[**Sefirat HaOmer: Hesed – Lovingkindness**](https://4246290-338316515408691068.preview.editmysite.com/editor/main.php)

A Lithuanian man once came to Rabbi Nahum of Tchernobil and complained that he had no money to marry off his daughter. The rebbe happened to have fifty gulden put aside for another purpose, but he immediately gave all of it to the man. He then went and fetched his silk robe. “Now you will be able to dress well for this joyous occasion!” therebbe said and offered the man the robe. The man took everything, went straight to an inn, and began drinking vodka.

A few hours later, some of the Hasidim went to the inn and found him lying on a bunch, completely drunk. Flabbergasted, they took the rest of the money and the silk robe away from him and brought it all back to Rabbi Nahum. “That Litvak betrayed you, Master!”

“What is this?” cried the rebbe, “I just caught hold of the tail end of the Divine quality of unconditional kindness, and you want to snatch it from my hands? Take it all back to him at once!”

This week begins what is known as the sefirat ha’omer period between the festivals of Passover and Shavuot.  Each of these seven weeks represents a sefirah, or Divine emanation, which correspond to practical middot, or “Divine Qualities” that we can practice and embody. These Qualities are really different ways that Presence expresses Itself in different situations.

There are two main ways of working with the Qualities: One way is to think about them, study them, and do exercises and practices to internalize them. Most spiritual practice is like this – you step out of the flow of life and into the laboratory of meditation, prayer, ritual or study. The practice of tzeddaka (giving charity) is like this; it’s an artificial way of making sure that your resources are expressing generosity.

By using the word “artificial” I don’t mean to imply anything negative. “Artificial” just means something separate from the spontaneous flow of life, something that embodies a specific intention, like any art.

But there’s another way of working with the middot that is more primary, and that’s the spontaneous expression of the Divine Qualities in the flow of life. When Reb Nahum gave the money and robe to the drunkard, it wasn’t because he had set aside money for the purpose of charity; it wasn’t preconceived. Rather, it flowed from the heart of one who is free, one who is not controlled by the ordinary impulses of stinginess or selfishness or even self-responsibility.

We can all do this at any moment, but it is difficult of course because the thinking mind tends to give importance to its own thoughts and conceptions of the past and future, while unconsciously “passing over” the supreme opportunity of the present. To overcome unconsciousness and be awake to the only opportunity that really matters, realize: the time to express the Divine Qualities is now. Bring you awareness to the fulness of whatever is present, and know that this moment is the altar upon which we bring our offering.

כִּֽי־קָר֥וֹב אֵלֶ֛יךָ הַדָּבָ֖ר מְאֹ֑ד – Ki karov elekha hadavar me’od- for this thing is very close to you!” (Deuteronomy 30:14)

Practice being the lovingkindness with whatever is present. There is always a way to do it; whether it’s expressing kindness to another person or simply giving attention to your own feelings as an act of kindness. When we become present, Hesed is a natural dimension of the Presence that we already are… if we can but remember to access it.

More On Hesed...

So let’s explore Hesed, or Lovingkindness, by looking at the root mitzvah for Hesed.

(In case you don’t know, the word *mitzvah*means commandment, and it comes from the traditional idea that God gave *mitzvot,*or commandments to the Jewish people through the prophet Moses about 35,00 years ago. Now you may or not believe in that literally, but the point is that the Jewish practices known as *mitzvot*are very ancient and they’re a way to connect the work of your spiritual awakening to the tremendous richness that flows from the Jewish lineage.)

So what is the root *mitzvah*of *Hesed?*

It’s the *mitzvah*known as *ahavat Hashem-*love of God. The text of this *mitzvah*is traditionally chanted four times a day as part of the *Sh’ma*and comes from Deuteronomy, or *Devarim,*chapter 6 verse 5.

It says, *Ve’ahavtah et Hashem Elohekha b’khol levavkha uv’khol nafsh’kha uv’khol meodekha- Love Hashem your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might.*

Now this *mitzvah*is strange for a number of reasons. First of all, how can you intentionally love something? Isn’t love a feeling that either arises on its own or it doesn’t? Can you actually decide to love something or someone, or does your heart simply feel however it feels?

Second of all, if we dig a little deeper into the language, we see that the Name of God is composed of the letters *Yod, Heh,* and *Vav and Heh,*which come from the verb “to be,” so the Name of God really means Existence or Reality, as I’ve also mentioned in the [IJM materials.](http://weebly-link/236289953191646951) Now if you experience something that you already love, such as closeness with a person you love or you hear some music that you love, or taste some food that you love, then it’s relatively easy to elevate that experience into *ahavat Hashem*through gratitude. You simply give thanks for the gift that you’re experiencing, and that gratitude opens you to an even deeper pleasure of connection.

However, *ahavat Hashem*through gratitude is incomplete by itself. That’s because by definition, Existence or Reality includes everything that exists- everything that’s real- not just the things you love. So how does it make sense to love everything that is? Isn’t the very experience of love based on the fact that you love some things and not other things? How can you love something that’s evil for example, or how can you love being sick, or being in pain, and so on? It seems that the very reality of love is dualistic- we love somethings and hate other things. So how can you possibly love God, how can you do the *mitzvah*of *ahavat Hashem*if *Hashem* includes everything, even the most hateful things. So let’s explore this a bit.

Imagine that you are a sculptor who works with clay. So for you, clay is the most wonderful thing because it’s the medium of your craft. Your whole life is devoted to working with clay. You LOVE clay. But, you’re also very opinionated about what makes a good sculpture and what makes a bad sculpture, and because you’re so serious about your art, nothing is more disturbing to you than a terrible sculpture.

Along comes one of your new students who hasn’t learned much yet, and they eagerly show you their latest work, which happens to be a terrible sculpture in your opinion. So what do you do? Do you whack your student in the head and vow to never touch clay again because of the ugly thing your student made? That would be really immature and kind of crazy, right? Hopefully your hatred of the sculpture would instead motivate you to help your student improve. If you’re a mature person, then you can love your student even if you hate this particular sculpture they made. You can also, of course, continue loving clay even though the bad sculpture was made out of clay, because clay in general and the bad sculpture in particular exist on two totally different levels; you can hate the sculpture and yet love the clay that it’s made from, and also love the person who made it. It’s all just a question of where you put your energy and attention.

The analogy here is that the clay represents Being or Existence. You can love God, meaning Being or Existence, while still disliking some particular experiences.

But, you may ask, this analogy takes for granted that you love clay. What about the case of someone who doesn’t love clay? In other words, we’re still left with the problem- how do you command *ahavat Hashem?*With clay it makes more sense. You’re a sculptor, you love clay, though you may not like a particular sculpture. You’re a musician, you love your instrument, though you may not like every piece of music that can be played on it. But what does it mean to love Existence or Being, and how can you possibly practice that?

Let’s look at what happens when you’re craving something, and then you get what you’re craving. Take food for example. You feel the pain of hunger, the desire to eat something, and then you eat it and feel satisfaction. But there’s something else going on that you might not be aware of unless you’re really paying attention, and that is the sense of incompleteness that’s caused not by the hunger, but by the mental and emotional fixation on the object of your desire. It’s not just that you’re hungry, it’s that there’s a basic dis-ease with the present moment, and a psychological “reaching” for a future moment when you imagine that you’ll be satisfied.

Then, when you finally get what you were craving, not only is there a satisfaction with the experience of the food, there’s also hopefully a relaxing into present moment reality while you enjoy the food, and a dropping away of that dis-ease of wanting. And that simple connection and dropping away of dis-ease is itself very pleasurable, and naturally lovable, even more so perhaps than the food. Now everyone experiences this at least to some degree, but rarely to people realize that what’s going on. Instead, people just assume that all the pleasure comes from the food or whatever particular gratification they’re experiencing.

But the truth is, the deeper pleasure comes not from the food, though food is certainly a wonderful thing, but from the *letting go of wanting* and instead connecting deeply with the present. That’s why we have practices like fasting, for example, or giving up bread on *Pesakh.* Normally when we feel a craving, the heart tends to run after what we want and we lose connection with the present. But if you let yourself feel the craving on purpose, returning your attention to your heart again and again so that it doesn’t carry you away, then you can learn to open your heart and drop into the wholeness and bliss of the Present without needing to satisfy whatever urge you’re feeling. In that way, you get to experience *Ahavat Hashem-*love of God- meaning love of Being or Existence or Reality Itself, because your connection to the Reality of the present is by its nature very pleasurable, healing and liberating.

There’s a hint of this in the Torah reading *Parshat Sh’mini.*It opens, *“Vay’hi bayom hashmini kara mosheh- It was on the eighth day that Moses called out."*Moses then gives instructions to the Israelites for the offerings they should bring in order for them to have a vision of the Divine. It then goes on in great detail about the animals and grains and oils they burned as fire offerings. At the end of this litany it says, *“… vayeyra kh’vod Hashem el kol ha’am- the Divine Glory appeared to all the people.”*

Why?

When you experience satisfaction such as eating delicious food, you can elevate that experience through gratitude- through realizing that your food is literally a gift from God, emerging from the field of Being. But if you want to experience *ahavat Hashem-*the love of God that’s there even when you’re not feeling satisfied, you have to differentiate the pleasure that comes from Presence from the pleasure that comes from gratification, and you can do that through sacrifice- through purposely giving something up. Then, just as the Divine Glory appeared to the Israelites, so you too will perceive the deep satisfaction and bliss of connecting with Reality as it is, beyond all those temporary and finite pleasures, wonderful as they might be. And when you do that, a much deeper gratitude can emerge- gratitude not only for the particular blessings we experience, but for the constant opportunity we have to practice Presence and connect with the completeness and peace of this moment.

This is also hinted at in the opening verse, *“Vay’hi bayom hashmini- It was on the eighth day…”

Y’hi*is a form of the verb “to be.” *Bayom*means “on the day” but it can also mean “in today”- meaning, in the Present. *Hashmini*means, “the eighth.” The number eight on its side is a symbol for infinity. So the idea here is that you connect with the Eternal- *hashmini-* through Being- *y’hi-* in the Present- *bayom*.

Now all of this may seem every complex. But at its root, it comes down to returning your attention to your heart, again and again. When you crave something, it’s as if your heart is running after what it wants, disconnecting from this moment. But when you return your attention to your heart, you open to reality as it is, and all that heart energy that normally wants to run after things opens into that deeper bliss of Being...​

**Divine Remembrance-Hesed Week**

The matzah that is traditionally eaten this week represents two qualities: immediacy and intimacy.

Immediacy, because since there was a hasty departure from Egypt, the dough had no time to rise. This hints at the immediate accessibility of Reality/Divinity; there's no process to come to this moment. As soon as you intend it, you do it, now.

Intimacy, because the rising of dough is the separation of the substance of the dough away from itself, caused by the bubbles from the yeast. This is a wonderful metaphor for what happens in consciousness: we identify with certain aspects of our experience, such as thoughts and feelings, and objectify other aspects of our experience, such as things happening in our environment.

But everything in experience is, by definition, made of consciousness. So when we become present, the "dough" of consciousness is permitted to collapse into itself, like the thin matzah. This moment is experienced simply as it is, without separation.

These two aspects, immediacy and intimacy, also correspond to the two "wings" of prayer – *Yirah* and *Ahavah,* Fear and Love.

*Yirah* is not the anxious fear of worry and anxiety, it is simply a healthy respect for danger. In this sense, *Yirah*means being careful with your own mind, being watchful, guarding yourself against too much meandering of thought.

*Ahavah,*Love, means being open and giving of yourself to the fullness of Being as it manifests now, in an open hearted, even passionate way. It is regarding the immediacy of Reality as the Face of the Divine, and remembering the Divine constantly, similarly to how you might constantly think of a person you're infatuated with.

*Yirah* and *Ahavah*also correspond to the dual practice of *Shamor V'Zakhor, Guarding and Remembering,* alluded to in the Shabbat hymn, *​L'kha Dodi.

Shamor,* "guarding," means guarding your own mind. *Zakhor,* "remembering," means remembering that the Divine is present as whatever is living in your experience, right now. This practice of *Zakhor,*remembering the Divine, is expressed in the Sufi practice of chanting Divine Names, known as *​zikr.*Although this is a sufi practice, the son of Moses Maimonides, Avraham Maimonides, claimed that the Sufis had preserved the ancient practices of Israel in their *zikr, and*that the Jews could recover their ancient lineage of chanting Divine Names by re-adopting it from the Sufis!

There's a hint of this in the verse (Exodus 21:29):

בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר אַזְכִּ֣יר אֶת־שְׁמִ֔י אָב֥וֹא אֵלֶ֖יךָ וּבֵֽרַכְתִּֽיךָ
*In all places that I cause My Name to be remembered –* *azkir et Sh'mi – I will come to you and bless you.*

The understanding of *azkir, "I will cause to be remembered,"*is not merely a mental remembering, but remembering through chanting the Name. That's why many English translations of this verse translate *azkir*as, *"I will cause to be spoken."*

There's a story about Rabbi Israel, the Maggid of Koznitz, that he used to visit the town of Apt every year in order to visit the grave of his father. One time while he was visiting, the townspeople came and asked if he would preach in the synagogue on *Shabbos* as he did last time.

"Why would I do that?" he replied, "There's no evidence that the preaching I did last time did any good."

The townspeople were greatly upset, and gathered around his inn to try and persuade him. Finally, a craftsman went in and knocked at his door. When the Maggid opened the door, and the craftsman said, "You claim that your preaching last year did no good, but that's not true. I heard you teach that a person should always practice the verse from Psalm `16, שִׁוִּיתִי יְהוָה לְנֶגְדִּי תָמִיד **–** *Shviti Hashem L'negdi Tamid – I place the Divine Name before me constantly.*Since then, I always keep the Divine Name in my mind, remembering that the Divine is always present in every moment."

"In that case," replied the Maggid, "I will come and preach."