[**The Dog – Shabbat Sukkot**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/sukkot)

ה֤וֹרֵ֥נִי יְהוָ֗ה דַּ֫רְכֶּ֥ךָ וּ֭נְחֵנִי בְּאֹ֣רַח מִישׁ֑וֹר לְ֝מַ֗עַן שׁוֹרְרָֽי
Reveal to me, Hashem, Your way, and guide me on a straight path, because of my watchful foes.
(Psalm 27)

In this psalm that is chanted during this holiday season, King David prays to be in alignment with the Divine so that he might merit salvation from his enemies. But this and many other psalms are so universally relevant because they point not only to external foes, but to our inner reality.

I once saw a bumper sticker that read, “Don’t believe everything you think.”

What a beautifully succinct and useful piece of wisdom! We know that believing in absurdly distorted thoughts is called insanity; we can see when a person is insane, because the reality they describe is completely different from what most normal people would consider to be true. And yet, there is some degree of insanity for most people; when our minds make automatic judgments, we tend to believe our thoughts without question, especially if there is an emotional charge attached to them.

In this way, it is our own thoughts that lead us onto a crooked path; it is our own thoughts that become the enemy.

וְאַל תָּדִין אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתַּגִּיעַ לִמְקוֹמוֹ
Don’t judge your friend until you have reached his place…
(Pirkei Avot 2:5)

Until you have the same perspective as your friend, says the sage Hillel, you should refrain from judging them… which is really the same as saying that we should never judge anyone, because it is impossible to ever see from someone else’s perspective. This is an amazing statement for a text that is mostly directed toward actual judges! The message is: we must sometimes make judgments, but don’t believe in them as absolute truth. Be open. Let your thoughts be translucent to the light that Reality continuously reveals, and be conscious of the infinite complexity that is not revealed.

But if the function of the mind is thought, how can we possibly transcend thought?

Rabbi Yitzhak Mer of Ger was once talking to a hasid of Rabbi Simcha Bunam. The hasid said his master once remarked he was amazed that a person wouldn’t become spiritually perfected by merely saying birkat hamazon, the grace after meals. Rabbi Yitzhak thought for a moment and then replied, “I think differently. I am amazed that a person isn’t spiritually perfected merely by eating! After all, a donkey knows its owner.”

We may not have so much experience with donkeys, but many of us have experience with dogs – how a dog will run to its owner with love and enthusiasm the moment they walk through the door.

How does the dog know the owner is there?

Usually all it takes is the sound of the door opening, or the sound of the voice, and the dog comes running. The dog doesn’t want the door or the voice, the dog wants the person; but the sounds are the cue.

ה֤וֹרֵ֥נִי יְהוָ֗ה דַּ֫רְכֶּ֥ךָ וּ֭נְחֵנִי בְּאֹ֣רַח מִישׁ֑וֹר לְ֝מַ֗עַן שׁוֹרְרָֽי
Reveal to me, Hashem, Your way, and guide me on a straight path, because of my watchful foes.

There is profound lesson here for us as well: if we want to run into the arms of the Divine, we too can listen for the cues to tell us which direction to go. Only with us it is even more simple – all we need do is pay attention to whatever is present, to whatever presents itself. And this is the deeper lesson of Reb Yitzhak’s spiritual perfection through eating: it is the realm of the senses that brings us into the arms of the Master, not the realm of language and thinking (though, paradoxically, language and thinking is certainly needed to tell us this!)

There is a hint in this week’s reading for Shabbat Sukkot:

וַיֹּ֨אמֶר מֹשֶׁ֜ה אֶל־יְהוָ֗ה רְ֠אֵה אַתָּ֞ה אֹמֵ֤ר אֵלַי֙ הַ֚עַל אֶת־הָעָ֣ם הַזֶּ֔ה וְאַתָּה֙ לֹ֣א הֽוֹדַעְתַּ֔נִי אֵ֥ת אֲשֶׁר־תִּשְׁלַ֖ח עִמִּ֑י
Moses said to Hashem, “See, You say to me, ‘Lead this people forward,’ but You have not made known to me whom You will send with me….”
(Exodus 33:12)

Moses is asking, who and where are You, God? How can I know You? God responds by putting Moses in a cleft of rock and then passes by Moses while shielding Moses’ eyes from seeing the Divine directly. After God passes by, the shielding is removed, and Moses sees God’s “back.”

וַהֲסִרֹתִי֙ אֶת־כַּפִּ֔י וְרָאִ֖יתָ אֶת־אֲחֹרָ֑י וּפָנַ֖י לֹ֥א יֵרָאֽוּ
Then I will take My hand away and you will see My back; but My face must not be seen.”
(Exodus 33:23)

What is this “back” of God that Moses sees? It is nothing but the world of the senses, the presence of whatever is present. This is the deeper wisdom of Rabbi Yitzhak’s teaching: this moment is grace. You need not even wait until the next time you eat; every moment we are “eating” the air around us. Every moment is grace. But we can only really see this if we come fully to the moment, if we come into the senses, into the body, into our breathing, and out from the world of thought.

In this way, our thoughts become like the sukkah – not a solid edifice of assertion, but a framing of a tiny space in the world, a translucent embellishment of the Mystery…

***More on Sukkot...***

[**The Mouse- Shabbat Sukkot**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-mouse-shabbat-sukkot3623376)

Once, during the days after Yom Kippur, we suspected that there was a mouse in the house.

First, the strange little pieces of refuse that would show up on the floor when we knew we had already swept. Then, the little mysterious scratchy sounds I would hear when I knew everyone else was asleep. But we knew for sure when we found that a bag of leftover hallah had been chewed through.

Not knowing how the mouse got in and out, we quickly became much more disciplined about putting all our food away! We could tell the mouse was still coming in, but most of the time there was nothing for it to steal.

It wasn’t until Sukkot began, however, that I actually saw it.

We were eating in the sukkah, when I went back into the house to get the main course. As soon as entered the back door of our house, I saw the little mouse scurry across the floor and squeeze right through a little opening below a sliding door that goes into the wall.

I took some plastic bags and pushed them into the opening to block it, then used duct tape to seal it up. A temporary measure, but the mouse seems to have not returned, leaving the sanctuary of our home free from it for now.

But there is another kind of sanctuary- a space in which the heart is free and the mind is clear. That space is a sanctuary from all stress, from all problems, from all tzures.

That space is the present moment.

It is ever available, and always right here. And yet, the ordinary human mind is unaware of this space. Living life almost entirely through the screen of thinking, this sanctuary is overrun with the “rodents” of thought.

Craving some peace, one attempts to put life in order so that the rodents won’t disturb anything too much. Unaware of where the rodents are coming from, all you can do is put the food away so as not to attract them.

By “putting the food away” I mean arranging your life to your liking- organizing things so that stress and chaos are kept at bay. This is a wonderful thing. I’ll tell you, our kitchen was never so consistently clean as when that mouse forced us to develop better habits!

But once you see where the mouse is coming from, you can seal up the hole at its source. Meaning- once you see that the source of all chaos and worry is your own mind, you can “close the hole” through which chaos and misery enter.

Then, you can still clean your kitchen if you want to, but you’re not dependant on it. Meaning- you can organize your life to maximum benefit, but even when life is chaotic externally, even when there is loss, failure and uncertainty, the Sanctuary of the Present is not lost. Your mind can be free from those “rodents” of excess thinking, and in that clarity the Sanctuary reveals itself.

And yet, this is still a big secret, even for long-time spiritual practitioners!

Many people enter the Sanctuary in their moments of avodah, of meditation, ritual, chanting and so on, but cannot seem to stay connected in the midst of life.

In this week’s special reading for Shabbat Sukkot, Moses seems to have this very problem. Moses- the one who speaks to Hashem face-to-face, is afraid that the Divine Presence will not accompany him on his journey of leading the people (Exodus 33:12):

“Re’eh Atah omer eilai, ha’al et ha’am hazeh-
"See, You say to me, ‘take this people onward’, but You did not reveal whom You will send with me!”

Moses is afraid that the One who sends him on his mission will abandon him. What is Hashem’s response?

“Panai yelekhu v’hanikhoti lakh-
"My Presence will go and give you rest!”

The Presence “goes” wherever you go!

That’s because the “Presence” is not something separate from your own presence, from your awareness when it is actually present. And when your awareness is present, there is “rest”.

The word here for “I will give rest”, hanikhoti, has the same root as the name Noakh, the fellow who built the ark for the great flood. Whether the metaphor is rodents or destructive floodwaters, the idea is the same- there is an ark that floats above the raging waters in which you can find refuge.

In the case of Moses and the Israelites, they lived in temporary dwellings on their journeys- the sukkot in which Jews everywhere are now dwelling for this holiday that commemorates the ancient dwellings of the Israelites.

The sukkah is a sanctuary, yet it is hardly a solid thing. Open to the sky, vulnerable to the elements, it is really just a frame, not secure at all.

And that’s the paradox- that “sealing the hole” and securing your mind from the “rodents” of thought does not mean something hard or effortful. No plastic and duct tape! It means relaxing the mind, allowing the mind to be open to the fullness of what is already present.

But still, to do this constantly takes a special kind of effort that eludes most people. So much of the language of prayer is longing for the fruit of this effort!

​As King David says in Psalm 27:

“Akhat Sha’alti me’eit Hashem-
"Only one thing I ask of You, Hashem, that I should dwell in Your house and meditate in Your sanctuary all the days of my life!”

The Sanctuary of Presence is ever-present, yet it is so easy to block it. Think of this- the sun is 864,938 miles in diameter, yet you can block its view entirely with just your little hand.

And yet, even while you are blocking the Presence, the blocking is itself happening in the present! The only thing blocking God, ultimately, is God- as God tells Moses a few verses later (Exodus 33:22):

“It will be when My Glory passes, I shall place you in a cleft in the rock and shield you with My hand…”

When our fleeting and immaterial thoughts hide the “Glory” of this passing moment, hardening the openness of the present into what feels like a narrow cleft of rock on all sides, remember: Your thoughts themselves are also part of this moment. Accept them with openness and let them pass as well.

In accepting and releasing your thoughts, they can dissolve, revealing the open space once again, as Hashem says next:

“Then I will remove My hand and you will see my ‘back’…”

Meaning, you will see in retrospect that your thoughts blocking the Sanctuary are themselves part of the Sanctuary. They are part of the reality of the present moment.

But the more simple and direct path is simply to bring your attention to literally anything physical that is already present. The more you train yourself to do this, the more you will become aware of the space behind whatever is present- the ineffable openness that is the present moment.

There is a story of Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi, that once he asked his son what he “prays with”. The boy answered that he inspires himself with the verse, “Every form shall prostrate itself before You.”

The boy then asked the rebbe, “What do you pray with, Abba?”

The rebbe answered, “I pray with the bench and the floor.”

On this Shabbat Sukkot, may we commit our attention ever more deeply to the bench on which we sit and the floor on which we stand, that we might open ever more deeply to the Sukkat Shalom- the Space of Peace that is this moment in which we now live.

Good Shabbos!