miracles to happen again.¹⁰⁰

As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach put it:

Purim is when we don't see G-d. Do we know how much G-d thinks of us, especially when He is not looking? Do you know why G-d is not mentioned in the Megillah? The Megillah teaches us how much G-d loves us, even when He is not showing it at that moment, when He seems to be hiding. When you love a person, the real test of the love is how much do you think about them when you don't see them. The test of a Jew in exile is how much G-d thinks about us, and we think about Him, even when we are not close.

R' Leibel'e Eiger, in Toras Emes, teaches that on Purim we sweeten everything. We understand that there can't be anything bad which happens. We realize that we rely only on Hashem. We become intoxicated with this simple belief. Joy surges into our being, healing in its path.

¹⁰⁰ Torah Wellsprings- Purim, 5781, pg. 53

Pesach: Setting Ourselves Free

Real Freedom- Living as our True Selves

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook teaches that true freedom is being loyal to our inner selves¹⁰¹. The source of true freedom is atzmiyus- identity, individuality, and self-expression. To achieve true freedom, a person first has to come into contact with his true inner self. Otherwise, he extends his enslavement, expending energy while strengthening the factors that mask who he is. A person's happiness and fulfillment is dependent on his connection to his inner self, to his unique light and role in the world. A person can only grow to become his true self. Any attempt to live for or like someone else will not bear fruit. One can only be happy with his lot¹⁰² if he understands himself and his inner worth.

As Rav Kook poignantly stated: A person knows many names, but his own name he forgot, he does not know,"¹⁰³. Every person is searching to find his or her value and unique contribution to the world. Every person wants to fulfill their purpose. The key is to block out all the outside noise and to listen to our inner voice, to grow into who we are deep inside.

Klal Yisrael is one united entity tasked with the mission of revealing the Shechinah, Hashem's presence, in this world. Each individual amongst the Jewish people is integral and has a unique role to play in our collective mission. There is not a single person in the world who is extraneous. Everyone is a necessary part of Hashem's master plan. Every person has a unique mission in the world for which Hashem has given him all the tools needed to succeed. The desire for something external to us comes from the belief that we know better than Hashem. If we truly believed in Hashem, we would recognize that He gives us all that we need to be who we are meant to be.

A relationship with kedushah begins from within. The self is the point of connection between man and his Creator. Coming close to yourself is a prerequisite for coming close to Hashem. When you are satisfied with yourself, when you are connected to who you truly are, then can you be with Hashem. One who is disconnected from himself is also disconnected from his Source. Pesach teaches us that when we know our

¹⁰¹ Olot Ri'ayah, Part 2, p. 245

¹⁰² Avos 4:1

¹⁰³ Orot HaKodesh, Vol.3, p. 139

name, when we identify with who we are, even though we are broken and incomplete Hashem, in His infinite kindness, redeems us anyway.

Rabbi Mordechai Burg explained that this is the purpose of one of the more peculiar customs that we have on Seder night, the breaking of the middle matzah.

The entire Haggadah is said over a broken piece of matzah. There is no quest for completion. It remains broken from Yachatz until the end. "On Pesach night, we find G-dliness even in the brokenness of our lives. In the 49th level of tumas Mitzrayim, we were still redeemable. Not because of anything we had done, but simply because we were loved. This is the gift of imperfection.

The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, famously said "There's nothing as whole as a broken heart." Rabbi Joey Rosenfeld teaches that the inverse is also true. Meaning, "There is nothing as broken as a whole heart." Being imprisoned is not so restrictive. Not knowing that you are enslaved is the greatest form of subjugation. One who is enslaved to his ta'avos, to his base instincts and desires, and thinks that it is what he really wants, is in a serious situation. He is enslaved and he does not even recognize it. Today, western society takes a person away from his inner essence and draws him to the vanities of the physical world. On Pesach, we have the ability to rectify this. We can see ourselves for who we are, to live according to our inner essence, and to rid ourselves of the "self" that has been projected upon us by others.

Removing the Foreign Influences Within

On a cold, wintery Shabbos morning, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger gave over the following idea:

The Torah tells us that the purpose of the Ten Plagues was "in order that you should relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have made a mockery of Egypt and the signs that I have placed on them, and they shall know that I am Hashem,"¹⁰⁴. Rashi explains that Hashem was saying, "I made a joke" of Egypt. Can it really be that Hashem performed all those miracles in order to play a joke on the Egyptians? Why does Hashem care so much that "they [the Egyptians] shall know that I am Hashem?"

The Degel Machaneh Ephraim, taught in the name of his grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, that there is a little Egyptian within every Jew. He explains that because we lived in Egypt for so long, they became almost completely immersed in the impurity of Egypt. When the pasuk says that Hashem did the plagues so

¹⁰⁴ Shemos 10:2

“they,” the Egyptians, would know that “I am Hashem,” this was not referring to the Egyptians themselves. It was referring to the Egyptian aspect within each Jew. Hashem did the plagues so that the Jewish people themselves would finally be able to let go of their attachments to the coarse physicality of Egypt.

Why is this force of impurity within a Jew called “Egypt?” According to the Mei HaShiloach, the Torah calls Egypt the “garden of G-d”¹⁰⁵ because it was such a lush environment, filled with every blessing from G-d, where one could enjoy all of the pleasures of the physical world. This level of physical luxury is why the Midrash says that until the Jewish people left, a slave had never fled Egypt¹⁰⁶. There was no constituency of Egyptians demanding that a wall be built around the country and that the Canaanites should pay for it. No slave had ever fled before because, despite all of the hard physical labor, those in bondage were also enslaved to the physical desires they could only satisfy in Egypt.

Even today, we see so many people enslaved to substances or behaviors even though they know how bad they are... Whatever the flavor of excessive attachment, whether to money, illicit desires, food, some substance, or almost any other form of pleasure to which a person can become obsessed, the intense form of pleasure forms a border around the person. It blinds him from seeing the broader world. It makes him or her small-minded. The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, comes from the word meitzarim, meaning border or limit. Being a slave to the pleasures of this world puts blinders on a person, binding him into a tiny world where he cannot imagine anything greater than a life filled with his indulgence of choice.

It was critical that Hashem make a mockery out of their pleasure-seeking lifestyle that the Egyptian part of ourselves felt drawn to. He knew the only way we would be able to be the first slaves to flee Egypt was to first release the psychological stranglehold that materialistic place had on our psyches by demonstrating its absurdity... How did the miracles of the Ten Plagues accomplish this? Hashem knew the only way we could escape from the small-mindedness of Egypt was to expose us to true greatness.¹⁰⁷

The Kotzker Rebbe famously said: “If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But if I am I because you are you and

¹⁰⁵ Berishis 13:10

¹⁰⁶ Mechilta, Yisro, 1

¹⁰⁷ Drasha for Shabbos Morning: Making a Mockery, Parshas Bo, 5779

you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you.” Through experiencing enslavement and the process of gaining our freedom, the Jewish people were shown who we truly are. As we experienced stage after stage of the miraculous exodus, we realized that man was not created to be a highly productive piece of machinery. Our experience in Egypt taught us and continues to teach us that there is more to life than our physical existence, that we are spiritual beings experiencing a physical existence.

Chametz and Matzah

When Pesach comes, the sefarim extol the evil nature of chametz. Chametz represents the yetzer hara¹⁰⁸. It is so horrible that one must seek it out and destroy it. One may not own even a single crumb of chametz. Unlike other forbidden foods, if chametz gets into a pot on Pesach it is not nullified, no matter how great the proportion of non-chametzdik food is to the chametz. Everything that we hold abhorrent, all aspects of this physical world which bring us away from a life of closeness to the Creator of the Universe, is represented by chametz. The obvious question is raised, if chametz is so horrible, why is it permitted the rest of the year!? The Zohar answers with a parable and then it spells out the lesson as follows:

[There is a parable of] a king who had an only son who became sick. One day, the son wanted to eat. [The doctors] said, let the king's son eat [a certain] healing food. Until he completes his regimen of eating this food, do not let any other kind of food even remain in the house. They did this. Once the son had eaten this healing food, [the doctor] said, "From now on, let him eat whatever he desires. Now, it cannot harm him." Similarly, when the Jewish people left Egypt, they did not yet know the foundation and the secret of emunah. The Holy One, Blessed be He, therefore said, "Let the Jewish people taste of [the bread of] healing [Matzah], and while they are eating this medicine, let them not even see any other kind of food. But once they have eaten the Matzah, which is the medicine which causes a person to ascend and to know the secret of emunah," Hashem says, "From now on, they may see chametz and eat it because it can no longer harm them." ¹⁰⁹

The recounting and recalling of the Exodus from Egypt is itself a mitzvah, and is the reason behind so many other commandments. The Chafetz Chaim explains that the reason why the mitzvah of zechiras yetziyas mitzrayim, of remembering the Exodus from Egypt is so prevalent in our tradition is because when we recall our enslavement,

¹⁰⁸ Zohar 40b; Radbaz 3:546; Shelah HaKadosh Bo; See also Kad Hakemech [Rabbeinu Bechayeh] Pesach; Toras Moshe [Alshich] Shemos 12:13, etc.

¹⁰⁹ Zohar 183b

the ten plagues, and the splitting of the sea, we entrench within ourselves love and fear of G-d¹¹⁰. In a similar vein, the Sefas Emes writes that the reason we have a mitzvah every single day to remember the Exodus is because our remembrance makes us more free from enslavement to the yetzer hara¹¹¹. It is no wonder then, that the Nesivos Shalom describes the foundation of Pesach as emunah, and the Seder night as the Rosh Hashanah of emunah¹¹².

The Zohar explains that eating matzah on Pesach is the antidote to the yetzer hara, permitting us to eat chametz the rest of the year. On Pesach, by ridding our homes of chametz and eating matzah, the bread of faith and healing in its place, not only do we entrench ahavas Hashem and yiras Hashem in our mind, but we cement it within our bodies. When we go through Pesach mindfully, when we eat Matzah with intention, we can reset and reorient our consciousness and with that we can start over, refocusing and redirecting our lives. As Mrs. Miriam Aflalo beautifully put it:

To eat matzah is to eat emunah. It heals the heart from those thoughts that ferment, from seeing our lives as simply progressing along a predictable timetable. Matzah is the bread of our emunah. No breath or heartbeat is taken for granted; aches aren't a natural result of aging. Hashem is the reason for all the good things that happen, and those that don't, all that we have, and all we don't. Hashem is the source of all that appears to us as failure and the pain caused by someone else's actions. Seeing any other source is the chametz we have to eradicate from our house, remove from our heart — and then fill those empty spaces with matzah, the bread of emunah. ¹¹³

Freedom is something internal. We can be bound and chained and remain free. Freedom is not dependent on one's external circumstances. A Jew in a concentration camp could be more free than you and me, more free than a billionaire who has everything but is enslaved to a never-ending pursuit of material wealth. Freedom is not dependent on anything external to a person, but rather something that comes from deep within.

Rabbi Avraham Schorr, in his commentary on the Haggadah, explains Mah Nishtanah in the following manner:

How different is this night? A person needs to ask themselves what will be different because of this night, this special evening when wondrous lights

¹¹⁰ Shem Olam, Part 2, Chapter 5

¹¹¹ Sefas Emes al HaTorah, Shemos, 5637, Parshas Bo

¹¹² Nesivos Shalom, Maamar Revi'i- Pesach Chag HaEmunah

¹¹³ Mishpacha Magazine, Family First, Issue 489, Rise to the Occasion

*descend, how they will enact change on us, and what we will choose to change because of the sanctity of this night. On this miraculous night, the dark of night turns to the light of day—this is the difference we are speaking about on this night. We must enact change as if changing night to day.*¹¹⁴

When we go through the Yom Tov of Pesach, when we eat matzah with intention, internalizing the messages of healing and faith that the physical act of eating entrenches within us, we are then able to step back into the darkness while remaining focused on the light that is found within.

¹¹⁴ Haggadah shel Pesach: HaLekach v'HaLibuv, Maggid, Mah Nishtanah

Sefiras HaOmer: Becoming Human, Becoming Self-Aware

Man and Intellect

The Omer offering represents the food of an animal. Starting from Pesach, we build ourselves up from being like an animal to becoming an adam, a person. Through performing the service of the Omer offering, we spiritually awaken ourselves. Rabbi Meilech Biderman, in his famous Parsha booklet, explained this matter at length.

*On the second day of Pesach, the korban omer, made of barley, is sacrificed. Barley is generally animal food. We then count fifty days until Shavuot, when the shte halechem are brought. The shte halechem are made from wheat flour, which is flour fitting for humans. This hints that during the fifty days of the omer, we can rise from being like an animal to being a human being. What makes a person "human"? In Shacharis we say, mosar ha'adam min habeheimah ayin. These words can be translated that the quality of man, over animals, is man's ability to say ayin, no. Animals act by instincts, they can't control themselves. Man's greatness over animals is ayin, that he can shout "no" to whatever isn't Hashem's will. The Mei HaShiloach, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner taught that the head of human beings rests on top of the body. This indicates that his mind rules over his actions. By an animal, the head and the body are on the same plane, which implies that the mind can't control its corporeal instincts. If a person has intelligence, but he doesn't follow his conscience, he is essentially the same as an animal.*¹¹⁵

Sefiras HaOmer, Growth, and Self-Transformation

There is a well-known idea that when the Jews left Egypt during the Exodus, they were on the forty-ninth level of tumah, spiritual impurity. Many explanations are given for this and it is expounded upon at length by several great commentators and other writers. Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar, in his commentary on Torah, Or HaChaim, writes that, based on the opinions and teachings of the Arizal, the principal purpose of the exile in Egypt was to salvage the souls which had been contaminated with the fifty levels of impurity at the time. The forces of the kelipah captured some of the holy souls from Adam when he ate from the Tree of Knowledge. The Or HaChaim HaKadosh explains

¹¹⁵ Torah Wellsprings, 5778, Behar/Bechukosai, Becoming a Human Being

that if G-d had redeemed the Klal Yisrael prematurely this would have aborted the plan to rescue all those lost souls. The Or HaChaim HaKadosh concludes with the famous concept that Jews were on the 49th level of holiness when they got the Torah, one step away from the very top, the 50th level of holiness¹¹⁶.

We're taught that the forty-nine days of Sefiras HaOmer, the Counting of the Omer, help us pass through those forty-nine levels so that we will be ready to re-accept the Torah. Each day of the Omer, we work to refine one character trait and go up a level, until 49 days later, we are ready to receive the Torah. Rabbi Dr. Saul Haimoff explained it as follows:

The journey from Pesach to Shavuot as a 49-step spiritual detox program. Since the Jewish people were not worthy of receiving the Torah when they first left Egypt, they had to ascend spiritually for 49 days until they cleansed themselves of all their impurities. Anyone with experience in the profession of mental health, especially in the area of recovery from addiction, can relate to the sefirat haomer model. It is a count. A streak. A resolution. We set our goals, map out our journey, and monitor our progress each step along the way. We stand tall each night and announce proudly "this is the 13th day", "the 14th day", "the 15th day"! We don't want to miss a single day.

We count in an ascending order, instead of a descending order. We are leaving our past, filled with destructive habits and unhealthy patterns. We are building towards something better. We are climbing up a mountain of self-actualization. This idea is more than a "ra ra ra" pep rally pump-up cheer. It is rooted in science and research. An article published in the journal Psychological Bulletin in 2016 conducted a meta-analysis on how monitoring your progress influences your ability to achieve your goals. It turns out that it matters a whole lot.

People who record their progress and monitor their gains and losses are much more likely to be successful than those who don't. What's more, physically recording your progress and announcing it publicly, further improves your chances of achieving the results you are striving for.

This is true with regards to psychotherapy as well. A 2009 study found that when psychotherapy includes a formal monitoring of symptoms, patients are more likely to get better than when progress is not monitored. The research

¹¹⁶ Or HaChaim al HaTorah, Shemos 3:8

*shows that the best formula for success is to first identify your goals, set a plan for how to achieve them, and then monitor your progress along the way. In other words, to model it after the mitzvah of Sefirat Haomer... The Omer period can provide us with the mental fortitude and resources to live a life worth living and grow spiritually.*¹¹⁷

As Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach so beautifully taught, “Pesach and the redemption from Mitzrayim is G-d's revelation. Sefiras HaOmer means, what am I doing with it? Everybody has to count in order to fix his own neshamah,”¹¹⁸. Sefiras HaOmer is the way we hold space for and retain the spiritual achievements of Pesach.

We're taught that the forty-nine days of Sefiras HaOmer, the Counting of the Omer, help us pass through those forty-nine levels so that we will be ready to re-accept the Torah. Each day of the Omer, we work to refine one character trait and go up a level. Forty-nine days later we are ready to receive the Torah.

As our sages teach, the Jews started on the forty-ninth level of tumah, level -49. Forty-nine days later they were at +49, the forty-ninth level of holiness. The forty-ninth level of holiness is ninety-eight levels higher than the 49th level of impurity. So, it should have taken the Jews ninety-eight days to get to the level of holiness required to be ready to accept the Torah. At the time of the Giving of the Torah, which was only forty-nine days from when they left Egypt, they should have been at level zero! How did they make it to +49 in only half the time? The answer is, quite simply, they made it up two levels every day. How did they do that? Well, instead of destroying negative character traits and then rebuilding new, positive traits, which would be a two-day process, they transformed the negative character traits themselves into positive ones, in one day.

So what does that mean for us? It means is that we need to rework our understanding of negative character traits. There are no bad character traits. There are only badly channelled ones. So, each day of the Omer, instead of trying to create entirely new emotions and traits, we try to figure out where those emotions already exist within us. Then, we re-channel them to where they are supposed to go. Forty-nine days later, we will be ready to accept the Torah.

¹¹⁷ Counting The Omer Every Day: A Model for Self-Growth & Resilience, Rabbi Saul Haimoff, PsyD

¹¹⁸ It's Still Iyar, 5746.

Shavuot: Re-Committing to the Relationship

Torah: The Guide to Ourselves and to Life

How does a person know his abilities and how to tap into them? He needs a GPS, a guidebook. Torah is that GPS, it is the guidebook for our soul. The Torah teaches us who we are. The boundaries of Torah are not binary, external restrictions. They are guardrails for the good of man; so we can come close to ourselves and our Creator. As Rabbi Noach Weinberg famously said, “Torah is not a history book. It is *Toras Chaim* – literally Instructions for Living, God’s manual teaching us how to fulfill our potential and get the most out of life.” Torah law is not a bunch of rules and restrictions from an angry man in the sky. The Torah opens us up so we can come to self-awareness and self-attachment. The Torah and all its restrictions were given to us so that we can find and define ourselves- our identities, our successes, our happiness, and our fulfillment. That is why halachah is all-encompassing and spans every area of Jewish life. Judaism teaches that Torah and mitzvos are the tools man can use to come close to his inner essence. Torah gives us both freedoms and restrictions. Hashem, the Ultimate Source of goodness, wants to bestow good- that is why he created us and gave us the Torah¹¹⁹.

As long as a person has not come to self-recognition, as long as he has not tasted true freedom, he will feel that Torah and mitzvos are a burden, restricting him from living his life to the fullest. Philosophy suggests that religion is the opium of the masses for it inhibits man’s ability for self-expression and self-actualization. This claim is true against Christianity, which denies man’s pure and holy essence, but it is absolutely false in regard to Torah Judaism, which is built on the true nature of man.

The Or HaChaim HaKadosh writes:

It is also hinting to Torah, with the words “in all the good”, as our sages of blessed memory have taught that “there is no good besides the Torah”¹²⁰. For if a person would feel the sweetness, pleasantness, and goodness of the Torah, they would go crazy and chase after it. In their eyes, no amount of gold or silver would matter. For the Torah contains all goodness that exists in the world.¹²¹

Because man is hardwired to seek freedom, many leave a life of Torah and mitzvos to experience counterfeit “freedom”. People who leave Yiddishkeit do so in

¹¹⁹ Derech Hashem, Chelek Rishon, B’Tachlis HaBriah

¹²⁰ Brachos 5b

¹²¹ Or HaChaim al HaTorah, Devarim 26:11

search of freedom. Their mistake is that they were raised to believe in a deeply engrained misunderstanding of what Torah and mitzvos are, as well as a mistaken understanding of their ratzon, their inner will and desires. When a person feels that Torah is a burden, that Torah negates and ignores what he seeks and yearns for, he feels that he has no place in Torah; he feels that in order to live a life of Torah he has to erase himself. If he understood that the Torah does not come to subjugate your desires, but rather Torah reveals man's true inner desire, redeeming a person from all that is chasing him and preventing him from being himself, then he will come to recognize the sweetness and beauty that is a life of Torah and mitzvos.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach explained this idea, based on a Torah from the tzaddikim of Aleksander:

By Shavuos it says "Hakol modim deba'inan nami lachem" (Pesachim 68b). Everyone agrees that when it comes to Shavuos, we require that it be also "for you," meaning that it is a mitzvah to eat, drink, and rejoice on that day. "Ba'inan nami lachem" means that on Shavuos the lachem means that you need to ask yourself 'what do you think about yourself?' Everybody has to ask themselves 'what do you really think?' A person can talk himself into 'I'm a good Jew because I keep x, because I do y, because I was written up in the Jewish Press, because this rabbi ordained me', it's all nonsense. The only question truly is, what do you really think? ¹²²

This point was emphasized in a story shared by the previous Toshi Rebbe:

The holy Rebbe, Rabbi Moshe of Sambor zy"a, in his sefer Tefillah L'Moshe (Parshas Pekudei) writes that once after the Shabbos day meal he heard the holy Rebbe from Lublin zy'a complain about himself that he is not a tzaddik. Rabbi Moshe of Sambor answered and said: "I'm prepared to take an oath that the Rebbe is a Tzaddik Gamur". The Rebbe of Lublin said: "I know that there are many people, maybe even hundreds of people who would testify that I'm a tzaddik, but in the upper worlds they'll only ask me." ¹²³

Our tzaddikim teach us, that it could be that others will praise us, in this world or in the World to Come, but the only thing that matters is my perception of myself. How do I see myself? Do I have a real relationship with Torah and with the One who gave it? Do we recognize that Torah is prescribed by the Source of all healing so that we can live healthy, wholesome lives?

¹²² Reb Shlomo on Shavuos, What Do You Think?

¹²³ Avodas Avodah, Shemos, Mishpatim, p. 245

In his book, *Ayeka*, Rabbi Reuven Sasson gives an allegory that we need to etch into every fibre of our being. He writes:

During a routine appointment, the doctor once again implored his patient about the dangers of eating certain foods, given his state of health. He explained to his patient that sugar and gluten were particularly unhealthy for him and had to be avoided at all costs. His warnings fell on deaf ears. Wanting to be “free” and eat whatever he pleased, the patient totally ignored the doctor’s words. Is that freedom? Even if he feels free at the moment he is satiating his desires, at the end of the day his body will bear the consequences. If we look at the disagreement between the doctor and his stubborn patient and claim that the doctor is removing any of the patient’s freedom we are making a foolish claim. The doctor is fighting for his patient to be free of physical ailments. He is looking at the life of his patient in a holistic manner and is not hyperfocused on the momentary pleasure that is being withheld... Similarly, Hashem is the doctor from the story in our lives. The Torah is G-d’s intervention, it is His instructions to save us from ourselves and ensure we make the most out of life¹²⁴

Awake All Night!?

The Midrash records a fascinating story. The night before Hashem himself was to appear before the nation, the Jewish people did what anybody does before an important event; they turned in early for a good night’s sleep. The next morning, when it came time for the Torah to be given, the place was empty. The entire Jewish people had slept in. The Midrash even recounts that Moshe Rabeinu had to wake them, causing Hashem to later lament, “Why have I come and no one is here to receive me?”¹²⁵ The Magen Avraham suggests that this is the reason we have the custom of staying awake Shavuos night; in order to rectify our forefathers’ mistake, we stay up late each year on Leil Shavuos to show that our enthusiasm for Torah and Yiddishkeit isn’t lacking at all¹²⁶

The Zohar is the earliest source for this custom¹²⁷. The Zohar recounts that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, attributed for writing the Zohar, as well as “the early pious ones” would stay up learning Torah on Leil Shavuos. The Zohar does not mention anything about the Jews sleeping in, instead of writing that this practice was a preparation for, and in honour of the “bride’s” (the Jews) upcoming marriage to the “groom” (Hashem and his Torah), a metaphor used often for Matan Torah.

¹²⁴ *Ayeka*, Loyalty to Oneself, p. 60, 63

¹²⁵ Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:12

¹²⁶ Magen Avraham, 494:1

¹²⁷ Zohar, Emor, 34

A story is told about one Shavuot in the 1500s, when Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, invited Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, the composer of Lecha Dodi, to his house to learn that Shavuot night. Rabbi Alkabetz relates that, as they started to learn Mishnayot, Rabbi Karo began to speak, his voice turned powerful and loud, his words sharp and enunciated. Those present instantly grasped that this was not Rabbi Yosef Karo speaking. The voice praised them, telling them that their learning had pierced Shamayim and reached HaKadosh Baruch Hu himself¹²⁸.

Rabbi Chaim Vital records in the name of the Arizal that the custom of staying up late is a truly important one, and writes that it had already become widespread throughout Judaism. He then makes a promise: those who stay up Shavuot night, refraining from even a second of sleep, and spend the night learning will be protected from any harm that year¹²⁹.

Why do we stay up Shavuot night learning Torah? Why is our learning on this night so powerful? Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin, quoting his rebbi, Rabbi Tzvi Berkowitz, explained it in a column in Mishpacha Magazine.

*“If you do the math, you don’t really learn that much more over the 24-hour period of Yom Tov. If the goal is talmud Torah, it would make more sense to learn for a bit, get a full night’s sleep, and then learn the following afternoon. His answer was short and powerful. We stay up all night, he explained, because when you’re in love, you do crazy things.”*¹³⁰

Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits explains it similarly:

On Shavuot, there is a special reason to stay up all night learning Torah. Even if one would argue that you can learn more hours during Shavuot by keeping to a regular schedule, the goal here is different. We are showing our uncompromised, extraordinary dedication to the study of Torah on the day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people.

A Love Affair: Torah and the Jewish People

Have you ever noticed someone kiss a novel after reading it, or an Encyclopedia after studying it? I haven’t. In Judaism, there is a custom when getting an aliyah to the Torah to kiss the Torah scroll before and after the reading. The Rema also mentions the practice of bringing young children to the Torah scroll to kiss it. The Kaf HaChaim

¹²⁸ Shenei Luchos HaBris, Aseres HaDibros, Shavuot, Ner Mitzvah

¹²⁹ Pri Etz Chaim, Shaar HaShavuot, 1

¹³⁰ Mishpacha Magazine, Ideas in 3 Dimensions, Shavuot

writes that it is a holy custom to kiss a printed holy book when opening and closing it; this helps one remember what they learned. Our books are not just vehicles of knowledge and divine wisdom. Sefarim are tools for encountering Hashem, for hearing him speak to us. Torah is not just the blueprint upon which the world was created. Rather, it is the G-dly lifeforce of Divine Will which sustains the world. When we learn Torah, we encounter the spiritual matter upon which the world stands.

Just as the Torah is eternal, the ability to receive the Torah is eternal. Every year on Shavuot our ability to receive the Torah is renewed. This is what we recite in our prayers and Kiddush: Zman Matan Toraseinu, the time of the Giving of our Torah. This does not mean merely that we have a festival that reminds us that Hashem gave us the Torah in the past. Rather, every year on Shavuot, we receive the Torah again. On Shavuot, we recommit to living a life in accordance with our inner self. We reaccept the Torah as the guide of our lives, connecting us to ourselves and to the One who created us.

As Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits put it:

*Shavuot is the day that we celebrate the fact that Klal Yisrael, not only then, but now in the 21st century are a different species. Divine values are on a whole different level. The main mitzvah on Shavuot is: party, rejoice... Celebrate all of Torah – whether it is Chafetz Chaim, basar b'chalav, Chumash, or Mesillas Yesharim. This is the day that did it. We went through slavery in Egypt to become a nation worthy of receiving the Torah. Be proud and happy and celebrate!*¹³¹

In Tzav V'Zirus the Piacezner writes about his feelings upon approaching his 40th birthday. He is wondering what he can take on. He can't find any ability to add on more Torah study, because he is studying as much as he can. The same for removing himself from physical desires - he has reached the pinnacle in those areas. What, then, does he ask of Hashem? Simply to be a Jew. In his words, "I want to become a convert, to become a simple Jew." To infuse his learning, davening, and mitzvah observance with so advanced a spirit of soulfulness beyond his current (already unimaginable) level, that he will be considered to have converted, to have only now become a Jew. Maybe this is why we read Rus on Shavuot - a story about a convert. Because truly being mekabel the Torah, right here and right now, within our current circumstances imperfect as they may seem, can enable us to reveal a "neshama yeseirah"

¹³¹ Ashreinu Mah Tov Chelkeinu, Shavuot 5775

inside of ourselves that will bring about a complete transformation in our lives, enabling us to access spiritual capacities we didn't even know we had. There is no time like today to begin our journey. Like Rus and Neomi, may we grab hold of Shavuos and say 'I'm not letting go. Take me with you. Transform my life!'.

¹³²

¹³² Rabbi Yaakov Klein, Ne'ilas HaChag, 5784

Tisha B'Av: The Individual in Exile

The “I” in Exile

In the tale of the Lost Princess, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov tells us that we are all searching for the princess of our youth that has been lost from us. In a perpetual state of seeking our inner essence, we go through this world in a state of exile. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook speaks about this in greater detail.

“I am in the midst of the exile” (Ezekiel 1:1). The inner, essential “I” – whether of the individual or of the community – appears within [an entity] only in relation to its holiness and purity [and] in relation to the degree of its supernal power suffused by the pure light of an elevated illumination, flaming within it. “We and our forefathers sinned” (Psalms 106:6). Adam sinned. He was alienated from his essence. He turned to the consciousness of the serpent and lost himself. He did not know how to give a clear answer to the question, “Where are you?” (Bereishis 3:9), because he did not know himself, because he had lost [his] true “I,” with [his] sin of bowing to a strange god. [The nation of] Israel sinned. It “ran after foreign gods” (Devarim 31:16). It abandoned its essential “I.” “Israel rejected goodness” (Hoshea 8:3). The earth sinned [during the week of Creation]. It denied its essence. It constricted its power. It went after [limited] goals and purposes. It did not give forth all of its hidden power so that the taste of the tree would be equal to the taste of its fruit (Sukkah 35a). It raised its eyes to look outside of itself, to think about [its trivial] future, its “career.” The moon complained [at that time] (Chulin 60b). [As a result,] it lost its internal orbit, the joy of its portion. It was dreaming of a superficial beauty of royalty. Thus does the world continue to sink, with the loss of the “I” of every [entity] – of the individual and of the whole. Learned educators come and focus on the superficial. They too remove their consciousness from the “I.” They add straw to the fire, give vinegar to the thirsty, and fatten minds and hearts with everything that is external to them. And the “I” grows progressively forgotten. And when there is no “I,” there is no “He,” and how much more is there no “You.” The Messiah is called “the breath of our nostrils, the anointed one of God” (Eichah 4:20). This is his might, the beauty of his greatness: [that] he is not outside of us. He is the breath of our nostrils. Let us seek Hashem our God and David our king. Let us tremble before God and His goodness. Let us seek our “I.” Let us seek ourselves – and find. Remove all foreign gods, remove every stranger and illegitimate one. Then “you will know that I am Hashem your God,

Who takes you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am Hashem your God” (Bamidbar 15:41).¹³³

As Rav Kook poignantly expresses, our exile as a nation is an outgrowth of the fact that our very sense of self is in exile. As the Maharal writes, the fact that such an exile exists itself is proof and clear imperative for redemption¹³⁴. Rabbi Itamar Schwartz taught¹³⁵:

Where is a person’s “I”? Where does a person feel that his “I” is located? How does a person identify himself? Is our “I” found in some part of our body? Is it found in our heart’s feelings? Is it in our brain? Is it in our hands? A person has to take the time to reflect about this and locate where his “I” is actually found. If a person makes such a reflection and comes to the conclusion that his “I” is found in his heart – he feels himself existing entirely in his emotions – then his entire sense of self-worth is limited to his emotions. He is off-based in his assessment of himself. When a person identifies himself with thoughts, though, he has begun to feel where his true self is. A person has to reach a point in which feels that Torah is his where his true self is. When one learns Torah, he has to feel towards it, “This is where I am found.” Without this recognition, a person can learn Torah but he feels that he is his body, and that it is merely his brain which thinks about Torah and analyzes it intellectually. A person has to feel that his “I” is actually found where his thoughts are, and then he can begin to feel that Torah is his true place where he is found.

Hashem, His Torah, and His chosen nation, the Jewish people are one. We can only be complete when we are connected to all aspects. Thus, it is no surprise that our sages teach that it was because of baseless hatred¹³⁶ and lack of connection to Torah study¹³⁷ that the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed. When we recall who we are and we live accordingly, then our harmonious existence will permeate all of existence, leading us to a time where all of humanity will live in harmony with the recognition of the oneness of Hashem¹³⁸.

In commenting on the Jewish people’s survival amidst their enslavement in Egypt, Rabbi Yissocher Frand wrote:

¹³³ Orot HaKodesh, Vol. 3, p. 140

¹³⁴ Netzach Yisrael, Chapter 1

¹³⁵ Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh: 48 Ways - #26 Recognizing Your Place

¹³⁶ Yoma 9b; Gittin 55b-56a (See Rashba, Yoma 9b)

¹³⁷ Bava Metzia 85b

¹³⁸ Zechariah 14:9

When the outside environment is hostile, the sanctity of the Jewish home (bayis ha'Yehudi) becomes critical to the maintenance of Jewish identity. Our fortress is dependent upon the bayis ha'Yehudi. This is primarily based on how a woman maintains her home. Throughout our exile, it has been the "Yiddishe shtieb" [the Jewish home] which has been the key to our survival. ¹³⁹

The inner sanctum, both in terms of our physical homes, and feeling at home within ourselves, is crucial for being able to weather the storm of the exile in which we find ourselves. This safety, to be who we are as our true, authentic selves in a community, is our primary mode of surviving exile.

Rabbi Yonason Goldson wrote:

In a series of letters I exchanged a few years back with Rav Mendel Weinbach, shlita, of Ohr Somayach, I repeatedly vented my frustrations with this or that failing of Klal Yisroel. Rav Mendel never told me I was wrong, never chastised me for my intolerance, never ordered me to clean up my own house before I condemned others and theirs. What did he tell me? Quite simply, he said: We're in galus. This is galus.

It's easy to become cynical, and it's easy to justify our cynicism because there's so much about which to be cynical. But we gain nothing through our righteous indignation, except to distract ourselves from our real avodah. Indeed, it's possible that the ikkar avodah of the self-actualized Torah Jew is to accept the imperfections in the world around him, to understand that the world will only be perfect when we have perfected ourselves as avdei HaShem, and that fixating on the shortcomings of others only serves to prolong the galus. On the other hand, by striving to better ourselves we not only shorten the galus but ease our own passage through galus until Moshiach brings it to its final end. ¹⁴⁰

Galus HaDibur- The Inability to Express Ourselves

Rabbi Gedalya Schorr explains that when Klal Yisrael was enslaved in Egypt, we could not live out our purpose of revealing G-d's presence in every aspect of creation because our speech was in exile.

¹³⁹ Parshas Shemos: The Secret to Surviving Galus / You Never Know!,
<https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5778-shemos/>

¹⁴⁰ Self-Actualization and the Focus on Your Self, October 30, 2019,
<https://beyondbt.com/2019/10/30/the-myth-of-self-actualization/>

Because speaking is when the feeling of the heart is revealed, and as is written in Chovas HaLevavos, the mouth is the quill of the heart, that the mouth and speech bring forth the revelation of the emotions that are in the heart, and this is called speaking, when the innermost things come to light. When Bnei Yisrael were in Mitzrayim everything was concealed, therefore it is called that speech was in exile...

When Bnei Yisrael came out of Egypt, it was a fulfillment of what King David said (Psalms 142:8) "Take my soul out of confinement and I will give thanks to Your name." They were taken out of bondage and jumped right into their intended purpose- "to give thanks to Your name", to sing to G-d, to sing the song of all of creation, and to bring out the kavod shamayim and G-dliness in everything. Therefore the end of the exile from Egypt was when they came out singing, because then they came to the intended purpose - "This people have I formed for myself; they shall relate my praise" (Tehillim 43:21).¹⁴¹

In Daas Shlomo, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe is recorded saying that "we should contemplate how the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash affects us, and if we find that it does not affect us in a significant way, then we should at least anguish that we are so disconnected." In a similar vein, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander taught:

We feel satisfied, even with all the suffering surrounding us, as if we are not lacking anything physical or spiritual at all. This feeling prevents us from being able to properly mourn the destruction, as we cannot feel nor sense what, in essence, we are missing... Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to learn and understand the deep consequences of the destruction and to feel and understand how our situation has declined from the time of the destruction until now.¹⁴²

Part of our mourning on Tisha B'Av is a recognition that, in our state of exile, it is tremendously difficult to live up to our purpose and we are unable to adequately express our losses and mourn our individual and collective suffering.

No Pain, No Gain

Pain is inevitable. We cannot escape pain. But it is not necessarily a bad thing. In the words of Rav Kook:

"The Jewish nature is such that merely meeting with pain doesn't cause a spiritual distancing from the foundation of emunah. Even at a time when the

¹⁴¹ Or Gedalyahu, Shemos, Parshas Beshalach, Os Daled

¹⁴² Sifsei Chaim: Moadim, Vol. III, p. 284

*entire world is confused, and it is impossible to stand on the foundation of life that is found within the holiness of emunah without pain and suffering - behold, Klal Yisrael is forever ready for this. For even though it may pain us (Meitzar li), we know that our Beloved it to us as well (Dodi li)."*¹⁴³

Through years of hard work, a person can come to find the "I" of the inner self that was lost from him. We can learn to deal with the pain and suffering that is inevitable in this world.

*For all of us, life presents many opportunities. For some of us, they turn into problems. We look at them – another problem, another nail into our hide, another difficulty, barrier, obstacle; another cause for sorrow, sadness; another area to drain us of our energy. And because we take that attitude, it cripples us; it turns into a shackle which won't release us. On the other hand, there are people who have very much the same kinds of challenges and tests. To them, they are opportunities, doors, gates – into bigger and better things – developing new strengths, insights; commanding new perspectives, and ways for us to be able to rise above the things that challenge our way in life. The same test – trial – tribulation; but attitude makes all the difference. For some of us, those tests are the "tick in the clock," which is a tick of despair, a sound of life wasted. For others, it brings us closer to our own geulah, to redeeming all of the potential and all of the resources in ourselves. Something else to bring out the kochos hanefesh [soul powers] that we have. It's one move closer to our own personal geulah, and ultimately, through us, a contribution to the geulah shelaimah.*¹⁴⁴

We live at this point in history, on the doorstep of the Final Redemption. It is our mission to find Hashem (and ourselves) not despite our yesurim, but specifically because of them. Rabbi Yisrael Motzen summed it up so beautifully when he said:

*On Tisha B'av, I mourn for the disconnect. I mourn for the fact that I don't see my sins as toxic waste eroding my soul. I mourn for the fact that I don't see the explosive impact of a single Mitzvah. I mourn for the fact that I don't notice the angels dancing every time I overcome a challenge. I mourn for the fact that I don't feel Hashem holding me up in dark times and smiling with me in times of joy. I mourn for the fact that I sometimes find myself in an obstacle course instead of the pathway to an amazingly fulfilling life.*¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ Shemoneh Kevatzim 7:139

¹⁴⁴ Rabbi Michel Twerski: Parshas Parah: Balancing Opposing Ideals

¹⁴⁵ Parshas Devarim, 5782: To siyum or not to siyum is NOT the question (August 7, 2022)

Tu B'Av: Recalibrating our Hearts

Unravelling the Mystery of Tu B'Av

Externally, Tu B'Av seems to be a day of little significance. In halachah, we are taught that we do not say Tachanun on this day.¹⁴⁶ Other than that, this day is typically not externally celebrated. (However, in recent years, the depth of this day has been revealed and more people are connecting to the light of this Yom Tov). In the Talmud, seven reasons are given to explain the exuberant joy that is connected with Tu B'Av.¹⁴⁷

1. The dancing maidens of Jerusalem. On Tu B'Av, all the single ladies would wear white dresses, borrowed from one another to not embarrass those less fortunate, and would go out to the fields and tell the young bachelors to not look at their beauty, but rather choose them based on their family, and who they are as individuals, looking at how they acted within their surroundings and not their physical beauty.¹⁴⁸
2. The dying of the generation of the Exodus ceased. The Mishnah tells us that: "No days were as festive for Israel as the 15th of Av and Yom Kippur." How is it equivalent to Yom Kippur? Chazal explain: Yom Kippur symbolizes Hashem forgiving Klal Yisrael for Cheit Ha'Eigel, for it was on that day that He finally accepted Moshe's plea for forgiveness of the nation, and on that same day Moshe came down from the mountain with the new set of luchos.

Just as Yom Kippur symbolizes the atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, Tu B'Av signifies the atonement for the sin of the meraglim, where ten spies came back, bearing such negative reports which reduced the entire nation to panic. As a result of that sin, it was decreed by G-d that the nation would remain in the desert for forty years, and that no person twenty years of age or older would be allowed to enter into Eretz Yisrael. On each Tisha B'Av of those forty years, those who had reached the age of sixty that year died – 15,000 each Tisha B'Av. This plague finally ended on Tu B'Av.

As long as members of this doomed generation were still alive, G-d didn't

¹⁴⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 131:6

¹⁴⁷ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Bava Basra, 121a,b

¹⁴⁸ Talmud Bavli, Maseches Taanis, 26b

communicate with Moshe in an affectionate manner. As soon as the last of these men died, once again G-d lovingly communicated with Moshe Rabeinu.

3. The tribes of Israel were permitted to intermarry. Following the case of the daughters of Tzelafchad, found at the end of Sefer Bamidbar, the daughters, who inherited from their father when there were no sons, were forbidden to marry someone from a different tribe, so that land would not pass from one tribe to another. After the seven years of conquest and the seven years of dividing of the land, this decree was rescinded on Tu B'Av.
4. The tribe of Benjamin was permitted to re-enter the community. Generations later, after the story of the "Pilegish of Giv'ah", the concubine of Giv'ah¹⁴⁹, Bnei Yisrael swore not to allow their daughters to marry anyone from the tribe of Binyamin. This posed a threat of annihilation to the tribe of Binyamin. The people realized that if they kept to their prohibition, one of the twelve tribes might totally disappear. As to the oath that had been sworn, they pointed out that it only affected the generation that had taken the oath and not subsequent generations. The same was applied to the prohibition of heiresses marrying outside their own tribe: this rule was applied only to the generation that had conquered and divided up the land under Yehoshua, but not future generations. This was the first expression of the merging of all the tribes and was a cause for rejoicing. Over the generations, this day was described in Maseches Taanis as a day devoted to betrothals, so that new Jewish families would emerge.
5. Hoshea ben Elah opened the roads to Jerusalem. After Yeravam split off the kingdom of Yisrael with its ten tribes from the kingdom of Yehudah, he posted guards along all the roads leading to Yerushalayim, to prevent his people from going up to the Holy City for the Shalosh Regalim, for he feared that such pilgrimages might undermine his authority. As a "substitute," he set up places of worship which were purely Avoda Zara, in Dan and Beit-El. The last king of the ממלכת ישראל, Hoshea ben Elah, wished to heal this split, and removed all the guards from the roads leading to Yerushalayim, thus allowing his people to make the pilgrimage again. This act took place on Tu B'Av.
6. The dead of Beitar were allowed to be buried. Long after the event, the Romans finally permitted the bodies of those who had been killed in the defense of Beitar during the Bar Kochba revolt to be buried. This was a double miracle, in that,

¹⁴⁹Shoftim 19-21

firstly, the Romans finally permitted the burial, and, secondly, despite the long period of time that had elapsed, the bodies had not decomposed. The permission was granted on Tu B'Av. It is said that in gratitude for this double miracle, the fourth and last blessing of Birkas Hamazon was added, which thanks Hashem as *hatov v'hameitiv*, "He Who is good and does good." "He is good" – in that the bodies had not decomposed, "and does good" – in that permission was given for the burial.

7. "The day of the breaking of the axe." When the Beis HaMikdash stood in Jerusalem, the annual cutting of firewood for the Mizbeach was concluded on the 15th of Av. The event was celebrated with feasting and rejoicing, as is the custom upon the conclusion of a holy endeavor, such as a wedding, bris, siyum, bar mitzvah, or pidyon haben. This festive meal included a ceremonial breaking of the axes, which gave the day its name.

A Day of Unity and Repairing Relationships

In the Navi, the Jewish people are praised with the words of King David, "Mi K'Amcha Yisrael".¹⁵⁰ Why are we so special? We live as one, united nation in our land. As Rabbi Shlomo Aviner explains:

Domestic harmony within the Nation, and harmony between the Nation and its Land are really one and the same. In the Land of Israel, they become one People (Zohar, Parshat VaYikra 93b; the Natziv, Shivat Zion, vol. II; Eim HaBanim S'meicha, p.321).

Tu B'Av is the opposite of Tisha B'Av. In contrast to the baseless hatred that brought about the destruction of the Holy Temple and the Exile, the events commemorated on Tu B'Av revolve around love and unity among different sectors of the nation, and our deep connection to Israel and the Holy Temple. Tu B'Av is a day of renewal of ties among the nation, and Yom Kippur is a day of renewal of our ties to the Holy One of Blessed Name. On this day, we turn over a new leaf.

There is a famous story about the Ba'al Shem Tov, who sent his disciples to learn how to repent by following the example of a very simple man. They saw him standing in prayer, holding two notebooks, and speaking to G-d, "Master of the Universe, in this notebook I have recorded the many sins which I committed

¹⁵⁰ Shmuel Beis 7:23

this past year. And in the other notebook I have recorded all the suffering and troubles you brought upon me. I will forgive You for all the troubles if You forgive me for all my sins!" He then threw both notebooks into the fire.

This should serve as a model for all our relationships – with our friends, our spouses, and so on. We must learn to throw all the notebooks into the fire, and begin anew. This is also why it is fitting for Yom Kippur to be the "Wedding Day" of Israel to the L-rd, and Tu B'Av to be a day for Jewish weddings. Therefore, "Israel had no holidays as joyous as Tu B'Av and Yom Kippur."

Elul is Coming....

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, in his book, Practical Judaism, explains that Elul, the time period associated with sincere teshuvah, is ushered in beginning on Tu B'Av.

Beginning with Tu B'Av, we start preparing ourselves spiritually for the month of Elul, the prologue to the coming Days of Awe. The days begin to get shorter, the nights get longer. The weather, too, helps us to take spiritual stock: the hectic days of the harvest are over for the farmer, and the pace has slowed down considerably. Even on a physical level, the heat of the summer makes it hard to sit down and think things out, and now that the days and nights are cooler, it is easier to examine one's actions.

In earlier times, it was the custom already from Tu B'Av to use as one's greeting "May your inscription and seal be for good" (ketiva vachatima tova), the same blessing that we today use on Rosh Hashana. Those who work out the gematria values of different expressions found that phrase adds up to 928 – and so do the words for "15th of Av." ¹⁵¹

As Rabbi Lau writes, Tu B'Av is the start of our spiritual preparations for the Yamim Noraim. On this day, we reflect on the state of our relationship with ourselves, with those around us, and with Hashem.

In a letter sent on Tu B'Av 5725 (August 13, 1965) the Lubavitcher Rebbe wrote the following:

Chazal tell us that in ancient times, the 15th day of Av was a very joyous festival, especially for the younger generation, with emphasis on Jewish values

¹⁵¹ Practical Judaism, Av

and authentic Yiddishkeit. Coming so soon after Tisha B'Av, the radical transition from a mood of sadness to that of joy is doubly significant.

Firstly, it signifies that any sad interlude in Jewish life is only a transition and is based on the principle of “descent for the purpose of ascent.” In other words, any and all sad events in our history which are commemorated on the few sad days on our calendar are backward steps which are necessary for a greater forward leap. Secondly, the fact is that the very transition from sadness to happiness intensifies the joy, and adds real quality to it, which could not be appreciated otherwise. ¹⁵²

On Tu B'Av we reflect on our experience in moments of darkness and we use that as a catalyst for greater love, connection, and personal growth. As Rabbi Itamar Schwartz explains, we are compelled to reflect on events in our lives, as recent as the Tisha B'Av that we just went through. We must ask ourselves: Did we only cry for ourselves or did we cry for others? Did we cry for our neighbour, our friend, our cousin, our people- in Israel and around the world? Did we cry for Hashem? ¹⁵³

Tu B'Av is not only about shidduchim, which is what Tu B'Av has become known for today, but it is about achieving true unity and fixing the relationships that have been strained in all aspects of life over the course of our personal and collective exile. The immense joy of Tu B'Av comes because of the barriers that were broken on this day in ancient times and because the reverberation of those momentous occasions is felt within us each year. The message of the days between those of intense sadness of Tisha B'Av and the immense joy of Tu B'Av is that of transition, growth, and change. When Tu B'Av comes, we rejoice in the closeness and connection that comes as a result of who we are and our ability to hold space for others in our midst.

¹⁵² Ninth and Fifteenth of Av: Descent for the Purpose of Ascent: Correspondence by Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, The Lubavitcher Rebbe

¹⁵³ Achdus Talks, p. 115

Elul: Returning to Ourselves¹⁵⁴

Teshuvah: What is it?

Teshuvah is not a scare tactic. We do not fear the High Holidays or the World to Come. If we have the right approach we can see that we simply want a stronger connection with G-d. Teshuvah is commonly translated as repentance, but that is inadequate and misleading. Teshuvah means to return, to return to the path G-d set for us when we were born, the path that our souls know as homeward bound, the path of goodness, of becoming a better person. “Teshuvah is not about attaining something new that we didn’t already have before. It is simply about returning to the most natural state of the Jew, a life lived in alignment with the strivings of our innermost identity,”¹⁵⁵. At the core, teshuvah is about living a life of personal authenticity.

When we make a mistake, we are to go through the process step-by-step. The result is forgiveness and growth. There are four basic parts to teshuvah: regret of the misdeed, the decision to change, verbal expression of one’s sins, and a resolution for the future, or what we call in Hebrew, charatah, azivas cheit, viduy and kabbalah l’asid.

The completion of these steps is called teshuvah gemurah. The Rambam explains this occurs when you are put in the exact same position as when you originally made the mistake and you do not repeat it¹⁵⁶. Many people take this to mean that you must place yourself in the exact same situation and manage to escape. This is so wrong! If, for example, you frequented parties and did things that were not exactly befitting of your inner holiness, that does not mean that you have to seek out a party and put yourself in the same place, with the same temptations, and manage not to succumb to them. What the Rambam means is that complete teshuvah is shown by the fact that if you were to be in the same situation, because you are a changed person, because you went through this reflective cleansing process known as teshuvah, you would not make the same mistake.

Teshuvah is a constant, ongoing process that cannot be accomplished overnight. No matter how many times a person may stumble, he always has the power to get back up. True success comes only if a person has worked hard. We cannot hope to never fail;

¹⁵⁴ This piece was previously published in Where G-d and Humanity Touch, Sha’ar Emunah b’Atzmo, Chapter Four- Returning to Your Inner Essence

¹⁵⁵ Rabbi Yaakov Klein, Story of Our Lives, p. 31

¹⁵⁶ Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Teshuvah, 2:1

that is impossible. What we can do is continue to rise every time we fall, which will guarantee us success.

Shlomo HaMelech famously wrote in Mishlei, “The righteous fall seven times and rise again,”¹⁵⁷. Rav Yitzchak Hutner, in a letter to a student, explains: The pasuk is generally interpreted to mean that even though the righteous individual stumbles often in his or her journey, he or she always rises again. Rav Hutner suggests an alternative explanation. It is because the tzaddik falls seven times, that he or she can rise to even higher heights¹⁵⁸. “The main pleasure Hashem has from the service of man is according to the effort to fight against the yetzer hara, not according to the success in fulfilling the mitzvos of Hashem,”¹⁵⁹. Life is not one big game, collecting tokens that we can redeem for reward in the next world. G-d wants to see us battle the yetzer hara, to choose holiness. In the teshuvah process, in the process of personal growth, in the journey that we call life, a person has to simply pick him or herself up and keep trying to stay on the right path.

Teshuvah is not about beating ourselves up because we are ashamed of what we have done, or because we are afraid of impending doom, a potential punishment that may come. Teshuvah is about recognizing that we have a connection with Hashem and our inner holiness, and through the mistakes that we’ve made, we’ve distanced ourselves and severed that connection to some degree. The teshuvah process is the steps we take to try to sustain and rebuild the connection to what it once was. Not only that, but through complete teshuvah we return to our inner pure essence.

The Power of Teshuvah

“It is no more possible to think about religion without sin than it is to think about a garden without dirt. By its very nature, the ideals of religion entail sin and failure. Judaism has its own language and framework for sin that expresses themselves both legally and philosophically,”¹⁶⁰. *Teshuvah* is that framework.

The great Chassidic masters speak often about the awesome power that is the possibility of starting over. The previous Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, in his sefer *Nesivos Shalom*, writes that teshuvah is an expansive topic that is relevant to each and everyone at any given moment. We must always live in a world of

¹⁵⁷ Mishlei 24:16

¹⁵⁸ Pachad Yitzchak: Igrot U’ketavim No. 128

¹⁵⁹ Derech HaChassidus- Aleksander, p. 104

¹⁶⁰ Sin•a•gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought, Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin, Cherry Orchard Books

teshuvah!¹⁶¹. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi of Ropshitz explains that teshuvah is only possible because we can tap into the literal piece of G-d that is within¹⁶². Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz explains that the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, of setting the calendar¹⁶³, is to teach us that it is possible to begin again, to renew ourselves in Torah and in our actions.

Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz said: “When Rosh HaShanah falls on Shabbos, we do not blow Shofar. When Sukkos falls on Shabbos, we don't take the Arba Minim, the four species, even on the first day. When Yom Kippur falls on Shabbos, we don't push off anything! We say viduy and do teshuvah, we confess our sins and strive to return to G-d and our essential selves. When it comes to real teshuvah, it's not something we can put off,”¹⁶⁴.

Rabbi Benzion Rabinowitz, the Biala Rebbe, known by the title of his works, Mevaser Tov, taught that “just as the Jewish people were in Egypt on the 49th level of tumah, spiritual impurity, and Hashem took them out, similarly each and every person, no matter their connection or how deep they have sunken into the pit of despair, can get out of it, because Hashem in the Exodus from Egypt did this to every one of us specifically. We are able to escape the deep pit in spirituality and physicality just as the Jewish people did from the 49 levels of tumah in the Exodus from Egypt,”¹⁶⁵. We are commanded to remember yetzias mitzrayim daily because it serves as a reminder to us that no matter how far we've fallen, no matter who we are surrounded by or where we are, Hashem has the power to take us out, and we have the power to redeem ourselves.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger shared the following, something which is applicable for each and every person, regardless of their unique struggles.

“Over the years I have met with a number of addicts who struggle with a variety of substances and activities which threaten to destroy their lives. One of the most heartbreaking things is when someone tells me: I was clean for over a year. I began seeing how I could begin rebuilding my life. I began to feel that I had some hope of being something. But then one thing and another went wrong and I fell back into the lowest depths.

¹⁶¹ Nesivos Shalom, Nesivei Teshuvah, Pesichah

¹⁶² Zera Kodesh, Vayeilech

¹⁶³ Shemos 12:2

¹⁶⁴ Quoted from a shiur he gave on Zoom.

¹⁶⁵ Mevaser Tov, Vayeitzei, 5771

The hardest thing for someone in that position is not only the consequences of his actions. It is the feeling that all of the time he was clean was worthless. When someone crashes, he feels as if he had never left. So what was the point of that time under the chuppah; riding the wave; feeling that first embrace of goodness and normalcy?

My message to people when they are overwhelmed with that feeling is: That time did not go to waste. You may have forgotten what it was like to be healthy. But during that time, you saw what a normal, healthy, exalted life can be like. That was your bolt of lightning in the darkness. Now you can think back on the view you had before your fall. You now see that your goal is within your reach and you can achieve it again if you “get back on the horse” and work, one day at a time, to return to become the person you saw you can be.”¹⁶⁶

Returning with Love

Elul, the month that prepares us for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, in which our primary focus is *teshuvah*, is not about pointing out the bad within us. In the world today, there are enough people to show us where we went wrong. As Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron teaches, based on the writings of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the only *teshuvah* for our generation is to find the *nekudos tovot*, the good points within us. This means that we must recognize that we are inherently good, that we are worthy of love and connection. *Teshuvah* as a scare tactic is not healthy, nor is it sustainable. *Teshuvah* from a desire to get closer to G-d, and as a result to our true selves,, now that's something we can all get behind!

The Zohar teaches that the only *teshuvah* that works for *pegam habris* is “*teshuvah* that is worthy of covering over all his deeds,”¹⁶⁷. Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin explains that this means *teshuvah m'ahavah*, which is a complete return to Hashem. *Teshuvah m'yirah* erases the sins - and according to our tradition, certain sins are not erasable. But *teshuvah m'ahavah* doesn't erase the sins, rather it fixes them, and turns them into merits¹⁶⁸.

The Kozhnitzer Maggid teaches a fundamental understanding regarding *teshuvah*. “A person should say in their heart to himself, as long as there is a Jewish *neshamah* within me, it is promised that my *teshuvah* will be accepted. Even if I did the

¹⁶⁶ Sparks: Pesach 5780, pg. 72

¹⁶⁷ Zohar HaKadosh, Vol. 2, 14b

¹⁶⁸ Tzidkas HaTzaddik, 242

worst evil in the eyes of Hashem, His mercy and truth will never abandon me,”¹⁶⁹. No matter what we have done, no matter how far we may feel, we are always able to return, to come closer. It is necessary to remind ourselves that despite, or perhaps because of, what I did in the past I will never be abandoned, nor will I ever give up on myself.

¹⁶⁹ Avodas Yisrael, Sefer Devarim, Parshas Shoftim

Shabbos: Radical acceptance of things as they are

Being, Not Becoming

One of the defining factors of a Torah-observant Jew is their observance of Shabbos. So much so that when one wants to describe an observant Jew, he would refer to them as “Shomer Shabbos”. Yet, somehow while we remain conscious of all the laws that come with shemiras Shabbos, the essence of Shabbos has been forgotten. Shabbos is not only a day of restrictions and prohibitions, though to many that is their association with the day. Shabbos is a day to create ourselves. So, how do we do it? What does Shabbos teach us about ourselves and our lives?

The Sefas Emes¹⁷⁰ writes that on Shabbos, the bechinah of the Exodus is awakened as the Talmud teaches that one who rejoices in Shabbos receives an inheritance without constrictions, meitzarim¹⁷¹. This allows us to hear and perceive the “kol Hashem”, the voice of G-d that reverberates throughout creation.

Rabbi Noach Weinberg taught that “the essence of Shabbos is to know and feel G-d's love.” The point of Shabbos is not to restrict or punish us. It's not to deprive us of our social status or make us stand out. The essence of Shabbos is simply put, disconnecting to reconnect. Taking time to reflect on who we are, our values, and what's important to us. Shabbos is a time to connect to the Almighty and to our fellow Jews. Then, we have to take that inspiration and motivation with us for the week to come.

Rabbi Zev Reichman explains:

*In Chasidic literature, Shabbos is called Beer Sheva, a seven-fold well. Shabbos is similar to a well, a source of life-renewing water for the seven parts of the personality. Shabbos energizes every spiritual part of the soul so that we might redouble our efforts to serve God in this world.*¹⁷²

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, in his book, Sabbath: Day of Eternity, defines two often misunderstood words, menuchah (rest) and melachah (work). Melachah is an act that shows man's mastery over the world by means of his intelligence and skill. Menuchah is

¹⁷⁰ Sefas Emes, Shemos, Yisro, 5634

¹⁷¹ Shabbos 118a

¹⁷² Flames of Faith: An Introduction to Chasidic Thought, pg. 36

not interfering with nature nor exhibiting mastery over it. It is a state of peace between man and nature. A person has to find the proper balance between being and becoming—striving for more and being okay right where we are. This is the balance between Duchra and Nukva, the masculine force of giving/doing and the feminine force of receiving. This is also the balance between the six days of melachah and the menuchah of Shabbos. Six days a week we work, we do, we strive to become. Then comes Shabbos, whether we are ready for it or not, everything stops. We learn to simply be, to accept ourselves as we are.

Hashem wants us as we are

One of the most profound thinkers and teachers of our generation, Rabbi Yaakov Klein, once gave over the following:

G-d recreates the world each split second. HaKadosh Baruch Hu doesn't do anything mindlessly, without thinking. He doesn't think anything without willing. No matter how horrible things look in the world and in our own particular lives, the Infinite being with His infinite wisdom is constantly willing to bring the world into being each split second.

Some of the most powerful words in our liturgy we say on Friday night. Asher kidshanu b'mitzvosav v'ratzah banu. The deepest want we have is to be wanted. The deepest want every human being has is to exist. It's a fundamental need that every human has. All we want is to be seen. We want someone to look into our eyes and say, "You exist". The saddest thing is that we spend all of our time thinking about what everybody else thinks about us and everybody else spends all their time thinking about what we think about them. We have a whole world of insecure people, relying on everyone else for approval when the truth is that everyone needs each other. We're so much more powerful than we think and we're so much more vulnerable than we think. Enough with the charades. Let's just be both. Let's just be radically vulnerable and remember how powerful each other are.

We make kiddush and it's the best moment of the week. V'ratzah banu, we exist. We matter because the Infinite being chose us. At the end of the week, when we schlep into Shabbos with all the mistakes and everything that we go through today, we say the words v'ratzah banu. With everything, HaKadosh Baruch Hu, You want me.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Rabbi Yaakov Klein- "If Not Now, When?" An Evening of Torah and Song in Yerushalayim

“In the Slonimer approach, Shabbos is the particular vehicle by which all obstacles are surmounted and through which faith becomes an achievable reality. The Chofetz Chaim, in his famous introduction to the laws of Shabbos, states unequivocally that it would be nearly impossible for a person lacking the requisite knowledge of the laws of Shabbos to observe the day faithfully. So too, a person oblivious to the inner essence of Shabbos would be severely disadvantaged in relating to the “spirit” of Shabbos. For such a person, it would seem, exposure to and integration of at least some of the Slonimer’s teachings regarding Shabbos becomes a sacred undertaking. Not insignificantly, this learning might serve to emancipate one from the emptiness of a Shabbos that is viewed as overly restrictive and revolves around little more than fine dining and the social interaction that a synagogue setting provides.

In Slonim, Shabbos took on a sublime, almost other-worldly air. Great care and caution were exercised so that no mundane matter might infiltrate and disrupt the sanctity of the day. The pervasive attitude of the Slonimer Chassidim was “milachticha asuya – your work is done.” Friday has passed, Sunday has not yet arrived, and the only goal is to be enveloped by the spirituality of the Shabbos.

This concept extended to such a degree that not only were worry and concern over one’s material needs off-limits, but even the otherwise commendable acts of assessing and rectifying the negative aspects of one’s spiritual state were discouraged as well. In the King’s Palace on the Holy Day of Shabbos, the only issues to be addressed were those of Shabbos itself.¹⁷⁴

To be a human, and particularly to be a Jew, is to live on the roller coaster of emotions. It’s to be able to withstand the waves that come crashing in, trying to knock us down and keep us under the water until we drown. Throughout the week, we drag our feet through the mud, getting soiled by the week that was. When Shabbos comes, the world changes. All the fear, all the worry, all the anger, all the tears, they simply disappear. Hashem believes in us and we believe in Him. Even if it’s hard. Shabbos relieves the pain of the week. No news, no nothing. Just HaKadosh Baruch Hu and us. By the day meal on Shabbos we invoke Noah’s Ark and the Great Flood in the zemer Yom Shabbason. Shabbos is our respite from the waters of the flood that surround us. It is our teivas Noah. Shabbos is the reason why we can live with the pain. On Shabbos we

¹⁷⁴Jewish Action, Fall 1999, The Slonimer Way, The Power of Shabbos

realize that we are enough. Hashem wants us as we are. We don't have to become someone else. We simply have to live lives that reflect our true inner selves.

Rabbi Osher Freund, in one of his poetic and peculiar tales, writes:

*A tale of Shabbos coming suddenly. And one was wearing a dirty shirt. And he had great pain and embarrassment; how would he enter into Shabbos like this, with a shirt like this. And he went to a chacham, a wise person in the area and said to him: "See! How can I enter into Shabbos in dirty garments?" And the chacham held onto the shirt with joy and said: "How pleasant and how beautiful is this shirt for Shabbos." And [the one] was very happy, and went, and accepted Shabbos with joy. And they brought him a different, clean shirt.*¹⁷⁵

The one is each and every single one of us. Each week Shabbos creeps up on us suddenly. We are still sullied, wearing the dirty garments of our deeds and misdeeds of the past week. We feel unworthy and unable to connect to the light of Shabbos. In the end, we must realize that the garments we carry with us are beautiful. No matter what, we can tap into the power of Shabbos. When we live like this, not only will we live with true joy, but we will realize that we are given a new, clean slate.

Rabbi Reuven Sasson writes:

*A person has to know that he has self-worth. If he believes that HaKadosh Baruch Hu created a world filled with goodness, he has to believe that he is also good. It makes no sense that a person praises HaKadosh Baruch Hu every day for the world that He created, and only himself he does not value. Inasmuch as he is a creation of the Divine, every person has a unique inner worth. He should get his self-confidence internally, from himself, and not from any external pressures. The only "thing" that gives us our value is Hashem, whom we thank each morning for believing in us with the return of our souls to us, which shows us that our lives are incredibly important and precious.*¹⁷⁶

A Taste of the World to Come

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach often told a powerful story that took place at a secret Shabbos minyan at his home in 1938.

The minyan was held first thing in the morning before the town fully woke up so Jews would avoid beatings for being seen walking to synagogue to

¹⁷⁵ 68 Maasiyos, Tale 25

¹⁷⁶ Ayeka, The Bris- A Person's Loyalty to the Self, p. 210

pray. One Shabbos there was a knock at the door, and the young Shlomo and his brother saw a very holy-looking man who stood and smiled at them and sang, "Good Shabbos, good Shabbos, good Shabbos" over and over again. The man whose name was Moishele led Shacharis that day, singing everything in the same beautiful melody praying slowly and attentively even if it meant finishing late into the morning, which was unusual, for that would easily catch the attention of the local antisemites.

After davening was finished, when the young Shlomo's mother brought out some cake and wine for the Kiddush, Moishele insisted on opening the curtains. "Are you mad?" someone asked him. "If the non-Jews see us they'll come for us we'll be in danger!" Moishele looked back sighed and insisted "All those people are descendants of Uncle Esav, the brother of Yaakov Avinu. If only uncle Esav remembered it was Shabbos," he pleaded, "they wouldn't behave this way." He continued: "If only we could remind him it was Shabbos – everything would be so different."

The man was hence nicknamed Moishelle Good-Shabbos because he would recall it was Shabbos not only on Shabbos itself, but all week long whenever he greeted anyone, he would remind them of Shabbos, always singing his greeting with a beautiful slow melody.

If only the world would know about Shabbos, if only we knew about Shabbos in order to teach the world, everything would be different. If only people could see G-d's presence and the love he shows through enabling our very existence, the world would be a better place, it would be Mashiachdik. Shabbos is a taste of the World to Come, for it gives us the opportunity to see ourselves the way Hashem sees us. It allows us to rise above this worldliness to live consciously in a world that is filled with Hashem's presence.

R' Shayelev of Kerestir had this thing about giving out food. He was crazy about it. One Shabbos, he was walking around with a sack of bilkelach, challah rolls. He was giving out to all the poor people. The Rebbe of Liska, R' Hershele Lisker was watching in amazement. Someone asked the Rebbe, "Why are you staring at the shamash, R' Shayelev?" The Rebbe said, "Look at Shayelev, he's giving out bilkelach." The man responded, "But Rebbe, Shayelev is always giving out bilkelach." The Rebbe, R' Hershele Lisker said, "I saw a long time ago that the bag was empty, and he's still reaching in and giving out bilkelach."

R' Shaya ben R' Moshe was a tremendous tzaddik and ba'al moifes, but he was not so different than you and me. He believed in himself, in his ability to give, and so he did, in every single way.

We have oil, wicks, and fancy candelabra for Shabbos, we have wine and Challah for shabbos, we have chicken soup for Shabbos, and we have cholent for Shabbos. We live in a generation that has all the external trappings of Yiddishkeit in general, and of Shabbos in particular. Let's have Shabbos for Shabbos. Let's believe in the power of Shabbos and in the power we have inside. Let's live authentically, sincerely, and deeply. Let's allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Let's accept ourselves and those around us for who we are and let's not try to pretend to be someone we are not. Through this, may all of humanity merit to experience the light of Shabbos in the era that is kulo Shabbos, with the building of G-d's dwelling place in the world, with the coming of Mashiach may it be speedily in our days.