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| Tranquil Waters – ל LAMED and Parshat Shelakh L’kha |

Reb Menachem Mendel, known as the Kotzker Rebbe, once overheard someone comparing some person to another person: “So-and-so is a much greater scholar than so-and-so!”

To this, the Kotzker replied:

“If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I, and you are you. But if I am I *because you are you*, and you are you *because I am I,* then I am *not I,* and you are *not you!”*

In other words, don’t base your identity on how you see others – or put more simply, *don’t compare yourself to others.*

This bit of wisdom, albeit said in a riddle-like way, is simple and obvious. And yet, comparing ourselves with others and feeling inferior or superior as a result is an all-pervasive psychological reality for most humans.

At its root, this tendency to compare ourselves with others comes from a feeling of insecurity that stems from *uncertainty.* We may feel uncertain about whether we are really worthy of what we have, or whether our abilities are good enough to maintain what we have or acquire what we lack, or we may worry about losing our abilities as we age. And it’s understandable – we really don’t know the answer to what will be. Uncertainty is the truth.

But rather than confront this truth, some deal with uncertainty by trying to pretend it’s not there. We may try to convince ourselves that we are great, that we’re better than others, creating a kind of insecurity-based arrogance. Or, we may put ourselves down, affirming the worst in ourselves so that we don’t get disappointed. The problem with both these approaches is they’re not based on truth; they’re based on our *reaction to our discomfort with truth –* that is, the truth of uncertainty.

עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רַב, וְהִסְתַּלֵּק מִן הַסָּפֵק רַבָּן גַּמְלִיאֵל הָיָה אוֹמֵר

*Rabban Gamaliel used to say: “Make for yourself a teacher, and remove yourself from uncertainty…”*

- Pirkei Avot 1:16

On the plain level, this *mishna* is reminding us of the importance of having teachers. Learning from teachers accomplishes three important things – first, it helps us to grow. Second, it puts us in a relationship of humility toward another, helping us to accept our own uncertainty rather than fight against it with arrogance or self-deprecation, so that we can be open to learning something new. Third, it is actually a path to transforming some of our uncertainty into knowledge.

But on a deeper level, this *mishna* can me read, *“Make for/to yourself a teacher” –* in other words, make that which is *to yourself –* whatever is arising in this moment – into your teacher.

אֵיזֶהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם *Eizeihu hakham? Halomed mikol Adam.*

*Who is wise? One who learns from every person.*

- Pirkei Avot 4:1

This is the Path of *Lamed* ל*,* which means both “learn” and “teach,” pointing to the attitude of curiosity – alert openness to learn whatever the moment has to teach us. On the deepest level, this is not the learning of specific content, but rather it is the ongoing learning of *how to be;* that is, how to move through life as an embodiment of Presence, knowing yourself as the open space of awareness within which this moment unfolds, not separate from the One Reality we call the Divine.

Again, this deepest level of the Path of *Lamed* ל is not merely the learning of ideas or concepts; it is a way of approaching the moment. There is a story that once, when Rabbi Yisrael of Apt was giving a public teaching, great throngs of people were pushing and shoving to try to get closer so they could hear his words.

“That won’t help you!” cried the rabbi, “Those who are able to hear will hear, even at a distance. Those who are not able to hear will not hear, no matter how near they come.”

In other words, the root of “hearing the teaching” is in our relationship with the moment, not in our hearing of specific words.

Peaceful Unity

יַחְדָּו אֶשְׁכְּבָ֪ה וְאִ֫ישָׁ֥ן כִּֽי־אַתָּ֣ה יְי לְבָדָ֑ד לָ֝בֶ֗טַח תּוֹשִׁיבֵֽנִי׃ בְּשָׁל֣וֹם

*In peaceful unity I lie down and sleep, for You,* Hashem, *cause me to dwell in solitude and security.*

- *Tehilim* (Psalms) 4:9

There is a sense of peace and unity that is found when we learn to *simply be* in the fulness of this moment. In this unity, there is no other, no sense of “me” and “not me.” To dwell in this unity, then, is to be truly alone, because there is nothing that arises in our field of awareness that is separate from awareness; this is the supreme security in which we can constantly trust.

*…l’vadad lavetakh toshivieni – to dwell in solitude and security.*

In fact, the word for security, *vetakh,* is the same root as “trust” – בטח. As is says in *Tehilim:*

וַאֲנִי בְּחַסְדְּ֒ךָ בָטַֽחְתִּי – *As for me, in Your kindness I trust (vatakhti)…*

- *Tehilim* (Psalms) 13:6

But this inner peace, this “dwelling” in “solitude and security” is not something solid, not an experience that persists permanently in time. It is, in fact, nothing but the open space within which everything is constantly changing; therefore, if we want this ultimate peace and security, we must stop resisting the fact that *there is no permanent peace and security in time.*

So then why strive for it if it can never be permanently established?

*Parshat Shelakh L’kha*

On an inner level, this was the argument of the spies who were sent by Moses to go investigate the land and bring back reports.

שְׁלַח לְךָ֣ אֲנָשִׁ֗ים וְיָתֻ֨רוּ֙ אֶת־אֶ֣רֶץ כְּנַ֔עַן

*Shelakh l’kha – Send for yourselves people who will spy out the land of Canaan...*

- *Bamidbar* (Numbers) 13:2

Most of the spies come back and say that the land is wonderful, but that there are “giants,” thus discouraging the Israelites from attempting to “conquer the land.”

But on a deeper level, “conquering the land” represents the aim of *“dwelling with the Divine in solitude and security.”*

The spies are saying that yes, peace and security are real, but we won’t be able to have them as a *permanent state;* the “giants” of thoughts and feelings are too powerful. So, why even bother?

וְהַ֨יָּמִ֔ים יְמֵ֖י בִּכּוּרֵ֥י עֲנָבִֽים וְהִ֨תְחַזַּקְתֶּ֔ם וּלְקַחְתֶּ֖ם מִפְּרִ֣י הָאָ֑רֶץ

*“…strengthen yourselves to take from the fruit of the land.” And those days were the days of the first grapes…*

- *Bamidbar* (Numbers) 13:20

“Fruit” is a metaphor for the experience we seek. Here the fruit is the grape, and the word for grape is ענב *anav.* These three letters, *ayin, nun* and *bet,* have meanings:

*Ayin* ע means “eye,” and so represents “seeing.”

*Nun* נ is associated with the word נָפוּל *naful* which means “fallen,” and refers to the fact that Israel would eventually “fall” to her enemies. *Nun* נ*,* then, represents impermanence.

*Bet* ב means “house,” the archetype of which is the ancient Temple in Jerusalem which would eventually “fall” to the Babylonians.

Together, then, we can read ענב *anav* as meaning, “seeing the impermanence of sacred structure” – that is, the impermanence of spiritual experiences. The “grapes” that the spies bring back are plump and good – meaning, the “fruit” of experiencing unity and peace is possible, but there are “giants.” States of consciousness are not permanent.

So, on this level, the spies are embodying a self-defeating attitude that can thwart our practice:

*“I can’t seem to hold on to the states I experience in meditation, so maybe I shouldn’t even bother.”*

But, there is another word which shares letters and sounds with ענב *anav* (grape):

ענוה – *anavah –* “humility.”

In this word, theב *bet* is replaced with aו *vav* (which has the same “v” sound). When the ו *vav* comes as a prefix to a word, it means “and,” implying movement into the future, the embrace of change, opening to something new, saying “yes and.”

This is the key:

The true בֶטַח *vetakh,* the true security, comes not from holding on to a particular state or moment; it comes not from trying to preserve the “fruits” of our practice, the עֲנָבִֽים *anavim* which are destined to die and decay. It comes instead fromענוה *anavah,* humility, which is openness and surrender to the impermanence of all forms and experiences. Because in this openness, there is the ever-renewing ו *vav,* the ever-saying “yes” to the newness that the moment brings.

And this is the paradox: when we say “yes and” to the moment as it is becoming, when we embody the openness of ענוה *anavah* and let go of the עֲנָבִֽים *anavim,* the “fruits,” we discover the שָׁלוֹם יַחְדָּו, *shalom yakhdav,* the true peace and unity of all being, beyond yet including all experiences, the space of Reality Itself, supremely Alone in all Its resplendence.

The Bread of Affliction

Furthermore, as we learn to embrace whatever disturbing thoughts, feelings and sense perceptions arise, our awareness is actually strengthened by them:

…אַל־תִּֽירְאוּ֙ אֶת־עַ֣ם הָאָ֔רֶץ כִּ֥י לַחְמֵ֖נוּ הֵ֑ם ... וַֽיהוָ֥ה אִתָּ֖נוּ

*Do not fear the people of the land, for they are our bread… the Divine is with us!*

*- Bamidbar* (Numbers) 14:9

“Bread” means nourishment. When we fully confront our difficult emotions and open to the fear or anger or whatever, it literally becomes “food” for consciousness. Whatever we resist can actually help us become *more awake –* if we decide not to be fearful of our fear, and instead open to the fullness of whatever arises in the field of awareness, without getting seduced by it.

Because, actually, all emotions are literally *made out of awareness –* and furthermore, it’s not *our* awareness, but the awareness of Reality Itself, of the Divine, incarnating *as us…*and that is infinite power, infinite freedom, if we are willing to recognize It and stand firmly in the Presence of Its Truth…

אַל תִּירָא מִפַּחַד...כִּי עִמָּנוּ אֵל *Al Tira MiPakhad – Ki Imanu El!*

*Don't be Afraid of Fear… for the Divine is with us!*

*- Mishlei* (Proverbs) 3:25, *Yeshayahu* (Isaiah) 8:10

Self-Doubt

בְעֵינֵ֙ינוּ֙ כַּֽחֲגָבִ֔ים וְכֵ֥ן הָיִ֖ינוּ בְּעֵינֵיהֶֽם׃

*In our eyes we are like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes…*

*- Bamidbar* (Numbers) 13:33

So too, we might think: “I’m not super human – how can I possibly accept everything that arises in the moment? How can I actually transcend my thoughts and feelings and become truly present in the face of the many challenges that arise in life?”

From that fear, there’s the tendency to turn spirituality into just another idea, into something to talk about, but not something you can really live. When that happens, the spies with the bad reports have won. Like the Israelites who were condemned to wander another forty years in the desert, the intellectualizing of spirituality keeps the searching and wandering going on and on, and puts off the Arriving for another time.

But you don’t have to be superhuman; you don’t have to be anything in particular, because openness is not a special thing; it is Nothing. It is just a willingness to allow this moment to be as it is.

It is told about Rabbi Leib, one of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, that when he heard rabbis expound on the Torah, he would remark:

“What does all this intellectual expounding amount to? A person should totally be a Torah, so that you can learn from their smallest movements as well as their motionless cleaving to the One. They must become empty and spacious like heaven itself, of which it is said:

אֵֽין־אֹ֭מֶר וְאֵ֣ין דְּבָרִ֑ים בְּ֝לִ֗י נִשְׁמָ֥ע קוֹלָֽם

*“Ayn omer v’ayn devarim, b’li nishma kolam* – *There is no speech and there are no words; their sound is not heard…”*

*- Tehilim* (Psalms) 19:4

This is the spaciousness of Presence – the “heaven” that is born within when resistance and ego die, but you do not.

Go to Hell

Once, Reb Zushia commented on the saying of the sages, “The bold-faced will go to hell, and the shame-faced to paradise.”

*“The bold-faced will go to hell,”* said Reb Zushia, “This means that if you are bold in holiness, you don't have to fear descending into hell. You can engage in all kinds of worldly things, and you will receive the light hidden within them. But if you're shame-faced in your holiness, you'd better stick to the paradise of prayer and meditation and stay away from the world...”

There are times for withdrawing from the world and from people, in order to heal or gain perspective. But when it's time to move back into the world, it is good to be “bold-faced with your holiness.” Meaning, have confidence that whatever difficulties you encounter are food for your consciousness, and all experiences are part of your “schooling” for learning to be awake.

To be “bold” doesn't mean you have to have confidence in yourself. The spies in the story lacked self-confidence, but the remedy would not have been to bolster their self-confidence. Rather, the remedy would be for them to have had *Divine-confidence. Hashem* told them not to be afraid; if they had *Divine-confidence*, their lack of self-confidence wouldn't have been a problem.

Similarly, if you don't have self-confidence, don't worry! You don't need it. It's often better not to have self-confidence. As Hillel says*,* “Don't believe in yourself until the day you die.” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:5)

But trust: here you are, in such-and-such situation, and this is your training; this is the exact situation you need to practice and to learn; This is the Path of Lamed ל.

Learning to Lie Down

*…* מִזְמ֥וֹר לְדָוִ֑ד יי רֹ֝עִ֗י לֹ֣א אֶחְסָֽר׃ בִּנְא֣וֹת דֶּ֭שֶׁא יַרְבִּיצֵ֑נִי עַל־מֵ֖י מְנֻח֣וֹת יְנַהֲלֵֽנִי׃ נַפְשִׁ֥י יְשׁוֹבֵ֑ב

*A song of David – the Divine is my shepherd, I shall not lack. In lush meadows the Divine lays me down, beside tranquil waters the Divine leads me – my soul is revived !*

These opening words from Psalm 23 reflect a common attitude about spirituality, that realization of the Divine leads to pure bliss and freedom from all suffering – from anger, fear, judgment, and so on. But if we go a little further down, it says:

תַּעֲרֹ֬ךְ לְפָנַ֨י  שֻׁלְחָ֗ן נֶ֥גֶד צֹרְרָ֑י

*You prepare before me a table in front of my tormentors…*

In front of my tormentors? I thought we were just lounging in the grass beside the tranquil waters – how did my tormentors get into the picture?

But that is the point. The point is not to get rid of the “tormentors,” but to shift the context within which the “torment” arises. This distinction can be confusing, because meditation will, after all, decrease negativity and suffering. It decreases stress, it decreases repetitive and unhelpful thinking, and it increases joy and bliss*.* And, at some point, you’re likely to experience all negativity dropping away completely.

*Beside tranquil waters the Divine leads me…*

However, this does not mean that negativity has been eliminated. That’s where you can get into trouble, because once you’ve had some deep success with your practice, once you “lie down by the tranquil waters,” so to speak, there can be a tendency to think that negativity shouldn’t bother you at all anymore, that your feelings should never get hurt, that you should never feel insulted, that nothing should make you angry and so on.

Then, when some challenge does arise, you can mistakenly conclude that you’ve somehow lost it, that spirituality isn’t working for you anymore, when really you’ve just been given a tremendous gift, and you just need to shift the way you’re looking at it to see the gift.

*Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me!*

The real power of Presence is not that it destroys the possibility of negativity arising. After all, we’re all in the *gei tzalmavet- the valley of the shadow of death.* But rather, the power of Presence is that it changes the context in which *everything* arises, including negativity. But, you can’t know this and prove it to yourself unless you have a chance to practice it, which is why the arising of negativity is a gift.

So, when negativity arises, use it as an opportunity to realize that *you are not trapped by it* *–* know that the Divine is with you, because the Divine is literally not separate from the space of your own awareness, within which the negativity as well as everything else comes and goes.

How do we do that?

Be a student of the moment – this moment, just as it is, is teaching you right now. This is the Path of ל *Lamed.*