**The Intention of Intention –** נן NUN –and *Parshat Matot/Mas’ei*

**The Window**

One summer, my son attended a band camp in Danville, California. Since the drive was 45 minutes each way from our home in Oakland, I just stayed out in Danville all day and worked in my car rather than drive back and forth twice.

Danville is quite a bit hotter than Oakland, and there are fewer trees as well, so it was a challenge to find a shady place to park. The first day, I drove around for long while before finding a tiny tree that could at least partially shade my car. I parked there and rolled down the windows.

That was fine for the first couple hours, but then it started getting really hot. So, I rolled up the windows, turned on the car, put on the air conditioner and continued to work. After some time, I was surprised by how ineffective the air conditioner was.

Then, I was startled by a noise coming from the backseat. I twisted around to see what was going on and realized – I had neglected to roll up the back windows! No wonder it wasn’t getting any cooler; all the cold air was blowing into the car and right back out the window.

Spiritual life can be like that too sometimes.

You might be trying to “cool down” your anger or impulsiveness, or maybe you need to “heat up” your enthusiasm for welcoming whatever appears in the moment. And yet, even with the best intentions, transformation might elusive. In that case, it is possible that you have “left the window open” – all your best intentions are blowing right out the window!

Meaning, there is not yet a continuity of intention; during prayer or study or meditation, our intention might be clear, but when we get into challenging situations, our intention can vanish. This is very common, as building the inner structures to hold the intention continuously takes time and practice; in fact, this is the main function of spiritual practice.

**Parshat Matot**

In my view, it is good to use a variety of modalities of practice for “rolling up the window” and building the inner structures necessary for having a continuity of intention. One of those modalities is the practice of regularly stating your intentions, or *kavanot,* out loud.

אִישׁ֩ כִּֽי־יִדֹּ֨ר נֶ֜דֶר לַֽיהוָ֗ה אֽוֹ־הִשָּׁ֤בַע שְׁבֻעָה֙ לֶאְסֹ֤ר אִסָּר֙ עַל־נַפְשׁ֔וֹ לֹ֥א יַחֵ֖ל דְּבָר֑וֹ כְּכָל־הַיֹּצֵ֥א מִפִּ֖יו יַעֲשֶֽׂה׃

*If a person vows a vow to the Divine or swears an oath to forbid something to one’s soul, they shall not empty their word; everything that comes from their mouth, so shall they do…*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 30:3, *Parshat Matot*

On the surface, this verse is reminding us to have integrity; if you say you are going to do something, do it. But the verse can also be understood as a promise – if you say that you will do something, saying it will *help* you do it!

This is because verbally saying your intention – and repeating it often – is a powerful way to “shut the window” – meaning, it is a way to keep yourself focused on the intention, so that it doesn’t dissipate in the face of distractions. Just because you have an intention one moment, that doesn’t mean your brain will constantly be connected to that intention, especially if the intention goes against old habits. For that, you need to create a new pattern in your nervous system so that the intention doesn’t discipate as life unfolds in real time.

The qualities of נ *nun* are actually both the source of the problem and the solution!

*Nun* נrepresents impermanence, and we can see this impermanence clearly in the fluidity of our own states of consciousness; it is easy for an intention that is solid and strong in one moment to simply vanish in another. But, *nun* נ is also faithfulness and return; we can overcome the impermanence of our states of consciousness by returning again and again to our intentions, and this is aided by repeating our intentions out loud.

Furthermore, the fact of impermanence also applies to the old habits and distractions we are attempting to overcome! They too are temporary, and when we faithfully return to our deepest intentions, distractions and habits can simply fall away over time. Contrary to the old saying, “some things never change,” even the most deeply ingrained parts of our personalities can change, if we learn to stop feeding them.

**Letting Go of Letting Go – נ *Nun* and מ *Mem***

And yet, we must also recognize – even if we are able to fully stay connected to our intentions, this is no guarantee that the *purpose* of our intentions will be realized. This is the other side of the equation; on one hand, it is good for our intentions to have clear continuity over time. On the other hand, we must not be attached to a particular outcome, and instead recognize that Reality is ultimately beyond our control.

אִישׁ֩ כִּֽי־יִדֹּ֨ר נֶ֜דֶר לַֽיהוָ֗ה אֽוֹ־הִשָּׁ֤בַע שְׁבֻעָה֙ לֶאְסֹ֤ר אִסָּר֙ עַל־נַפְשׁ֔וֹ לֹ֥א יַחֵ֖ל דְּבָר֑וֹ כְּכָל־הַיֹּצֵ֥א מִפִּ֖יו יַעֲשֶֽׂה׃

*If a person vows a vow to the Divine or swears an oath to forbid something to one’s soul, they shall not empty their word; everything that comes from their mouth, so shall they do…*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 30:3, *Parshat Matot*

When we have an intention to do something or not do something, there is usually a reason for the intention – an *intention for the intention.* In other words, the point is not necessarily the act itself, but the result that you intend through the act.

For example, let’s say you get up in the morning and go to work – not because you necessarily like your work, but because you want to earn some money. And furthermore, you want to earn some money not because you like the money itself, but because you want to use the money to buy food, and you want to buy the food to cook a meal for someone. But then, let’s say that when you cook the meal, the person who eats it has a terrible allergic reaction to the food and gets sick, G-d forbid.

So now there is a contradiction between your intention and your action; that’s called “making a mistake.” So, on this level, the Torah is saying that there should be a unity between your intention and your action – *lo yakhel d’varo –* don’t make your intentions mere empty words by doing things or not doing things that bring about the opposite result. Instead, be conscious, be attentive, be careful and do your best to act with wisdom.

But wait a minute, you might say. That’s good and well, but in the example, the food allergy isn’t something you could have known about in advance; it was a mistake. That’s the whole nature of mistakes – we don’t intend them; they happen by accident. And while it is true and good to be as conscious and wise as we can, it is also true that we are going to make mistakes, because ultimately, *we are not in control of what happens.*

This brings us to the next section:

וְאִם־הֵנִ֨יא אָבִ֣יהָ אֹתָהּ֮ בְּי֣וֹם שׇׁמְעוֹ כׇּל־נְדָרֶ֗יהָ וֶֽאֱסָרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר־אָסְרָה עַל־נַפְשָׁ֖הּ לֹ֣א יָק֑וּם וַֽיהֹוָה֙ יִֽסְלַח־לָ֔הּ כִּי־הֵנִ֥יא אָבִ֖יהָ אֹתָֽהּ׃

*But if her father restrains her on the day he hears, all of her vows and all of her oaths that she swore to forbid something to herself shall not stand; and the Divine will forgive her, since her father restrained her…*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 30:6, *Parshat Matot*

In this verse, if a child vows to do something or swears not to do something, and her father hears about it and prevents her from fulfilling her oath, *Hashem yislakh lah –* God “forgives” her, because her father had restrained her; it wasn’t in her control.

Who is this “child” the Torah talks about?

It is us; we may act with a certain intention, but the “parent” can prevent that intention from happening.

And who is the parent? It is Reality Itself – it is the Truth of what is – That which we call the Divine.

And so, this is the paradox: on one hand, we should be as conscious and careful as we can with our actions – כְּכָל־הַיֹּצֵ֥א מִפִּ֖יו יַעֲשֶֽׂה *k’khol hayotzei mipiv, ya’aseh –* we should make sure we do our best to bring about the results that we intend. But on the other hand, we must know that we have absolutely no control whatsoever over what happens. So, don’t beat yourself up over your mistakes; that would just be the ego clinging to a particular self-image. Instead, surrender to the Truth and know that *Hashem yislakh lah –*  you are forgiven because you weren’t really in control in the first place.

This is the path of מ *mem,* of letting go and forgiveness – which is necessary in order to enter the path of נ *nun –* being faithful to return to the Divine after we make mistakes that damage or destroy our outer structures of support, or our own positive self-image. These both point to the ego death that is the essence of the path of נ *nun,* and is hinted at by *Tisha b’Av,* the day which commemorates the destruction of the Temple.

But how do we do that? How can we come to truly forgive ourselves? Ultimately there is only one way, and that is that we have to forgive everyone else!

לֹֽא־תִקֹּ֤ם וְלֹֽא־תִטֹּר֙ אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י עַמֶּ֔ךָ וְאָֽהַבְתָּ֥ לְרֵעֲךָ֖ כָּמ֑וֹךָ אֲנִ֖י יְהֹוָֽה׃

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people; love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Divine.*

* *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 19:18

This is the *mitzvah* of נ *nun: Do not take revenge or hold onto a grudge.* Only when we truly let go of our negativity toward others and the past can we experience the renewal and peace that comes on the other side of loss.

**Parshat Matot**

…אֵ֜לֶּה מַסְעֵ֣י בְנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל אֲשֶׁ֥ר יָצְא֛וּ מֵאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרַ֖יִם

*These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went out from the land of Egypt…*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 33:1, *Parshat Mas’ei*

This verse opens the origin story of the Children of Israel, beginning with the Exodus from Egypt and recounting all the places they visited and battles they engaged up to that point. It then goes on to instruct what they should do once they enter the land – how they should conquer the land, how they should divide the land between the tribes, and so on. As the final reading of fourth book of the Torah, leading into the last book of the Torah,

*Parshat Matot* functions to give context and define the identity of the Children of Israel: “This is where you come from, this is where you’re going, and this is what you have to do…” Identity and story are important; they are what give us direction, definition and purpose.

And yet, in the Mishna, we find a passage that seems to contradict this principle:

עֲקַבְיָא בֶן מַהֲלַלְאֵל אוֹמֵר   ... דַּע מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, וּלְאָן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, ... מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, מִטִּפָּה סְרוּחָה,

 וּלְאָן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, לִמְקוֹם עָפָר רִמָּה וְתוֹלֵעָה...

*Akavyah, son of Mahalalel said: “... Know from where you come, and where you are going... From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, worms and maggots...”*

* *Pirkei Avot* 3:1

While this passage seems to begin with the same premise, advising to “know from where you come and where you are going,” the answers it gives seem to have the opposite effect from the *parshah;* there is no special identity, no collective story of being liberated from slavery and becoming a holy people, no goal of promised land, just the harsh biological facts: you’re going to a “place of dust, worms and maggots.”

The first passage tells us who we are; it tells us we are *something;* the second knocks down our stories; it tells us we are *nothing.*

There are two Hebrew words that are sometimes translated as “nothing” – they are, אַיִן *ayin* and הֶבֶל *hevel,* with opposite implications.

*Ayin* אַיִןis actually the spiritual goal: to realize the dimension of our own being that is “no-thing-ness” beyond all form. This is the open space of awareness itself, boundless and free. We can see this in the letters themselves: *Ayin* is composed ofא *alef,* י *yod* and נ *nun.*

נ *Nun,* as we know, means that all things are impermanent; all thingscome and go. But, behind this impermanence is the י *yod*, the simple awareness, of the א *aleph,* the Oneness.

The Maggid of Metzritch taught that as great as the creation of the universe is *Yesh me’Ayin,* Something from Nothing, even greater is our task: *to transform the Something back to the Nothing –* *Ayin me’Yesh!*

Meaning: right now, as you read these words, the words are a *something.* You perceive the something, but what is it that perceives? The awareness that perceives is literally no-thing; it is that which perceives all particular things – all sensations, all sensory perceptions, all feelings, all thoughts.

This is the *Ayin* inherent in our own being, as well as the underlying Presence of Existence, also called the Divine Presence, inherent in all things. These two are not even separate, because everything we perceive arises within and is made out of nothing but awareness, and the awareness that we are is the awareness of Existence Itself, looking through our eyes, hearing through our ears.

The other word for “nothing,” which has a negative implication, is *hevel. Hevel* could be translated as nothingness, futility, emptiness, or vanity. We can see this in the letters as well: ה *hei,* ב *bet,* andל *lamed.* The lettershint at the process oflearning (ל *lamed,* “learn”) that whatever we build (ב *bet,* “house”) is passing like the wind (ה *hei*, which has the sound of breath). This is expressed in the verse:

הֲבֵ֤ל הֲבָלִים֙ אָמַ֣ר קֹהֶ֔לֶת הֲבֵ֥ל הֲבָלִ֖ים הַכֹּ֥ל הָֽבֶל׃

*Havel havalim – vanity of vanities – said Kohelet – vanity of vanities, all is vanity!*

*- Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) 1:2

This famous opening line from Ecclesiastes springs from King Solomon’s disillusionment with all his experiences and accomplishments. He had everything, and could do anything he wanted – and yet, all was nothingness; everything comes and goes, a time for this and a time for that, nothing is really new, nothing really satisfies.

The same word is used in the *haftora:*

כֹּ֣ה אָמַ֣ר יְהוָ֗ה מַה־מָּצְא֨וּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶ֥ם בִּי֙ עָ֔וֶל כִּ֥י רָחֲק֖וּ מֵעָלָ֑י וַיֵּֽלְכ֛וּ אַחֲרֵ֥י הַהֶ֖בֶל וַיֶּהְבָּֽלוּ׃

*Thus says the Divine: What did your ancestors find in Me that was wrong, that they distanced themselves from Me and went after nothingness (hevel), and became nothingness?*

- Jeremiah 2:4

Both of these passages point to our human condition: we tend to make much of the *hevel,* running after this and away from that, but it is all for naught; we are going to “place of dust, worms and maggots.”

Still, as the *haftora* implores, there *is* a way that leads to the Divine, that leads to Wholeness, beyond all the *hevel.* There *is* a way that leads beyond the *hevel,* to *Ayin.* As the last line of Ecclesiastes says:

ס֥וֹף דָּבָ֖ר הַכֹּ֣ל נִשְׁמָ֑ע אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִ֤ים יְרָא֙ וְאֶת־מִצְוֺתָ֣יו שְׁמ֔וֹר כִּי־זֶ֖ה כָּל־הָאָדָֽם׃

*The end of the matter, when all is perceived: Be in awe of the Divine and guard the mitzvot! For this is the Whole Person.*

* *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) 12:13

*Be in awe of the Divine –* that is, know the *Ayin* that underlies everything, the *Ayin* that is perceiving, right now. *Guard the mitzvot –* that is, don’t act from the motive of running after or away from the *hevel,* act for the sake of the Divine – the *Ayin* from which all springs and to which all will return.

After we do all of that, after we fully confront the *hevel* and reorient towards the *Ayin,* then we can return to the *Yesh*, the Somethingness, and affirm our identity and purpose:

…אֵ֜לֶּה מַסְעֵ֣י בְנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל אֲשֶׁ֥ר יָצְא֛וּ מֵאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרַ֖יִם

*These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went out from the land of Egypt…*

The Divine has brought you to this moment to realize your inner freedom and has given you the only important choice there is, in this moment: to turn from the *hevel* of ego to the underlying *Ayin* of your deepest nature, right now. This is the path of נ *nun.*

Once there was a rabbi who was *davening* (praying) with great intensity toward the end of *Yom Kippur*, when he suddenly became overwhelmed with the realization of how attached to vanity, to *hevel,* he had become.

“*Ribono Shel Olam!* Master of the universe!” he cried out, “I am nothing! I am nothing!”

When the *hazzan* (the cantor) saw him do this, he too became inspired and cried out as well: *“Ribono Shel Olam!* I am nothing! I am nothing!”

The truth was infectious. Suddenly, a poor congregant, Shmullythe shoemaker, also became deeply moved and exclaimed as well: *“Ribono Shel Olam!* I am nothing! I am nothing!”

When the *hazzan* saw Shmully’s enthusiasm, he turned to the rabbi with incredulity: “Look who thinks he’s nothing!”