## Wisdom of the Body – מ MEM and Parshat Balak

The mystical prayer, *Ana b’kho’akh,* begins:

אָנָּא בְּכחַ גְּדֻלַּת יְמִינְךָ תַּתִּיר צְרוּרָה

*Please, with the strength of the greatness of Your right hand* (meaning – loving-kindness, compassion)*, untie the* tzar *– that which is narrow and contracted* (meaning – the narrow, limited self-sense, or ego).

קַבֵּל רִנַּת עַמְּךָ שגְּבֵנוּ טַהֲרֵנוּ נורָא

*Receive the song of your people! Strengthen us, Purify us, O Awesome One!*

נָא גִבּור דּורְשי יִחוּדְךָ כְּבָבַת שמְרֵם

*Please, Divine Strength, those who foster Your Oneness – like the pupil of an eye, guard them!*

This third line is unusual. If we’re asking God to guard us, to keep us safe, why are we likening ourselves to a *bavat –* a “pupil” of an eye? It would make more sense to pray that we be guarded like a baby, or like a city – but like a pupil?

Let’s look at this a bit more deeply.

What is a pupil? It is simply an opening through which light enters the eye; the pupil is essentially a hole. And yet, if you make eye contact with a person, it is really the pupil of the eye that gives you the sense that eye contact is being made. That’s why in all those zombie movies, when they want to make a person seem like they’re dead, they somehow take away the pupils from the actors’ eyes; an eye with no pupil creates the effect of there being “nobody home.” It’s a disturbing image to see a person’s eye with no pupil, because we somehow know intuitively that the pupil indicates consciousness; it conveys that there is someone there, looking back at us.

This is interesting, because everyone’s pupils look more or less the same. The color of people’s eyes are different, the shape of people’s eyes are different, and the face in which the eyes are set is completely unique for each person. You can’t tell the identity of someone by their pupils; you need to see their face. And yet, it is the pupil that tells you there is consciousness. Which is interesting, because consciousness itself is also not unique to individuals; it is essentially the same in everyone – simply an open space of perception. And yet, consciousness is our essence, without which we would cease to exist.

The pupil, then, is really a symbol for who we are on the deepest level. Are we our bodies? No. Are we our faces? No. Are we our feelings? Our thoughts? Our personalities?

All of these things are *parts* of who we are, but none of them are *essentially* who we are. The essential ingredient is consciousness. And, like the pupil of your eye, your consciousness is simply an opening. It’s not unique, it’s more or less the same for everyone, and yet it’s the most miraculous and precious thing. Without consciousness, everything else is just a shell; just a bundle of patterns.

So this prayer is crying out, *tatir tzerura- untie the bundle!* Meaning, uncover and reveal this essential openness that we are, beneath the bundle of patterns comprised of our bodies, thoughts and feelings, so that we can know ourselves as this simple openness, *k’vavat –* like a “pupil.”

**The Absolute Yes**

There is a certain paradox of consciousness which is also reflected in the pupil:

On one hand, consciousness effortlessly takes the shape of whatever is present in experience. When we relax the thinking mind and let go completely into the fluidity of consciousness, merging with the fulness of the moment, we are walking the path of מ *mem.*

Notice: there is a richness to your experience right now – sensations, senses, the movement of your breathing, and feelings or mood tone that may be vibrating in your body. Thoughts arise, persist for some time, and then dissipate. Relaxing into the richness of this one experience unfolding now is the path of מ *mem.*

And yet, at the same time, there also arises the choice to entertain some things within your experience and to not to entertain other things. For example, if some anger were to arise, or the impulse to judge, or to complain – you could notice its presence, but not act on it. So, on the deepest level, you can say “Yes” to it, you can recognize that a negative impulse exists, and that it is perfectly okay to exist. But on the level of choice, you can say “No” – you can choose not to *act* on it; you simply let it be there and then let it dissipate.

On the other hand, an positive impulse may arise, such as the impulse to be generous or responsible in some way, and you may choose to say “Yes” to that impulse on both levels; you say “Yes” first to its existence, just as you would for anything that arises, but you might also say “Yes” to act on it.

So, on the deepest level of awareness, there is a single “Yes” to everything that arises in the moment. That’s the path of מ *mem* and “water,” surrendering into the moment. But on the level of choice, there is a “Yes” to some things and a “No” to other things; that’s the duality of discernment – the path of ש *shin* and “fire.”

This truth is also reflected in the metaphor of the pupil, in that we generally have two pupils. On one hand, the pupil is a simple openness to light which creates a single image, a single experience – that’s the מ *mem,* or “water” level. And yet, there are two pupils, hinting at the Yes and the No, the duality of choice, the ש *shin* or “fire” that arises from the מ *mem*.

**Parshat Balak**

…וְעַתָּה֩ לְכָה־נָּ֨א אָֽרָה־לִּ֜י אֶת־הָעָ֣ם הַזֶּ֗ה כִּֽי־עָצ֥וּם הוּא֙

*“And now, go please and curse this people for me, since they are too numerous for me…”*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 22:6, *Parshat Balak*

*Balak*, the king of *Moav,* becomes frightened when he hears about the Israelites who are camping in a nearby valley. So, he sends messengers out to the reclusive sorcerer *Bilam,* to request that he put a curse on the Israelites. At first, *Bilam* refuses. But after several requests, he concedes and rides out on his donkey. Next, there’s a strange and unique passage – one of only two instances in the Torah of talking animals. (The other one is the talking snake in the Garden of Eden).

In this passage, *Bilam* rides out on his donkey through a vineyard, when suddenly an angel appears and blocks his path with sword drawn. But, only the donkey can see the angel; *Bilam* is oblivious to it. The donkey veers off the path to avoid the sword-wielding angel, and accidentally presses *Bilam’s* foot into a wall. *Bilam* gets angry and hits donkey with a stick, at which point the animal opens her mouth and speaks:

 מֶה־עָשִׂ֣יתִֽי לְךָ֔  *Ma asiti l’kha?*

*“What have I done to you?”*

*Bilam* yells back:

“Because you mocked me! If I had a sword I’d kill you right now!”

Says the donkey:

“Am I not your donkey that you’ve ridden until this day? Have I ever done anything like this before?”

“No,” admits *Bilam.*

Suddenly, *Bilam’s* eyes are magically “uncovered” and he too sees the angel with the sword. *Bilam* bows, apologizes and offers to turn back. The angel tells him no, but he should be careful to only say the words that God will place in his mouth to say.

So, *Bilam* goes on his way, and meets up with King *Balak,* who pleads with *Bilam* to curse the Israelites. But, every time *Bilam* opens his mouth, he pronounces blessings instead. King *Balak* tries again and again to get *Bilam* to curse, bringing him to different places on a mountain overlooking the Israelite camp, as if that would change something. But every time, it just comes out more blessings. In *Bilam’s* final blessing, he says,

נְאֻ֤ם בִּלְעָם֙ בְּנ֣וֹ בְעֹ֔ר וּנְאֻ֥ם הַגֶּ֖בֶר שְׁתֻ֥ם הָעָֽיִן׃

*“The words of Bilam son of Beor, the words of the man with an open eye…”*

נְאֻ֕ם שֹׁמֵ֖עַ אִמְרֵי־אֵ֑ל אֲשֶׁ֨ר מַחֲזֵ֤ה שַׁדַּי֙ יֶֽחֱזֶ֔ה נֹפֵ֖ל וּגְל֥וּי עֵינָֽיִם׃

*“The words of the one who hears the sayings of God, who sees the vision of Shaddai, while fallen and with uncovered eyes…”*

מַה־טֹּ֥בוּ אֹהָלֶ֖יךָ יַעֲקֹ֑ב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶ֖יךָ יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃ – *Mah tovu ohalekha Yaakov, mishkenotekha Yisrael!*

*“How wonderful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places O Israel!”*

…כְּגַנֹּ֖ת עֲלֵ֣י נָהָ֑ר… כַּאֲרָזִ֖ים עֲלֵי־מָֽיִם׃ יִֽזַּל־מַ֙יִם֙ מִדָּ֣לְיָ֔ו וְזַרְע֖וֹ בְּמַ֣יִם רַבִּ֑ים

*Like gardens by a river… like cedars by water, their boughs drip with moisture, their roots have abundant water…*

*- BaMidbar* (Numbers) 24:3-6, *Parshat Balak*

Water is such a powerful metaphor for consciousness, not only because of its ability to take the shape of the vessel into which it is poured, but because it is so fundamental – not only is it an essential nutrient that makes up about 70% of our bodies, but it is also the medium through which we are cleansed on both inner and outer levels.

Similarly, just as our bodies are made primarily out of water, on the inner level we are fundamentally made out of awareness. And just as our physical bodies become polluted and must be regularly purified with the help of water, so too we are affected by every experience – everything that happens to us, every emotion we feel, every thought that arises. We are, in a sense, like sponges, absorbing the energies of all that we experience, constantly.

Fortunately, just like a sponge that is cleaned with water, so too we can get clean on the inner level. Whatever we experience, no matter how intense, traumatic, or disappointing, is ultimately not who we really are; it eventually leaves our consciousness if we know how to rinse, squeeze, and rinse again.

And, if we don’t immerse frequently in the waters of Presence, then just like a sponge, *we can dry out.* The dried-out sponge can neither absorb anything new, nor can it be distinguished from all the dried-on *schmootz* within it. Similarly, when we become “dried out,” our belief systems are frozen; we can’t see anything new, but rather we perceive everything through the screen of our preconceptions. The inner “pollution” becomes indistinguishable from who we are.

But, no matter how dried out and encrusted we might become, just like the sponge – soak it in the water of awareness and the life comes back. If you are *really* dried out, it might take some time for the water to penetrate. But once it does, you will know, because all that stuff you thought was you will start rinsing away.

מַה־טֹּ֥בוּ אֹהָלֶ֖יךָ יַעֲקֹ֑ב מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶ֖יךָ יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃

*Mah tovu – How good are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel!* (Numbers 24:5)

“Jacob” and “Israel” are the *before* and *after* of inner cleansing. At first you may be practicing – meditating, *davening*, learning – but you still feel like a dried-out sponge, because the waters of awareness haven’t penetrated yet. That’s *ohalekha Ya’akov –* the “tents of Jacob” – because you’re sitting and working in the “tent” of goal-oriented practice.

But eventually, the water breaks through and you get soaked. At that point, just like a sponge, you still can get dirty again and again, but you know that *the dirt isn’t you;* you know how to get clean. Then you can bring that “moisture” of consciousness out of the tent and into more and more of life – that’s *mishklanotekha Yisrael –* the “dwellings of Israel,” because wherever you are, you can bring that Presence with you.

How do you do it? The *haftora* tells us:

הִגִּ֥יד לְךָ֛ אָדָ֖ם מַה־טּ֑וֹב וּמָֽה־יְהוָ֞ה דּוֹרֵ֣שׁ מִמְּךָ֗

*You have been told, O human, what is good, and what the Divine requires from you!*

- Mica 6:8

הִגִּ֥יד לְךָ֛ *Hidid l’kha – You have been told –* meaning, you already know the answer intuitively, but then it tells you again just in case:

כִּ֣י אִם־עֲשׂ֤וֹת מִשְׁפָּט֙ וְאַ֣הֲבַת חֶ֔סֶד וְהַצְנֵ֥עַ לֶ֖כֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶֽיךָ׃

*Only to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your Divinity…*

On the inner level, *asot mishpat – doing justice* – means giving your attention fully to all of this moment, not “favoring” some experiences over others, just as a judge would hear all testimonies and not take any bribes.

וְאַ֣הֲבַת חֶ֔סֶד *Ahavat hesed – love of kindness* means giving your awareness from the heart – not in a cold, mechanical way, but as an expression of generosity and benevolence.

וְהַצְנֵ֥עַ לֶ֖כֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶֽיך *Hatzneia lekhet im Eloheikha – walking humbly with your Divinity* means being aware of the Mystery, of the limits of your own understanding, and living through your faith in That Mystery, knowing the Divine as the underlying Reality behind all experience…

**The Wisdom of the Beast**

We are still left with two questions for our story.

Why is it that *Bilam’s* donkey perceives the angel before he does, and why do his eyes become “uncovered” as a result of the donkey speaking to him? And, once his eyes are uncovered, how does that allow him to “hear” the Divine voice, transforming curses into blessings?

One way to grasp this passage is to understand the donkey as the human body. There is a tendency to take our bodies for granted, as if they are only vehicles for achieving our agendas – like a car, or a donkey for that matter. But the spiritual potential of our bodies is to literally be *temples of Presence* – vessels for the “waters” of our awareness.

So, at first *Bilam* is just hitting his donkey, trying to control it. That’s the ego – selfish, angry, and entitled. But when he starts listening to what the donkey is telling him, then suddenly he can see the angel and hear it speak. Meaning – when we become present with our bodies, then we can clearly see the nature of whatever impulses that arise, and therefore we can come to hear the “angels of our better nature,” so to speak.

Then, rather than simply being taken over by our impulses, there is a space to really see which ones would bring blessings and which would bring curses if acted upon; that’s the “uncovering of the eyes,” so to speak. If there arises an impulse of anger, or an urge to put someone down – we can see that clearly and choose not entertain it. Or, if there arises an impulse of love, of supportiveness, of listening – we can see that clearly too and choose to act upon it. That is the “fire” that comes from the “water” – the *Yes* and the *No* of ש *shin* that comes from the Absolute Yes of מ *mem*.

**I’ve Got Two Eyes, One Two**

There is a story that when Reb Yosef Yitzhak of Lubavitch was four years old, he asked his father, Reb Shalom Ber:

“Abba, why do we have two eyes, but only one mouth and one nose?”

“Do you know your Hebrew letters?” asked Reb Shalom Ber.

“Yes,” replied the boy.

“And what is the difference between the letter *shin* and the letter *sin*?” continued Reb Shalom.

“A *shin* has a dot on the right side, and the *sin* on the left.”

“Right! Now, the letter *shin* represents fire, and fire makes the light that we see by. The dots on the right and left are like your two eyes.

“Accordingly, fire has two opposite qualities. On one hand, it can give us life by keeping us warm and cooking our food; that’s the right dot. On the other hand, it can burn us; that’s the left dot.

“Similarly, there are things you should look at with your right eye, and things you should look at with your left eye. You should see others with your right eye, being warm and loving, but see candy with your left eye, not grabbing at it!”

נָא גִבּור דּורְשי יִחוּדְךָ כְּבָבַת שמְרֵם *Na Gibor, dorshei yekhudekha, k’vavat shomreim!*

*Please, Divine Strength, those who foster Your Oneness – like the pupil of an eye, guard them!*

To walk the path of מ *mem,* pouring awareness into the body and merging with the moment, and yet also to walk path of ש*shin,* realizing the freedom to choose blessing and not curse, we have to be ever-watchful. Just as the pupil of an eye – *k’vavat –* is an open space of perception, so too our awareness is also an open space through which we can watchfully guard – *shomreim –* the movements and sensations of our bodies with *gibor,* strength. And, in so doing, we become *dorshei yikhudekha –* the ones who “foster” awareness of the Oneness of Reality, the Divinity of Being…