**Ocean of Being – מ MEM and *Parshat Hukat***

Reb Pinhas taught, “If you wish to guide others, you must not become angry at them, because not only will the anger pollute your own soul, it will infect those you are guiding as well.”  
  
And another time he said, “Since I've learned to tame my anger, I keep it my pocket, and take it out when needed.”  
  
In order to occasionally use anger in a directed and effective way, you have to not be taken over by it. Only when you are free from anger, can you use it effectively. But in most situations, it’s best to be conscious of anger as it arises, feel your anger fully, but not direct it at others. This is the path of ו *vav,* of having the inner strength not to be taken over by reactivity. But what about transforming the reactivity? Is there a way to cool the fires of anger? This is the path of מ *mem,* which means *mayim,* “water” – not merely the transcending of reactivity, but its transformation…

***Parshat Hukat***

זֹ֚את חֻקַּ֣ת הַתּוֹרָ֔ה אֲשֶׁר־צִוָּ֥ה יְהֹוָ֖ה לֵאמֹ֑ר דַּבֵּ֣ר אֶל־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל וְיִקְח֣וּ אֵלֶ֩יךָ֩ פָרָ֨ה אֲדֻמָּ֜ה תְּמִימָ֗ה אֲשֶׁ֤ר אֵֽין־בָּהּ֙ מ֔וּם אֲשֶׁ֛ר לֹא־עָלָ֥ה עָלֶ֖יהָ עֹֽל׃

*This is the decree of the Torah that the Divine commanded, saying: “Speak to the Children of Israel, that they should to bring you a red cow, whole and without blemish, on which no yoke has been laid…”*

*- BaMidbar* (Numbers) 19:2, *Parshat Hukat*

The *parshah* begins with laws of purification for coming into contact with death. The name of the *parshah –* *Hukat –* is a form of the word *hok,* which means “decree” or “statute.” The particular *hok* in this *parshah* contains the strange instructions to burn up a completely red cow – a *parah adumah –* and make a magical purification potion by mixing its ashes with water. Due to the particularly obscure and bizarre nature of this practice, the rabbis came to see the word *hok* to refer to *any* of the Jewish practices in general that don’t seem to make obvious sense, such certain animals being unkosher, or having a day of rest on Saturday. These *hukim* contrast with more obvious and universal *mitzvot,* such as not killing and helping the poor.

This water of purification was sprinkled on anyone who had touched a corpse, in order to ritually purify them. The premise was that if one touches a corpse, they become *tamei,* which means ritually unfit or impure, so that they wouldn’t be able to bring offerings into the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle)*,* and later the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple), without first doing this purification process.

How is this relevant today?

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef, known as The Ishbitzer, taught on the inner meaning of this practice. He pointed out that “death” represents the past, because the past is done; it’s dead. The *tuma* (ritual impurity)is really anger or resentment about something from the past. That’s because feelings of negativity and judgment about something that has already happened keep you stuck – you are holding on to something that you really need to let go of; that’s the *tuma.*

The red cow is itself the very embodiment of death – a living creature that is completely burned up. It is also completely red, the color of the blood that bleeds out of a slaughtered animal, as well as the fire that destroys the form of the animal. The redness and burning can also represent anger, as a person’s face becomes red and “burns” with anger.

So why does this symbol of death cure someone from the contamination of death?

Because the contamination, the *tuma,* comes from *resisting* death – from being angry at something in the past – from not *letting go*. To be cured from your resistance, then, you have to *accept* whatever you’re resisting; you have to embrace it. So, paradoxically, it is in embracing the past that you let go of the past, because being stuck means that you were holding on to an idea of how it should have been. But as you let go and accept what has been, you are purified; you are “sprinkled with the purifying waters,” so to speak. Then you become *tahor –* free from that clinging, that holding on, so that you can fully come into the sacred dimension of simply Being in the present.

This is the path of מ *mem*, the path of “water.” Just as water effortlessly takes the shape of the vessel into which it is poured, so the practice of *mem* is surrender, letting go of the past, letting the past die. It is therefore also the path of forgiveness, of letting go of any grudges or negativity against others.

But how do we do that? How do we accept whatever we are resisting, and let go? In other words, what are the “waters of the red cow” we can use today?

**The Most Direct Path**

There is a Hebrew cipher known as *atbash* in which you connect every Hebrew letter with another Hebrew letter, so that the first letter, *alef,* gets connected with the last letter, *tav.* The second letter, *bet,* gets connected with the second to last letter, *shin,* and so on. In this way, you can substitute letters in words to come up with new words. According to Kabbalah, words that are linked through *atbash* have a connection in meaning as well.

As we have seen, the word for being spiritually whole and pure is *tahor.* Through *atbash* we can substitute a *nun* for the *tet,* making *nahor.* Rearrange the letters, and you have *rinah –* “song.” And this is exactly the power of song and music in general – to transform negativity and resistance – not necessarily by turning *away* from it, but by turning *into* it*,* by transforming it and expressing it in melody.

Why? Because *music makes it feel good to feel bad –* hence the blues, as well as a lot of mournful Jewish liturgy, the *krekh* of the clarinet in Klezmer music, and a thousand other examples. In this way, music can be the “waters” of inner purification, transforming anger, fear, frustration and so on into Presence – not by distracting or suppressing the emotions, but by expressing them and uplifting them.

This is the basis for the Hassidic practice of the *niggun,* the wordless melody. As Rebbe Nachman said, “The most direct means for attaching yourself to God is through music and song. Even if you can’t sing well, sing. Sing to yourself. Sing in the privacy of your home, but sing.”

But why? How does music work anyway?

That is one of the greatest *hukim,* the great mysteries – that music has this power to bring us deeply into the depths of our present experience and open us to the Wholeness that we are…

**Ain’t Misbehavin’**  
Once, I heard a girl shrieking at her mother as I was waiting in the airport.

“What's the matter honey?” said the mother.  
  
“The phone died!!!” screamed the girl. She apparently was playing a game on her mother’s phone and it ran out of juice.  
  
“I see you're really upset,” said the mother.  
  
It always amazes me when a parent can stay present when a child shrieks about a video game. It reminded me of a parenting method my wife had learned about called “Positive Discipline.” Positive Discipline encourages firmness in correcting children, but instructs you to first connect with them in empathy before correcting.

The catch phrase for this is “Connection Before Correction.” In other words, speak to your children first, connect with their hearts, let them know you understand why they are upset or why they might have done whatever they did, and only afterward speak to them firmly about what behavior needs to change.

While I have not found this approach to be workable all of the time with my own children, especially in extreme situations, I still find the principle incredibly useful. And when it does work, it’s not only better for the children, it’s better for the parent. That’s because when you communicate only through harshness, it is all too easy to be seduced by the fires of anger. And though it is possible for the parent to correct the child with anger, the parent is then misbehaving too!

After all, anger demonstrates a lack of patience, a lack of composure – the very thing you want to correct in the child. So while expressing anger may have the desired effect of correcting the child’s behavior, it could have the opposite effect on oneself.

Spiritually speaking, impatience and loss of composure have a deeper root – they stem from a loss of Presence, and consequently, loss of connection with *the* Presence. When a child acts out, they have lost their Presence; they have been taken over by their impulses. Have you ever seen an adorable and beautiful child suddenly become a monstrous terror?

And, in the presence of such lack of Presence, it can be very difficult to keep your own Presence.

וְשָׂרַ֥ף אֶת־הַפָּרָ֖ה *V’saraph et haparah – the cow shall be burned…*

This is reflected in the ritual of the red cow – while the ashes mixed with water cause the impure person to become pure again, they also cause the one who sprinkled the potion to become *impure* –  just as parents who discipline their children with anger may help to “purify” the child’s behavior, but in the process they become impure themselves.

This theme continues to vibrate throughout the *parshah*. Shortly after the *hok* of the red cow, Moses’ sister Miriam dies.

וַתָּ֤מׇת שָׁם֙ מִרְיָ֔ם וַתִּקָּבֵ֖ר שָֽׁם׃  – *Miriam died there and was buried there.*

Metaphorically, Miriam’s death is the loss of connection with the Divine Presence, which Miriam represents.

וְלֹא־הָ֥יָה מַ֖יִם לָעֵדָ֑ה – *And there was no water for the community…*

After she dies, we are then told that there is “no water to drink.” Meaning, there is a “thirst” for connection with the Presence that was lost.

וַיִּקָּ֣הֲל֔וּ עַל־מֹשֶׁ֖ה וְעַֽל־אַהֲרֹֽן׃ – *and they joined against Moses and Aaron…*

The people then gather against Moses and Aaron, angrily demanding water. *Hashem* instructs Moses to “take the staff” – meaning, take hold of his own inner power, the power of ו *vav* to transcend anger – and “speak to the rock before their eyes” – meaning, speak from the heart, or we might say, *sing* from the heart – bring the “waters” of Presence to the “stone” of the hardened heart, to resistance and reactivity, to the lack of connection.

קַ֣ח אֶת־הַמַּטֶּ֗ה וְהַקְהֵ֤ל אֶת־הָעֵדָה֙ אַתָּה֙ וְאַהֲרֹ֣ן אָחִ֔יךָ וְדִבַּרְתֶּ֧ם אֶל־הַסֶּ֛לַע לְעֵינֵיהֶ֖ם וְנָתַ֣ן מֵימָ֑יו וְהוֹצֵאתָ֨ לָהֶ֥ם מַ֙יִם֙ מִן־הַסֶּ֔לַע וְהִשְׁקִיתָ֥ אֶת־הָעֵדָ֖ה וְאֶת־בְּעִירָֽם׃

*“Take the staff and assemble the community, you and Aaron your brother, and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it should give forth its water; you shall bring forth water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.”*

*- BaMidbar* (Numbers) 20:8, *Parshat Hukat*

But, this is not what Moses does. He becomes angry and instead yells at the people, calling them “rebels,” and then strikes the rock with his staff. The water comes forth anyway and the people drink, but Moses is told he cannot enter the Promised Land. His anger puts his own soul into exile; he purifies the people but contaminates himself.

You can apply this principle not only to correcting others, but perhaps more importantly, to correcting yourself. How often do you beat yourself up for not living up to your highest intentions? While beating yourself up might motivate you to change externally, it creates more negativity internally. Try talking to yourself gently, but firmly. Even better, *sing* to yourself. You have the power to teach yourself from your *inner Torah* – to set yourself on the path you want to be on, if only you take the time to open to the waters of Presence and let them gently wear away the hardness of your heart…

**A Person, A Torah…**

זֹ֚את הַתּוֹרָ֔ה אָדָ֖ם כִּֽי־יָמ֣וּת בְּאֹ֑הֶל כׇּל־הַבָּ֤א אֶל־הָאֹ֙הֶל֙ וְכׇל־אֲשֶׁ֣ר בָּאֹ֔הֶל יִטְמָ֖א שִׁבְעַ֥ת יָמִֽים׃

*This is the* Torah *(teaching): When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be* tamei *seven days…*

*- BaMidbar* (Numbers) 19:15, *Parshat Hukat*

After describing the process of purification of one who is *tamei* from contact with the dead through the special water mixed with ashes from the red cow, it goes on to talk about the situation of a person who dies in a tent. There is a story of Reb Yitzhak of Vorki which expresses a novel approach to this verse.

One Shabbos, in the year 1840, Reb Yitzhak attended a festive meal in the synagogue of the Seer of Lublin, who had passed away twenty-five years earlier. When it was time to sit for the meal, the *hassidim* tried to convince Reb Yitzhak to sit in the Seer’s chair.

Reb Yitzhak declined saying, “When our *rebbe* was alive, I always kept a distance of at least half the length of the room out of sheer awe of him.”

But as soon as he sat down, scores of *hassidim* eagerly crowded and pushed their way to be close to him. Reb Yitzhak gently spoke to them: “You know, every person is like a holy book; that’s why you mustn’t lean on or push one another.”

One of the *hassidim* countered, “But aren’t we allowed to stack holy books on top of other holy books?”

Replied Reb Yitzhak: “Yes… but even though you should see every person as a holy book, you shouldn’t see *yourself* as a holy book.”

One of the *hassidim* at that gathering later commented, “If I had come only to hear that remark, that would have been sufficient!”

**Waters of Consciousness**

אָדָ֖ם כִּֽי־יָמ֣וּת בְּאֹ֑הֶל *Adam ki yamut ba’ohel – When person dies in a tent…*

We can also learn from the next piece of the phrase:

The אֹהֶל *Ohel,* the “tent” can be seen as a metaphor for the body, the “tent” of consciousness.

The word for “dies,” יָמוּת *yamut,* contains the word ים *yam,* which means “ocean,” and also includes the מ *mem,* which represents the “waters” of consciousness; this is the “ocean of consciousness.” The next letter,ו *vav,* means “and,” and is followed by ת *tav,* which is the last of the Hebrew letters – the “end” of the *alef bet.*

Seen this way, יָמוּת בְּאֹהֶל *yamut ba’ohel –* “dies in a tent”can be read:

*The End of the “Ocean” of Consciousness in the “Tent” of the body…*

That is: loss of Presence in the body, being taken over by reactivity or anger.

The irony is that while one might be eager to hear a teaching and rush, push, shove and get stressed or aggressive, all of this creates the state of being *tamei –* beingdisconnected the body, not being present, which, of course, contradicts any authentic spiritual teaching!

The remedy is the path of מ *mem* – letting go, not reaching after the future, not holding on to the past, and merging with the Truth of this moment…

**The Serpent of Boredom**

*Mem* is the great Ocean of Consciousness, effortlessly taking the shape of this moment, ever flowing, formless, boundless and formless, purifying and nourishing. This vastness is the root of our own being; it is not something remote or attainable by only a few. Rather, it is our own sentience, the field of awareness behind all experience, ever- available.

And yet, because it is the constant and un-varying backdrop of all experience, it is ordinarily unnoticeable, just as the ocean is unnoticeable to the fish. It is, on one hand, ironically the most miraculous thing available to us, the only Thing that can quench the thirst of the human soul; yet, on the other hand, its extraordinariness is easily missed.

וַיְדַבֵּ֣ר הָעָ֗ם בֵּֽאלֹהִים֮ וּבְמֹשֶׁה֒ לָמָ֤ה הֶֽעֱלִיתֻ֙נוּ֙ מִמִּצְרַ֔יִם לָמ֖וּת בַּמִּדְבָּ֑ר כִּ֣י אֵ֥ין לֶ֙חֶם֙ וְאֵ֣ין מַ֔יִם וְנַפְשֵׁ֣נוּ קָ֔צָה בַּלֶּ֖חֶם הַקְּלֹקֵֽל׃

*And the people spoke against Elohim and against Moses, “Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and our souls have come to loathe this ‘miserable bread!’”*

- *Bamidbar* (Numbers) 21:5

This passage comes a bit after the incident with the water from the rock. Let’s look at these words more deeply:

– *Ayn lekhem v’ayn mayim – No bread and no water…*אֵ֥ין לֶ֙חֶם֙ וְאֵ֣ין מַ֔יִם

“Bread and water” are metaphors for varieties of experience; they are different types of contrasting and complementary gratification.

לֶ֙חֶם֙ הַקְּלֹקֵֽל – *Lekhem Haklokel –* The “miserable bread”is the *mon,* the miraculous “manna” that the Israelites ate in the wilderness. This “manna” is a symbol for our deepest being; on one hand, it is a miracle, our sustaining essence as we traverse the wilderness of life. On the other hand, it is the constant background; it is “bread” without “water,” a “goodness” without “badness”… and therefore not really a goodness, which is why it is called קְּלֹקֵֽל *klokel –* miserable, tedious, boring.

The word קְּלֹקֵֽל *klokel* is ק *koof* ל *lamed,* then ק *koof* ל *lamed* again. The symbolism of ק *koof* has to do with seeing the sacred in the ordinary, and ל *lamed* has to do with curiosity, with learning from every experience.

So, put together, קל *koof-lamed* could mean, “Learning to see the sacredness in the ordinary.” This is a fundamental and not difficult practice, simply entailing the bringing of awareness into connection with the ordinary moments of life. In fact, the word קל literally means “light” or “simple.” This is Presence in the ordinary, which we will explore later in the path of ק *koof.*

But, when the letters are repeated, קל – קל, it implies the tediousness of trying to find the sacred in the same old thing, over and over again.

What is the remedy for this tediousness?

וַיְשַׁלַּ֨ח יְהוָ֜ה בָּעָ֗ם אֵ֚ת הַנְּחָשִׁ֣ים הַשְּׂרָפִ֔ים וַֽיְנַשְּׁכ֖וּ אֶת־הָעָ֑ם וַיָּ֥מָת עַם־רָ֖ב מִיִּשְׂרָאֵֽל׃

*Hashem sent fiery serpents against the people; they bit the people and many of the Israelites died.*

The “fiery serpents” are emotional reactivity, anger, as represented earlier by the burning red cow. But here the fire functions differently; when we feel the tediousness of the same thing over and over again, emotions like anger and frustration can actually be a kind of *relief* from the tedium.

*…they bit the people and many of the Israelites died.*

As we have seen, anger is destructive, and ordinarily it causes the “death” of Presence. But, there is a way to make use of it:

וַיַּ֤עַשׂ מֹשֶׁה֙ נְחַ֣שׁ נְחֹ֔שֶׁת וַיְשִׂמֵ֖הוּ עַל־הַנֵּ֑ס וְהָיָ֗ה אִם־נָשַׁ֤ךְ הַנָּחָשׁ֙ אֶת־אִ֔ישׁ וְהִבִּ֛יט אֶל־נְחַ֥שׁ הַנְּחֹ֖שֶׁת וָחָֽי׃

*Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a pole; and when anyone was bitten by a serpent, they would look at the copper serpent and live.*

The “copper serpent” is נְחַ֣שׁ נְחֹ֔שֶׁת  *n’khash n’khoshet;* it is a play on words, because “copper” and “serpent” are essentially the same word, built from the root: נ *nun* – ח  *khet* – ש  *shin*. “Copper” is a common metal, as opposed to the more precious metals of gold and silver. “Serpent” is the pain of emotional reactivity. So, the “copper serpent” represents the emotional pain that comes from too much of the same old common experience.

And yet, the copper serpent had the power to heal the Israelites who were “bitten” by the “serpent” of emotional pain. We can see how in the letters themselves:

*Nun* נ represents impermanence, the pain of loss. *Khet* ח represents patience, grace, being simply present. *Shin* ש represents the fire of transformation, the increased consciousness that comes from bringing awareness to pain.

In other words, “looking” at the “serpent” means patiently being with the emotional pain, bringing “water” to the “fire” – this is the path of *mem.* Through the purifying waters of Presence, the latent “fire” of transformation within pain (*shin*) is brought into actuality, allowing us once again to truly “live” – to wash away the negativity of the past and worry about the future, and allow ourselves to be “poured” fully into the “vessel” of this moment in which we find ourselves…

**Sell Out**

One time, when I was flying home on a plane, the flight attendant came through the cabin and asked me what I wanted to drink. “I’ll have sparkling water with lime please,” which is my own “water of purification” that I always have when I fly.

“We have lime flavored sparkling water, is that okay?”

*No that’s not okay!* That’s what I was thinking – but I said, “Sure, thanks.”

I’ve been getting sparkling water with lime on the plane all my life, and suddenly it was gone – and in its place, a cheaper substitute. “Lime flavor” is not the same and is not as good as a piece of real lime – on a number of levels – but business decisions like this get made all the time. So many products nowadays are worse than their predecessors. This phenomenon is sometimes called, “selling out.”

“Selling out” means reducing the quality of something for the sake of monetary gain; it is an exchange of one value for another. But this doesn’t happen only in business; it is a basic ability we have to override our inner sense of what is right for the sake of something else we want. And, it’s not a bad ability to have, if used properly.

For example, it’s good to exercise every day, to eat healthy food, to spend quality time with others, and so on. But what if there is an emergency – someone has a crisis and needs your help. It is good to be able to put all those things on hold temporarily and take care of the crisis.

In this kind of case, “selling out” your personal health for the sake of another value – helping someone in crisis – can be a good thing. It is good to not be so attached your own needs so that you can respond to the needs of the situation. The problem is when this ability to override – to “sell out” – takes over and becomes our norm. The problem is when we completely “sell out” in the realm of personal health for the sake of a career, for example; that’s when we get into trouble.

This is why it’s so important to *consciously choose and create our habits.*

We can break them when necessary, as long as we return to them. Don’t let the exception to the rule become the new rule! Many of us are full of unconscious habits – behaviors we took on for certain reasons – that have become our norm, without ever consciously choosing them.

**Haftora**

The *haftora* for *Parshat Hukat* tells the story of Jephtah, the son of a harlot. Jephtah’s half-brothers of the same father don’t want their son-of-a-harlot half-brother to share in their inheritance, so they kick him out of the house and send him away.

Now Jephtah is a great warrior, and he attracts a band of men who become his loyal companions. Years later, when the Ammonites attack Israel, the brothers come back to Jephtah and ask him to please come lead the fight against the Ammonites.

“But you hated me and sent me away! Now you come back to me when you are in need?”

The brothers offer him a deal: “If you come back and help us fight, then when it’s all over, we will make you our leader.” Japhteh is convinced – he “sells out” in a sense, giving up his pride and sense of justice for the sake of prestige and status.

Before Japhteh goes into battle, he prays: *Oh Hashem, if you make me victorious, I will sacrifice to you whatever comes out of my house first when I return home!*

*What?* This is very strange – what does he think is going to come out of his house? Sure enough, when he returns home, his daughter runs out to greet him, and he cries out in horror as he realizes he must sacrifice his own daughter.

This is such a strange story. Obviously, if he vows to sacrifice “whatever comes out of his house,” he will end up sacrificing a family member; it’s not like a goat or sheep is going to run out of his house! But if we understand the story metaphorically, it makes sense as an illustration of this “sell-out” mentality:

First, Jephtah is the son of a harlot, and prostitution “sells out” the ordinary values of relationship and family for the sake of pleasure and monetary gain. Second, Jephtah agrees to help his betraying brothers fight for the sake of prestige; more selling out. Finally, he vows to sacrifice whatever comes out of his house if he wins.

This is the clearest example – he is willing to sacrifice the most precious thing at a future time for the sake of gaining something else in the short run. Then, he is surprised when it leads to tragedy – just as we too can be surprised when we unconsciously make bad choices for the sake of short term, relatively unimportant goals.

On the deepest level, when it comes to how we use our own minds, “selling out” tends to be the norm for most of us.

Meaning: Right now, we have something so precious – the most precious thing there is in fact – we have the ability to merge fully with this moment, to know the miracle of Being that is this moment, to know ourselves as the Ocean of Consciousness within which the experience of this moment is now arising.

And yet, many of us unconsciously and unwittingly give up this most precious gift – for what? For mostly useless thinking. If we’re not aware of what we are doing, we can simply cover up this most precious thing with our constant stream of thoughts, just like our hand can cover our eyes and block out the entire sun. The mind has a certain illusory gravity; it says, “Pay attention to me! I have something urgently important!”

But wake up to the majesty of this moment, and see: most thinking is a bogus urgency. Make it a habit to let go, to surrender, to know yourself as the vast Ocean of Awareness that you are, rather than as busy thinking, and the miraculous becomes your norm. Yes, of course, sometimes you have to “sell out” – it’s okay – the situation will sometimes require you to get busy with your thinking, to rush around, to take care of business. Sometimes you have to put aside the most precious thing for the sake of the situation, but don’t make that the norm! When you can, come back in *t’shuvah* to Presence; wash yourself clean in the waters of consciousness and let go into the openness of the present.

In fact, our innate capacity to return from the trivial to the miraculous is encoded in Jephtah’s name – *Yiftakh –* which means, “open.” No matter how much we have “sold out,” our potential to return to the open sea of consciousness – to know ourselves as that openness – is ever-present, and we can do it from wherever we are, right now...