**BEING SPACE – Sukkot and V'Zot HaBrakhah**

Rabbi Shmelke and his brother came to their master, Rabbi DovBer, the Maggid of Mezritch, with a problem:

“Our sages teach that we should praise and thank God for our suffering and pain just as much as for the blessings we receive. How is this possible? We can understand *accepting* suffering, but how is it possible give thanks for it?”

“Go ask Reb Zusha,” the Maggid replied, “He sits in the Beit Midrash smoking his pipe.”

So, they went and found Reb Zusha and put the question to him. Zusha just laughed – “I don’t think you are asking the right person,” he said, “because I have never experienced suffering – how should I know how to give thanks for it when I’ve never had it?”

But the brothers knew that Zusha’s life had been a web of poverty and anguish, and they understood: the answer is to receive suffering with love…

This story points to a way by which we might relate to our suffering. But what does this mean, to “receive suffering with love?”

The festival of Sukkot provides some hints:

בַּסֻּכֹּ֥ת תֵּשְׁב֖וּ שִׁבְעַ֣ת יָמִ֑ים כָּל־הָֽאֶזְרָח֙ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל יֵשְׁב֖וּ בַּסֻּכֹּֽת׃ לְמַעַן֮ יֵדְע֣וּ דֹרֹֽתֵיכֶם֒ כִּ֣י בַסֻּכּ֗וֹת הוֹשַׁ֙בְתִּי֙ אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל בְּהוֹצִיאִ֥י אוֹתָ֖ם מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרָ֑יִם אֲנִ֖י יְהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֵיכֶֽם׃

*In sukkot you shall dwell for seven days; all citizens in Israel shall dwell in sukkot, so that your future generations may know that I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in Sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I Hashem, your Divinity.*

* Lev. 23:42

This passage gives the reason for the festival – it is so that future generations should know –

בַסֻּכּ֗וֹת הוֹשַׁ֙בְתִּי֙ אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל בְּהוֹצִיאִ֥י אוֹתָ֖ם מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרָ֑יִם – *I caused the Children of Israel to dwell in Sukkot when I brought them out of the land of Egypt…*

The movement from bondage to freedom involves dwelling in a *sukkah.* But what is a *sukkah?* There was a disagreement in the Talmud:

דתניא כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל ענני כבוד היו דברי ר' אליעזר ר"ע אומר סוכות ממש עשו להם

*We have learned: “I caused the children of Israel to dwell in sukkot”; (these booths were the) Clouds of the Divine Presence, these are the words of Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Akiva says: They made for themselves actual sukkot/huts.*

* B.T. *Sukkah* 11b

Rabbi Eliezer believed that the original *sukkot* were*AnaneiKavod –* “Clouds of the Divine Presence” that protected the Children of Israel on their journeys. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, disagreed; he said no, they were *sukkot mamash –* actual, physical huts. But either way, both of these interpretations are insubstantial; a temporary hut couldn’t provide much protection, and certainly a “cloud” is the most insubstantial thing there is. Why would these phenomena be celebrated as protection?

Let’s look a little deeper at the symbolism of the “Clouds of the Divine Presence” through this passage in the Talmud:

ר' יוסי בר' יהודה אומר שלשה פרנסים טובים עמדו לישראל אלו הן משה ואהרן ומרים וג' מתנות טובות ניתנו על ידם ואלו הן באר וענן ומן באר בזכות מרים עמוד ענן בזכות אהרן מן בזכות משה

*Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Yehuda, says: Three good sustainers rose up for Israel, and they are: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And three good gifts were given by their hands, and these are they: The well of water, the pillar of cloud, and the manna. He elaborates: The well was given to the Jewish people in the merit of Miriam; the pillar of cloud was in the merit of Aaron; and the manna in the merit of Moses…*

* B.T. *Ta’anit* 9a

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are three siblings who play major roles in the Exodus story. But in Kabbalah, Biblical personalities are not merely characters, they are archetypes, embodiments of specific spiritual qualities. Since the “pillar of cloud”isconnected to Aaron, we might ask – what is Aaron’s special quality?

הִלֵּל אוֹמֵר, הֱוֵי מִתַּלְמִידָיו שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שָׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שָׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקָרְבָן לַתּוֹרָה

*Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them close to the Torah.*

* *PirkeiAvot* 1:12

Aaron is, according to this *mishna,* the embodiment of Peace, of *Shalom,* and according to a*midrash*, his role inthe Exodus was to help others make peace. There is a story that when two Israeliteswould be in an argument, Aaron would come to each one privately and tell them that the other wishes to apologize, but that they are too embarrassed to come themselves. In this way, he would stand in for egoless-ness, and when each person perceived the other as being egoless, they would drop their own egos.

There are two major qualities of egoless-ness: willingness to be wrong, and gratitude. The egoic opposites of these, of course, are the psychological need to be right and *kvetchiness!*

Both of these qualities, the ability to concede an argument and as gratitude, are both embodied in the word *modeh:*

**מוֹדֶה אֲנִי** לְפָנֶֽיךָ מֶֽלֶךְ חַי וְקַיָּם שֶׁהֶחֱזַֽרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחֶמְלָה, רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתֶֽךָ

*Modeh/modahanilifanekha – I give thanks before You, living and everlasting King, for You have restored my soul with mercy; great is Your faithfulness!*

With this prayer, *modeh*(m.) or *modah*(f.) becomes the first spoken word of the day, giving thanks for waking up in the morning. The plain meaning is gratitude, but on a deeper level it also includes the other meaning as well, for just as one surrenders being right when conceding an argument, so too the attitude of thankfulness to be alive involves a surrender to the truth of our situation, an embrace of the reality of the moment, as the prayer says a little later in the morning blessings:

יְהֵא אָדָם יְרֵא שָׁמַֽיִם וּמוֹדֶה עַל־הָאֱמֶת וְדוֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹלְעוֹלָם

*Always a person should be in awe of heaven (the space of awareness within which this moment happens), and surrender to the Truth, and speak Truth in their heart…*

* Morning Blessings liturgy

The Kabbalists associated these qualities of *modeh/modah*with the *sefirah*of *Hod,* whose plain meaning is “Glory.” And yet, “Glory” would seem to be to opposite of the egoless-ness of *modeh!*

Which brings us back to Reb Zusha, who said that he never experienced suffering – meaning not that his life was only pleasure and abundance, but that he received his suffering in such a way that he no longer experienced it as suffering; he received it with love, with humility and gratitude, and this allowed his deeper essence to shine forth with laughter as he sat with his pipe and studied Torah – this is his Glory!

In actual practice, receiving suffering with love may not feel very glorious. It is helpful to understand that while we have the choice to practice receiving this moment as it is, with love and gratitude, transformation is not instantaneous; transformation is a process that takes time, though the decision to practice now takes no time at all. So, there is a dimension of practice that is time-bound, the dimension of spiritual development and the movement toward “Glory,” and there is a dimension that is not time-bound at all, that we can and must engage only in the Eternal Present.

These two dimensions are the first and final Hebrew letters, *Alef*and *Tav.*

א –ת

*Tav,* which means “sign,” is the final letter in *emet,* “Truth.” As the final letter, it represents the final truth of things, the fact of this moment, as it is. The essence of our practice is this basic opening to the Truth of this moment, the fullness of experience as it arises, in its full spectrum, from joy to pain, from bitterness to sweetness. This is the practice of *Alef –* being the oneness of awareness within which the dualities of experience arises.

Through this practice, which is always in the present, there evolves over time a sincerity of embracing Truth; over time, with practice, we can reach that state of Reb Zusha, of no longer seeing our suffering as suffering. At that point, the practice is no longer even a practice, it is simply who we are; it becomes truly sincere, and that is the *Tav.Tav*comes at the end of all the letters, reminding us – *the process takes time.*

There is a hint inour final*parshah…*

וְזֹ֣את הַבְּרָכָ֗ה אֲשֶׁ֨ר בֵּרַ֥ךְ מֹשֶׁ֛ה אִ֥ישׁ הָאֱלֹהִ֖יםאֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל לִפְנֵ֖י מוֹתֽוֹ׃

*This is the blessing with which Moses, the man of God, blessed the Children of Israel before his death…*

* Deut. 33.1

As Moses stands *lifnei moto,* “before his death,” he becomes *IshHaElohim –* the “God-Man.” Meaning, he fully acknowledges his mortality, the fleeting nature of all forms, and in doing so identifies with That which is not fleeting – the Eternal Being-ness which incarnates as all forms. In other words, he becomes like the *sukkah –* temporary huts, insubstantial clouds; but clouds of the Divine Presence. And this is why that which is insubstantial and fleetingis the supreme protection on our journey from *mitzrayim,* from slavery to freedom – because it “protects” us from ourselves, from the illusory sense of solidity that ego rests upon.

And in this realization, in the death of the man and the birth of the God-Man, there can be the realization that there is only *This…*

וְזֹ֣את הַבְּרָכָ֗ה

*V’ZotHaBrakhah*

And THIS (and this, and also this) is the Blessing!

*Hazakhazakv’nitkhazek! Be Strong, Be Strong, and May We be Strengthened!*

**More on V'Zot HaBrakhah...**

**​The Stranger – V'Zot HaBrakha**

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Rabbi Barukh of Mezbizh said, “Imagine you come to a strange country, where you know neither the language nor the customs. You feel like an alien, disconnected from others around you. But then you meet another traveler from your own country. Under normal circumstances, you may never have been interested in this person; but since you are both strangers, you have something in common in the strange land, and you become great friends…”

Rabbi Barukh’s “strange country” is really all of life, and the “companion” is really the Divine Itself. There is no experience which is not completely Divine; still, we are inclined to never notice this, until we begin to feel the pain of alienation. Motivated by feelings of disconnection or being “out of sync,” we become seekers of wholeness and peace, and it is then that the possibility of finding the Divine appears.

But to do that, our estranged self (ego) must “die” into intimacy. The “me” that seeks can motivate us, but it can never “get there” itself; it must be surrendered into the vast space of awareness that is already not separate from anything you perceive, that is already the Divine in the form of you and everything else that exists.

This past week we completed the Torah reading cycle. In the final parshah, V’Zot HaBrakha, Moses is not allowed to reap the fruits of his years of leadership; he must die just outside the Promised Land. Immediately, we go right back to the very beginning and start the reading cycle anew: Bereisheet bara Elohim – In the beginning, the Divine created the heavens and the earth…

Maybe it seems harsh and unfair that Moses couldn’t enter the land. But if we see the inner dimension of the story, there is a pointer to our own experience: the seeker of the “Promised Land” must die if you wish to truly “enter.” Stop seeing the Garden of Eden as something to get to, and connect with your actual experience now, in the present. The “Garden” is all there is, the Divine is all there is; relax the “me” and know: you are the Garden, you are the Divine…