| Finding the Way Home – ע AYIN and Va’etkhanan |
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**Rejection of Rejection**

During my summer between fifth and sixth grade, my parents schlepped me back and forth to a day camp. But, for one night, the day camp became a sleepaway camp – the sleepover began with a dance in the barn, after which we spent the night in our sleeping bags out in a huge field.

In the barn, I danced with a particular girl for most of the night. I guess I thought this girl liked me, so during the sleeping-bags-in-the-field part, I kept trying to sneak out of the “boys area” and into the “girls area” so I could go see her.

At some point a counselor caught me. “Brian, stop bothering the girls!”

“No you don’t understand,” I pleaded, “They want me to be here!”

Suddenly, that girl and several of her friends cried out in unison, “*No we don’t!”*

Rejection!

Sometimes we think we are wanted, but we are not. That’s just the truth. The person who thinks that they are wanted despite all protestations is an egomaniac. Kids can be like egomaniacs sometimes, and at some point, the delusion is toppled: “No, you really are annoying the hell out of me and I want you to STOP!”

But these kinds of hurtful childhood experiences can also create another kind of misperception into adulthood: a self-image that you have nothing to offer, that people don’t need or want you.

I remember once being in a situation where I wanted to help someone, but I wasn’t being asked for help. In my post-rejection psychology, I didn’t offer anything, because I thought that if my help was wanted, I would be asked.

As time went on, however, I could see that I would never be asked – not because my help wasn’t wanted, but because the person wasn’t comfortable asking. So, I gathered my will against my personality, offered my help directly, and it was promptly accepted; so easy.

**Parshat Va’etkhanan**

אֶעְבְּרָה־נָּ֗א וְאֶרְאֶה֙ אֶת־הָאָ֣רֶץ הַטּוֹבָ֔ה אֲשֶׁ֖ר בְּעֵ֣בֶר הַיַּרְדֵּ֑ן … וָאֶתְחַנַּ֖ן אֶל־יְהוָ֑ה בָּעֵ֥ת הַהִ֖וא לֵאמֹֽר׃

*“I pleaded with the Divine at that time, saying…* ‘*Please let me cross and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan!’”*

- *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 3:23-25, *Parshat Va’etkhanan*

The *parshah* begins with Moses telling the Children of Israel about how he pleaded (וָאֶתְחַנַּן*va’etkhanan*) with God to let him enter the Promised Land.

But, God doesn’t let him:

רַב־לָ֔ךְ אַל־תּ֗וֹסֶף דַּבֵּ֥ר אֵלַ֛י ע֖וֹד בַּדָּבָ֥ר הַזֶּֽה׃

*“Too much of you! Do not increase your words to me about this thing!”*

-3:23

Moses, the beloved prophet who “knows God face to face” is rejected. But does Moses develop a bad self-image and stop doing his job? Not at all – he immediately goes on teaching them Torah:

וְעַתָּ֣ה יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל שְׁמַ֤ע *V’atah Yisrael sh’ma – And now Israel, listen!*

- 4:1

Sometimes our offers are accepted, and sometimes they are rejected. But if we shut down when we are rejected and stop offering, we may miss what we are called upon to do.

And furthermore, what’s wrong with being rejected anyway?

If rejection feels bad, it is because there is a self-image that is feeding off the desire to be appreciated. That ego, that separate self-sense, is natural, but ultimately it is a burden. When the ego is bruised, take that as medicine. Accept the pain – let it burn away the ego’s substance. Ultimately, the pain will be liberating, and in that liberation there can be a seeing of who we are *beyond* the self-image – which is to say, we can see that *we actually are the seeing* – we are the miracle of awareness itself; we are the “eye” that opens in the universe.

Furthermore, this “eye” is not merely our own awareness; it is the awareness of Reality Itself; it is the Divine incarnating as us and seeing through our own eyes. This activity of seeking and discovering is the path of ע *ayin,* the letter which literally means “eye.” This path has two aspects – first, there is a seeking, motivated by the drive to find fulfillment, to find oneness, to find peace, to come home. This ultimately leads to the second part – the realization that the Divine we seek is not separate from the awareness that we are. This field of awareness at the root of our being is represented by the second *sefirah* of *Hokhmah.* On the Integral Tree, ע *ayin* is connected to *Hokhmah,* representing the process of awareness becoming aware of itself.

**The Greatness That You Are**

אֲדֹנָ֣י יֱהֹוִ֗ה אַתָּ֤ה הַֽחִלּ֙וֹתָ֙ לְהַרְא֣וֹת אֶֽת־עַבְדְּךָ֔ אֶ֨ת־גׇּדְלְךָ֔ וָאֶתְחַנַּ֖ן אֶל־יְהוָ֑ה בָּעֵ֥ת הַהִ֖וא לֵאמֹֽר׃

*“I pleaded with the Divine at that time, saying: ‘My Divine Lord, you have begun to reveal to your servant Your Greatness…’*

*- Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 3:23-25, *Parshat Va’etkhanan*

וָאֶתְחַנַּן *Va’etkhanan,* “I pleaded” – comes from חֵן *hein*, which means “grace.” To “plead” is to beg for Grace.

​What “Grace” is Moses praying for? The revelation of *Gadol,* God’s “Greatness.” *Gadol* begins with ג *gimel,* the letter that represents wholeness, completeness, fulness.

But this “Greatness” is not something separate from you; it is the basic quality of your own innermost being. It is “great” in the sense that it is far more spacious than anything within your experience; it is the Wholeness of the space within which all experience arises – the space of awareness itself, of *Hokhmah.*

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, חָבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצֶלֶם

*He used to say, ‘Beloved are human beings, for they are created in the Divine Image…*’

- Pirkei Avot, 3:14

This Divine “image” is the Greatness, the ג *gimel,* of your own awareness, or *Hokhmah*. Rabbi Akiva calls us “beloved” because of this gift.

Then he says,

חִבָּה יְתֵרָה נוֹדַעַת לוֹ שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצֶלֶם

*It is an even greater love that our Divine Image is made known to us…*

In other words, though our Divine Greatness is a wonderful gift, it doesn’t do us much good unless we can *see* it – unless we experience the Infinite directly. This is the path of ע *ayin,* the seeking and finding of the ג *gimel* of *Hokhmah,* the Wholeness of awareness. This is the greatest gift, the Supreme Grace, because it is the revelation of our own being, something that can never be taken away.

But, this Divine Greatness is not really hidden; it is just that our awareness tends to look at everything except Itself, so it can be difficult to notice…

No Rathering

*Once I was on a family vacation in Rome. At one point, we had split up into two different cabs, and I was in a cab with my father-in-law. He turned to me and said, “So, Brian – are you enjoying yourself or would you rather be at some ashram in India?”*

*I replied, “Well, I don’t really put energy into rather-ing things.” He was silent for a moment, and then said, “I get that. That’s good. I’m going to eliminate ‘rather’ from my vocabulary!”*

*What does it mean to not “rather” something?*

It doesn’t mean that you can’t make good judgements. It doesn’t mean that you don’t take yourself out of an undesirable situation, or that you don’t help to make things better for yourself or others; it just means that whatever your experience is, in whatever situation you find yourself in, you don’t put mental and emotional energy into wishing things were different. You first of all accept the moment as it is, and then do whatever you do from this place of openness and surrender.

It is important to understand that the practice of “not rathering” is not really a character trait; it is not something that you *add on* to your personality, but rather it is a quality of Presence – a quality inherent within *Hokhmah,* within your field of awareness that is underneath your personality, beyond your thoughts, infinitely more vast than your feelings. And, while your thoughts and feelings are always flowing and changing, awareness is the background against which your thoughts and feelings are happening.

So, when you shift from feeling that “I am this personality, I am these thoughts and feelings,” into knowing yourself as the field of Presence within which your thoughts and feelings are happening, then it is very natural not to rather anything, because awareness itself is never preferring one thing over another thing; it is simply open to whatever there is to perceive in the present moment – that’s why it has the quality of Wholeness, represented by ג *gimel.*

וָאֶתְחַנַּ֖ן אֶל־יְהוָ֑ה בָּעֵ֥ת – *I implored Hashem at that time…*

Moses is saying, *“I implored that I should be at some other time, at a time other than now. I don’t want to be here, I want to get to the Promised Land!”*

*But God tells Moses that he should look and see the Promised Land from afar:*

עֲלֵ֣ה רֹ֣אשׁ הַפִּסְגָּ֗ה וְשָׂ֥א עֵינֶ֛יךָ

*“Ascend to the top of the cliff and raise up your eyes…”*

- 3:27

*The expression for “ascend to the top of the cliff” begins*עֲלֵ֣ה רֹ֣אש *alei rosh, which literally means, “Raise up the head.” Meaning, get out of your head! Don’t be so identified with your own opinions, with your emotional reactions and so on. How do you do that?*

וְשָׂ֥א עֵינֶ֛יךָ *v’sa einekha – and raise up your eyes – meaning, instead of putting energy into judging, into “rather-ing,” simply see what is happening in this moment. Be the witnessing Presence within which your present experience is unfolding. In seeing what is present, you will come to know: the “Promised Land” is, in fact, “where” you already are; it is not what you see from afar, but is which is seeing.*

*But what if this realization of the Promised Land continues to seem far off?*

**Ox and Field**

A disciple of Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger came to the *rebbe* with a complaint: “I’ve been trying for twenty years, and still I don’t feel like I’m getting anywhere! If a craftsman practiced their craft for twenty years, they would either be much better at their craft, or at the very least they would be able to do it much more quickly. But with me, I’ve been praying and praying, and I don’t feel any closer than when I began.”

“It is taught in Elijah’s name,” replied the *rebbe,* “that a person should take Torah upon themselves as an ox takes the yoke. You see, the ox leaves its stall in the morning, goes to the field, plows, and his led back home. This happens day after day. Nothing changes with regard to the ox, but the ploughed field bears the harvest.”

On the spiritual path there can be times of tremendous transformation, but there can also be times of plateau, times when it seems we are plugging away without much result, and that can feel frustrating. At such times, it is good to express our frustration through prayer, just like Moses did:

וָאֶתְחַנַּ֖ן אֶל־יְהוָ֑ה בָּעֵ֥ת הַהִ֖וא לֵאמֹֽר׃

*I pleaded with the Divine at that time, saying…*

Just like the *hassid* who complained to his *rebbe,* Moses is saying, “I’ve been leading this people toward the land for forty years – please let me at least enter along with them!”

The “land” is a metaphor – in relation to our spiritual path, it represents the fruit of the practice – that sense of coming home into the Oneness, coming home into the present, the ג *gimel*. When we feel the angst of separateness, when we feel like an ox that goes on day after day with the same old routine, don’t hold back – cry out in prayer! This is the first phase of ע *ayin,* the phase of seeking.

This crying out in prayer helps come to the second phase, hinted by God’s response to Moses:

רַב־לָ֔ךְ אַל־תּ֗וֹסֶף דַּבֵּ֥ר אֵלַ֛י ע֖וֹד בַּדָּבָ֥ר הַזֶּֽה׃

*“Too much of you! Do not increase your words to me about this thing!”*

That separate self-sense, the “me” that thinks and speaks and acts, is the “ox.” The truth is, the ox will always be an ox. At some point, we need to give up on all this “me” – *Rav lakh! Too much of you! –* and discover the aspect of our being that is silence – *Al tosef daber! Do not increase your words!*

In that silence we can discover the deeper aspect of our being – the ג *gimel* – the Wholeness of that vast, boundless “field” of *Hokhmah.*

This is not to deny or devalue the “ox” in any way; we need the ox. We need to organize our lives and set aside time for practice, in addition to all the practical necessities of life. But just as the ox cannot become the field, just as Moses cannot enter the land but must die outside the land, so too we must let go of this self-ness and recognize the aspect of ourselves that is beyond the ox. The truth is, on the deepest level, *we already are the field.*

עֲלֵ֣ה רֹ֣אשׁ הַפִּסְגָּ֗ה וְשָׂ֥א עֵינֶ֛יךָ

*“Ascend to the top of the cliff and raise up your eyes…”*

Moses climbs up the cliff and sees the “land” from afar, and there he dies. Similarly, we can understand the goal with our minds, but that is only a “seeing from afar.” To truly enter the “land,” we must discover what is beyond the ox-self. *Alei rosh – elevate the head –* recognize that beneath all the content, *you are the seeing,* totally transcendent of your thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

How do you do that?

וְשָׂא עֵינֶיךָ *v’sa einekha – raise up your eyes –* “see” whatever is arising in your awareness, right now; be the transcendent space within which this moment unfolds. In this way, prayer leads to silence, and you can make that shift from being the “ox” to being the “field” – from being the “seeker” to being the “finder” – the finder of the vast field of silent Presence, the ע *ayin* seeing the ג *gimel* of the *Hokhmah.*

A rabbi once asked Menachem Mendel of Vorki, “Where did you learn the art of silence?” Menachem Mendel was about to respond, but then he changed his mind and said nothing.

**A Good Eye**

There is another dimension to the path of ע *ayin,* which is what the tradition calls having a “good eye.” It means seeing the good in others, rather than dwelling on the negative. When we discover that the Wholeness (ג *gimel*) we seek is none other than our own innermost being (*Hokhmah*), the outer consequence is that we are freed from that egoic drive to judge others in a negative way:

וֶהֱוֵי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת – *Judge every person toward the pan of merit…*

*-* Pirkei Avot 1: 6

Once there was a rabbi who wanted to start a *yeshivah* – an institution for Jewish learning. After many years of planning and raising funds, his vision was finally realized – the new Torah school was built in a beautiful area out in the country, on the bank of a river. Many young people came to live and to learn, and the rabbi was gratified to see his goal and passion manifested.

On days with good weather, he would often go outside with the students to the river’s edge to *daven Minkhah* – to pray the afternoon prayer. One day, while they were all outside praying, he noticed that the building across the river (which seemed to have been abandoned) was being renovated and readied for something. Day after day he watched as workers came to refurbish the old building, and he could see that there seemed to be a woman in charge of the enterprise because she was there every day, busily involved with whatever was going on.

Eventually the building seemed to open for business, because he saw men coming and going at all hours of the day and night. He wondered, what could be going on over there?

Then he found out ­– the new business was a brothel, and the women he had seen was the head of the brothel. He was so upset ­– his Torah school was right across from a brothel! How terrible! He feared that his boys would be tempted into going over there; he was angry that his life’s work was being contaminated with such sinfulness and he was filled with scorn for the woman who was responsible.

Nevertheless, he refused to change his practice of bringing the students out to *daven* by the river. It was Spring, and the weather had just become warm and beautiful. One time, while they were all praying, he noticed that the woman had also come outside. He glared at her across the river, and he saw her looking back at him. He was filled with rage and cursed her in his heart.

This became a pattern ­– every day during those pleasant months, the rabbi and the students would go outside to *daven,* and every day he would see the women. He would try to ignore her, but he was driven by his irritation to look at her, and every time he did, he saw her looking back at him.

Soon after, it happened that the rabbi had a heart attack and died. When he came to *Olam HaBa,* the “World to Come,” he was told that he would not be able to enter right away, but would have to spend some time in *Gehinnom* (Jewish Hell) first to cleanse himself from the spiritual impurities caused by all his anger and cursing of the brothel owner. So, he willingly descended into *Gehinnom.* After what felt like an eternity of torment, he was finally cleansed enough to be allowed into the World to Come.

He was ushered into Paradise – a beautiful, peaceful place of lush gardens, in which the Divine Presence was palpably felt – and led to a small, modest dwelling, which was to be his heavenly home. It wasn’t much, but he accepted it with gratitude. As he approached his dwelling, he looked around and noticed that there was an immense palace next door. “Wow” he thought, “That must be the abode of some great *tzaddik* (saint).”

“Actually,” said his angelic escort, “That’s the house of the brothel owner across the river; she happened to die the same day you did.”

“What?” shouted the rabbi, “There must be some mistake! I mean, I realize I wasn’t perfect, I shouldn’t have gotten so angry at her, but still – I was studying Torah all day, and she was running a brothel!”

“Actually,” said the angel, “She studied much more Torah than you did.”

“Really? How could that be?”

“All those days that you stared at her from across the river, you seethed with anger thinking, ‘What a horrible person she is! Look what a terrible sin she has done, building that brothel and seducing people into sin!’

“But as she stared back at you, she was thinking, ‘What a sweet holy soul that is! Look at what a great *mitzvah* he has done, starting that *yeshivah* and nourishing so many with a Torah education!’ Over time, her holy thoughts of blessing toward you infiltrated the rest of her life, until she was almost constantly blessing you in her heart. Whereas in your case, your destructive thoughts of anger and cursing infiltrated the rest of *your* life, so even when you were studying Torah externally, internally you were filled with scorn…”

There is a beautiful *Mishna* that expresses the essence of this story:

רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶן תְּרַדְיוֹן אוֹמֵר, שְׁנַיִם שֶׁיּוֹשְׁבִין וְאֵין בֵּינֵיהֶן דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה, הֲרֵי זֶה מוֹשַׁב לֵצִים,

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים א) וּבְמוֹשַׁב לֵצִים לֹא יָשָׁב

: אֲבָל שְׁנַיִם שֶׁיּוֹשְׁבִין וְיֵשׁ בֵּינֵיהֶם דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה, שְׁכִינָה שְׁרוּיָה בֵינֵיהֶם

*R. Hananiah ben Tradion said: If two sit together and there are no words of Torah between them, then this is a session of scorners, as it is said: “And in the seat of the scornful he does not sit…” (Psalms 1:1); But, if two sit together and there are words of Torah between them, then the* Shekhinah *abides among them…*

*- Pirkei Avot* 3:3

At first, this *mishna* might seem extreme; is it saying that if two people are talking and they don’t discuss Torah, then they are “scorners?”

But if we look at it from the opposite direction, it is actually telling us what “Torah” really is. If “scorn” is the *opposite* of Torah, then the opposite of “scorn” is Torah! In other words, when we speak from a sense of love and blessing, when we see others with an ע *ayin tovah,* a “good eye” ­– we speak words of Torah.

Furthermore, the words we speak form the structure of perception through which we see things – the “window” through which the ע *ayin* sees, so to speak. Just as the thoughts of the characters in the story formed the abodes for their souls in the afterlife, so too we construct our perception, our inner “dwelling” through our thoughts and words. This is why *Binah,* the third *sefirah* of the Tree of Life which represents the activity of thinking, is sometimes referred to as the “Palace.”

But, if our thoughts have such power, why are we so careless with them? In the story, the rabbi is a scholar of Torah – how could he make such a mistake?

We seem to make the mistake of wrong thinking because we’re not aware of our choice. We get taken over by an impulse and our minds start running; we get swept away by our thoughts. If we want to gain sovereignty over our own minds, then our thinking needs to be balanced by *not thinking;* thought needs to be balanced by space, *Binah* needs to be balanced by *Hokhmah*. In this space of no-thought, we can more easily see others through the “eyes” of *Hesed,* of lovingkindness. This is why, on the Integral Tree, the path of ע *ayin* connects *Hokhmah* and *Hesed,* connecting spacious awareness with loveingkindness.

There is a hint in the *parshah,* which may be the first place in any text that *Hokhmah* and *Binah* are mentioned:

*…*רְאֵ֣ה לִמַּ֣דְתִּי אֶתְכֶ֗ם חֻקִּים֙ וּמִשְׁפָּטִ֔ים

*See, I have taught you ethical rules and spiritual practices…*

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם֮ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם֒ כִּ֣י הִ֤וא חָכְמַתְכֶם֙ וּבִ֣ינַתְכֶ֔ם לְעֵינֵ֖י הָעַמִּ֑ים אֲשֶׁ֣ר יִשְׁמְע֗וּן אֵ֚ת כָּל־הַחֻקִּ֣ים הָאֵ֔לֶּה וְאָמְר֗וּ רַ֚ק עַם־חָכָ֣ם וְנָב֔וֹן הַגּ֥וֹי הַגָּד֖וֹל הַזֶּֽה׃

*Guard them and do them, for She is your Wisdom* (Hokhmatkhem) *and Understanding* (Binatkhem)*in the eyes of the peoples that will hear all of these practices and say, “Surely this great nation is a people of Wisdom* (Hokham) *and Understanding* (N’Vonam)*.”*

*- Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 4:5-6 *Parshat Va’etkhanan*

​These passages begin with a description of the Teaching (“She,” Torah) as *hukim* and *mishpatim. Mishpatim* refers to universal ethical laws such as “don’t steal,” and “don’t slander” and the like; they are laws that anyone might arrive at through contemplation of right and wrong. *Hukim* literally means “decrees” and has come to mean the particularistic ritual laws of the tradition, practices that may seem strange and arbitrary from the outside, such as *kashrut* and *Shabbat*, but have an inner transformational wisdom to them that you can experience only through practicing them. (That is why I translated *hukim*as “spiritual practices.”)

These two elements ­– ethical behavior and spiritual practices – form the foundation of the spiritual path; neither can replace the other, because it is through spiritual practice that we sensitize ourselves to *seeing* beyond the narrow view of ego. Without widening our view beyond ego, we can’t see right and wrong clearly; we will always see things in terms of our preconceptions and prejudices.

Again, this is why *Hokhmah* and *Binah* are both so important. Through meditation and prayer (*hukim*), we transcend the thinking mind so that we can get free from our preconceptions and prejudices and see reality more clearly. From this clear place, we can contemplate (*Binah*) the right paths we should take with our behaviors (*mishpatim*).

Thus, *hukim* and *mishpatim* are the expressions of *Hokhmah* and *Binah.* The text then mentions another pair of concepts:

שְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם – *Sh’martem va’asitem – Guard them and do them.*

In order for the Teaching to become fully integrated into our lives, we need not only try to practice the Teaching, but we must also “guard” Her. This means keeping Her forward in our minds; it means making Her into our highest value. Again, this is only possible in an authentic way if we balance our thoughts about the Teaching with *space from thought*, because it is through the space of *Hokhmah* that we can experience the Oneness of Being in a direct way; thus, the Divine becomes not merely a concept, but a lived Reality.

Finally, the text mentions two different modes of perception:

לְעֵינֵ֖י הָעַמִּ֑ים אֲשֶׁ֣ר יִשְׁמְע֗וּן – *l’einei ha’amim asher yishm’un* – *in the eyes of the peoples that will hear*…

“In the eyes” and “will hear” refers to the senses of both “seeing” and “hearing.”

Both of these are themselves metaphors. “Seeing” represents direct perception because when we look around, we have a sense of what is going on instantaneously; we don’t have to think about it. Thus, “seeing” and ע *ayin* are connected to *Hokhmah* on the Integral Tree.

“Hearing,” on the other hand, refers not to hearing sounds, but to hearing words, and so relies on the thinking process – *Binah.* We need both; we need to see what is plainly in front of us in the present, and we need to use thought to chart a path into the future – *Hokhmah* and *Binah* together.

*Binah* and *Hokhmah* are also the starting point and end point of the two phases of ע *ayin.* *Binah* is thought, which allows us to judge and decide. On the path of ע *ayin,* thought is that which allows us to be dissatisfied with how things are and motivates us to seek and to cry out in prayer for something better. This leads to the second phase, in which our seeking, represented by ע *ayin,* looks back upon *Hokhmah,* upon awareness itself, and finds there the Wholeness and Peace it longs for, represented by ג *gimel…*