## **The Spoon – ה HEI and Parshat Tetzaveh**

There is a story that Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz, the disciple of Rabbi Yizhak Yosef (the Seer of Lublin), once asked his teacher: “Can you tell me the most fundamental, basic spiritual practice I should be doing?”

The Seer answered, “It is impossible to say one general practice, because each person must carefully observe their own inclinations, and then follow their own path with their whole being. For one, it might be studying the teachings, and for another, it might be prayer. For one it might be fasting, and for another, eating! Be aware of your own character, and embrace that as your fundamental practice.”

Self-awareness, meaning awareness of the unique constellation of elements that make up your personality, is vital for crafting a life-path that fulfills the truth of your being. This is as the Seer says in the above story – we must choose a life path based on the truth of who we are on the personal level of talent, desire, life experience, and so on, and then live that life with as much Presence as we can.

But, at the same time, there is another important reason for cultivating this kind of self-awareness:

Once, Rabbi Mendel was once visiting Rabbi Elimelekh for a Shabbat meal. Rabbi Mendel was a very meek fellow, exceedingly humble, and he lived in great poverty. As everyone at the table began to eat the soup, Rabbi Elimelekh noticed that Rabbi Mendel wasn’t eating.

“Why don’t you eat?” asked Rabbi Elimelekh.

“I am sorry- I don’t have a spoon,” replied Rabbi Mendel.

Rabbi Elimelekh replied sharply, “Look! One must know when to ask for a spoon, and even a plate if necessary!”

Rabbi Mendel took his words to heart, and from that time onward, his fortunes steadily improved.

I don’t know if this story about Rabbi Mendel is the source of that old Jewish joke about the man who calls over the waiter and says there is something wrong with the soup.

“Is it too cold?” asks the waiter.

“Try the soup!” says the man.

“Too hot?”

“Try the soup!”

“Too salty?”

“Will you just try the soup??”

“Okay… where’s the spoon?”

“AHA!”

I the joke, the waiter had forgotten the spoon; in the story of Rabbi Mendel, he was too meek to ask for one. Both point to the other crucial reason why we should be aware of our uniqueness – it is to be aware of our weaknesses; is to know when we should do the *opposite* of our inclination.

Our natural inclination is a double-edged sword. For the most part, Rabbi Mendel’s meekness served him, and was the foundation of the unique character of his spiritual life. But there was also a shadow side; it caused him unnecessary suffering which was cured only when this deficiency was pointed out to him, and he decided to change his behavior.

The point is, we are our uniqueness, but we are not *only* our uniqueness. We can also transcend it; we can go beyond what is natural and comfortable, because we are *more than form;* we are also the vast field of awareness beyond the form. There is a hint in the *parshah:*

וְשָׁ֣כַנְתִּ֔י בְּת֖וֹךְ בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל וְהָיִ֥יתִי לָהֶ֖ם לֵאלֹהִֽים׃

*I will dwell between/within the Children of Israel, and I will for them* Elohim.

וְיָדְע֗וּ כִּ֣י אֲנִ֤י יְהוָה֙ אֱלֹ֣הֵיהֶ֔ם אֲשֶׁ֨ר הוֹצֵ֧אתִי אֹתָ֛ם מֵאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרַ֖יִם לְשָׁכְנִ֣י בְתוֹכָ֑ם אֲנִ֖י יְהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֵיהֶֽם׃

*And they shall know that I am Existence Itself, their own Divinity, who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I may dwell between/within them; I am Existence Itself, their own Divinity.*

* *Shemot* (Exodus) 29:45, *Parshat Tetzaveh*

The first verse expresses the value of the unique character of the Children of Israel:

וְשָׁ֣כַנְתִּ֔י בְּת֖וֹךְ בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל – *I will dwell between/within the Children of Israel…*

In other words, *because* they are the Children of Israel, *because* of their unique connection with the Divine, the Divine “dwells within them.” In the story, their uniqueness is expressed in the building of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) the installment of the *Kohanim* (priests), and so on*.*

Similarly, our own uniqueness is also the path to realizing our Divine essence; we must construct the *Mishkan* of our lives based on the truth of our own unique qualities. This is what we might call the “constructive path” of ה *hei –* the embracing of our uniqueness in order to build a life path that is conducive to Presence.

But then it says:

וְיָדְע֗וּ כִּ֣י אֲנִ֤י יְהוָה֙ אֱלֹ֣הֵיהֶ֔ם אֲשֶׁ֨ר הוֹצֵ֧אתִי אֹתָ֛ם מֵאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרַ֖יִם לְשָׁכְנִ֣י בְתוֹכָ֑ם

*And they shall know that I am Existence Itself, their own Divinity, who brought them out from the land of Egypt that I may dwell between/within them…*

In other words, in order for the Divine to “dwell among them,” they must first be “brought out of Egypt.” Egypt is *Mitzrayim,* which means narrowness, limitedness. In other words, they must not only *express* their uniqueness, they must also *transcend* their uniqueness; they must go out from the bondage of identification with form and know their essence as spaciousness.

Similarly, we too must be aware of how our personality may block us from fulfilling our full potential, so that we can know when we must go outside of our “comfort zone” and grow. This is what we might call the “*de*structive path” of ה *hei.* It is destructive not in the sense of obliterating the forms of our personal character, but in the sense of freeing us from identification with those forms. Then we can know:

אֲנִ֖י יְהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֵיהֶֽם – *Ani Adonai Eloheihem – The deepest “I” is Divine, their own inner Divine Nature...*

***More on Tetzaveh...***

**I and Thou – Parshat Tetzaveh**

3/4/2020 [0 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/i-and-thou-parshat-tetzaveh#comments)

בְּרֹ֣ב חַ֭סְדְּךָ אָב֣וֹא בֵיתֶ֑ךָ

*In Your abundant kindness I will enter Your House…*

(Psalm 5:8)

I admit, I am not very good at staying in touch with people. I wish I were, but this deficiency is really the result of another deficiency, which is that I’m no good at multitasking. Unlike some people in my family who seem to effortlessly keep many people and their birthdays and everything else going on in their minds constantly, my mind tends to stay simple.

Still, I am in touch with friends I’ve had since childhood, thanks to a little trick I’ve developed – I rope my friends into projects, and then we are forced to be in touch. The irony is that being “in touch,” that is, being present with one another, is the greater value. Whatever projects we are doing are nowhere near as important as the relationship. Relationships are for their own sake; they are not a goal in time, but they are fulfilled in Presence.

Any yet, having a goal in time is helpful for the maintenance of the relationship, even though it is of lesser value. In this way, the lesser serves the greater, and the greater often needs the lesser in order to have a place in this world of busyness.

In the case of spirituality, we also need something of lesser value to help us “keep in touch” with the Greater Value.

אָב֣וֹא בֵיתֶ֑ךָ – *Avo Veitekha – I will enter Your House*

The psalm uses the metaphor of “entering” God’s “House” to describe being present with the Divine Presence. We can do this at any moment, since everything that exists partakes of Existence; every moment is always This Eternal Moment. But, in most moments, we have other things taking our attention! Thus, we must make times in our day that are only for God; we have to make a “project” of our spirituality, dress the Divine in the “garb of the world” so to speak, so that it stands a chance. This is our daily spiritual practice, as well as the weekly twenty-five hours of Shabbat.

Before you take the leap in commitment to Shabbat or daily practice, it seems impossible. Many people say to me, “How can you have time for Shabbat every week? How can you have time to meditate every day?” It is miraculous, but it is a miracle you can experience by taking the leap. That’s why “entering” the “House” is called “kindness” –

בְּרֹ֣ב חַ֭סְדְּךָ אָב֣וֹא בֵיתֶ֑ךָ

*B’rov Hasdekha Avo Veitekha – In Your abundant kindness I will enter Your House…*

We receive our ability to devote our time and energy to practice as a gift, as an expression of Divine *Hesed* (kindness), not merely as an expression of our own willpower. In this way, the logistics of scheduling too becomes part of the practice, not something separate from it.

You can also reverse-engineer Presence *from* your goal-oriented relationships. Next time you are checking out at the store, or dealing with any person that you don’t know for the sake of some task or goal, you can bring the dimension of Presence into the relationship. Yes, you are only dealing with this person because of what you need to accomplish, but you can use the opportunity to let the “lesser” serve the “Greater” – open yourself to the miracle of the person before you; appreciate that the Divine comes to you now in the form of this person before you.

Martin Buber had a special way of referring to these two realities: when we relate to someone or something as serving a function, as having a goal in time, we are in an “I-it” relationship. When we relate to someone for their own sake, being present for its own sake, we are in an “I-You” (or “I-Thou”) relationship.

There’s a hint in the *parshah:*

וְאַתָּה הַקְרֵב אֵלֶיךָ אֶת־אַהֲרֹן אָחִיךָ

*And you shall bring Aaron, your brother, close to you…*

(Exodus 28:1)

Moses is receiving instructions about how to transform his brother Aaron and his sons into *kohanim,* priests. But before going into all the detail about how to create the sacred vestments they must wear, it says, *hakareiv eilekha – bring him close to you!*

In other words, in order for all the elaborate ritual stuff to work, it has to be grounded in Presence. Presence is the point of the ritual elements – so before Moses gets involved with the ritual functions of his brother, he has to first connect with his brother for his own sake, as a “You,” before talking about his function as an “It.”

A *hassid* once asked Rabbi Yisakhar Baer of Radoshitz: “The Talmud says that Rabbi Shimon bar Yokhai said to his son, ‘My son, you and I are enough for the world.’ How are we to understand this?”

He answered, “In the *Tosefta* we read, “The underlying meaning of the creation of the world is that the creature says to the Holy One, ‘You are the Divine!’ And the Holy One replies, ‘I am the Divine.’ This ‘You’ and this ‘I’ are enough for the world…”

**The Fire of Awareness – Parshat Tetzaveh**

2/12/2019 [1 Comment](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-fire-of-awareness-parshat-tetzaveh#comments)

Someone told me recently that she felt so bad about herself, that she hadn’t done anything of worth, that she had messed up so much in her life. I encouraged her to notice that those were thoughts, that she didn’t have to “buy in” to those thoughts.

“But it’s TRUE!” she insisted.

“What is true,” I said, “is that those thoughts are present, the feelings that come with those thoughts are present, the sense of your body breathing right now is present, the sound of my voice is present… that’s TRUE.” She started to relax a little bit… *barukh Hashem,* because as we know, she could have punched in the mouth instead!

When a person is captivated by thoughts and feelings, it is not always helpful to point that out; a person has to be ready for that kind of pointing. We may or may not be able to help another person get free from the web of ego, but there is one person we can help – *and that’s ourselves.*

Notice: there is an absolute truth, and that’s the truth of whatever is arising in your experience, right now. The point, however, is not necessarily the content of your experience; the point is *being the noticing*. When you can see clearly – there is a thought, there is a feeling, there is a sensation – then there is the possibility of knowing: you *are* the noticing, you *are* the awareness, you are not trapped by any thought or feeling. You are the openness within which this moment unfolds. That is freedom. And from that freedom, you can see clearly: is this thought helpful? Is this thought destructive?

Spiritual teachings often come in diametrically opposed pairs.

There’s a teaching of the Hassidic rebbe, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of P’shikha, that everyone should carry two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one should be written, “I am but dust and ashes,” (Genesis 18:27) and on the second, “For me the world was created” (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin, 37b). As one goes through life, one should develop the wisdom to know which slip of paper to take out at which time.

Could there be more diametrically opposed messages?

The point is, our thoughts are not “true” or “not true,” they are either useful or not useful. From a spiritual point of view, they are useful if they move us from ego to freedom, from resistance to acceptance. Sometimes, acceptance means letting go and letting things be (“I am but dust and ashes.”) But that doesn’t mean passivity or weakness; often, it means the acceptance of responsibility (“For me the world was created.”) This moment, this situation, as it is, right now, *is.* How shall we respond? Shall we turn away, deny and ignore? Or, shall we address this moment as it is and step up to what must be done? This too is acceptance, this too is freedom – not freedom *from* responsibility, but *freedom from resistance to accepting the responsibility that is already yours.*

וְאַתָּ֞ה תְּצַוֶּ֣ה ׀ אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל וְיִקְח֨וּ אֵלֶ֜יךָ שֶׁ֣מֶן זַ֥יִת זָ֛ךְ כָּתִ֖ית לַמָּא֑וֹר לְהַעֲלֹ֥ת נֵ֖ר תָּמִֽיד

*You shall command the Israelites to take for you oil of olives, pure, crushed, for illumination, to kindle continuous flame...*

The oil is already burning – it is the *ner tamid* – the continuous flame of your consciousness, the essence of who you are, within which this moment unfolds. The question is, *are you conscious of your consciousness?* You are already aware, *but are you aware that you are the awareness?*

To wake up, to become aware on this deeper level, you have to purify your awareness from its identification with thoughts and feelings; you have to “crush” them from your consciousness. Like the olive, there’s a hard pit at the core; that’s the ego.

How?

Be the loving Presence that surrounds your ego. No need to try to get rid of it – that’s just more ego! Instead, accept the fulness of this moment as it is, resistance and all, feelings and all, thoughts and all, without “adding to the story” – without “buying in.”

In doing that, you illuminate the awareness that is already free from all that; לְהַעֲלֹ֥ת נֵ֖ר תָּמִֽיד – you kindle the eternal flame – that is the beginning of awakening.

**Wringing Out the Sponge – Parshat Tetzaveh**

2/23/2018 [2 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/ringing-the-sponge-parshat-tetzaveh#comments)

**Exodus 27:20**

וְאַתָּ֞ה תְּצַוֶּ֣ה ׀ אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֗ל וְיִקְח֨וּ אֵלֶ֜יךָ שֶׁ֣מֶן זַ֥יִת זָ֛ךְ כָּתִ֖ית לַמָּא֑וֹר לְהַעֲלֹ֥ת נֵ֖ר תָּמִֽיד׃

*You shall command the Israelites to bring you olive oil, clear, pressed, for illumination, for kindling lamps constantly...*

Becoming present is like ringing out a sponge, or pressing the air out of an air pump. On one hand, there's a kind of contraction, as you squeeze the sponge or pump. On the other hand, the water in the sponge or the air in the pump becomes more expansive as it's released.

Similarly, thoughts tend to be absorbed in the "sponge" of thinking. Becoming present requires a "pressing" of consciousness from it's ordinary absorption in thought, into the expansive fullness of your experience in the present.

This is hinted at in the above passage. The olive oil should be *​zakh – clear, pure –* meaning, not mingled with thoughts and attitudes. Simply be the clear space within which this moment arises. To do this, it has to be *kateet – pressed.* Meaning, "press" yourself into your present moment experience. This "pressing" is the freeing of consciousness from the forms it takes in thought...

**Darkness to Light – Parshat Tetzaveh**

**March 10, 2017**

This week’s Torah reading is *Parshat Tetzaveh. Tetzaveh* means, “And you shall command.” It begins with God telling Moses: *“V’atah tetzaveh et b’nai Yisrael- and you shall command the children of Israel- v’yik’khu eilekha shemen zayit zakh katit lama’or- they should take to you oil from olives, pure, crushed, for illumination- l’ha’alot ner tamid- for kindling the eternal flame.”*

So what’s the “eternal flame?” It’s your awareness that’s there all the time- whether you’re asleep or awake, whether you’re angry or openhearted, there’s always this basic awareness there, so you don’t have to create it- it’s already *tamid-* already constant.

But, the tendency is for your awareness to constantly get drawn in by the dramas of the mind and heart, the image we have of reality, rather than connect with Reality directly. So in order to free your awareness from your mind, you do have to “kindle it” so to speak. Just as when you’re asleep, you’re a little bit aware, otherwise no one would be able to wake you up. But once someone does wake you up, your awareness greatly increases. So too there’s a way *l’ha’alot ner tamid-* to kindle the eternal flame- meaning, to increase your awareness that’s already there, and wake up even more.

And how do you do that? You need *shemen zayit-* olive oil.

Now olives have a hard, inedible pit within them. Similarly, there’s ordinarily a hard, seemingly impenetrable pit at the core of who we are. From the moment we wake up in the morning, there’s that sense that “I” have woken up. You feel angry at someone, there’s a sense that “I” am angry. If you let go of the anger and you get all expansive and forgiving and loving, there’s still the sense that “I” am expansive and forgiving and loving. That’s the pit- the pit is the “I.” And just like you can’t eat the pit and transform it into nourishment, so it seems that the “I” is irreducible. No matter what experience you have, it’s always “you” having it.

But just as the olive fruit is crushed along with the pit to make olive oil, as it says, *zakh katit-* pure and crushed, so too that hard sense of “me” known as the ego can be crushed into oil, and that oil becomes fuel for consciousness- fuel for enlightenment.

So how do you get the oil from the olive pit of the self and burn it in the light of awareness?

The essential thing is not to try and control your mind, or try to not have judgments or think less, but rather it’s simply to notice what is in this moment. You have thoughts and feelings? Just know that there are thoughts and feelings. Let your awareness rest in the actual truth of your experience in this moment- being present with your feelings as they arise and fall, being present with your body and the rise and fall of your breathing, and being the perceiving presence behind your thoughts.

In this way you naturally let go of the mental urge to retreat into your mind, which is what creates the sense of “me,” known as ego, and instead feel yourself as the luminous presence within which the mystery of this moment is unfolding. There’s a wonderful hint of this in the next line:

*“B’ohel mo’ed- In the tent of the special time of meeting-* that is, the tent of meeting the present- *mikhutz laparokhet asher al ha’eidut- on the outside of the concealing curtain that’s over the tabletson which the ten commandments are written, that’s where Aaron will kindle the eternal flame.*

Now the word for the tablets, *eidut,* actually doesn’t mean tablets, that would be *lukhot.* Rather, *eidut*means testimony or witness. This witness is behind the *parokhet-* behind the curtain- you can’t see the witness. And this is exactly the nature of consciousness. Consciousness sees everything else, but just like the eyeball, it can’t see itself; it’s a mystery to itself. So what you get in spiritual awakening is not any new piece of information or expanded knowledge, but rather the awareness of the Nothing; the is-ness beyond all understanding that’s forever behind the curtain, so to speak.

And yet, you are the witness- you are behind the curtain. You can’t understand consciousness, but you can simply be conscious- you can simply be present… and that’s awakening out of the dream of the mind.

But to do this in a really deep and transformative way, the olive pits have to be *katit-* crushed. This means that when suffering comes your way- when things go wrong, when you suffer loss, when you experience anger or worry or fear- bring your awareness into the feelings. Let the feelings be without elaborating on them too much in your mind, without blaming or trying to figure out how to avoid them in the future. Instead, let their energy crush the pit of ego. It’s not necessarily pleasant, but it’s temporary and leads to greater illumination.

To help remember, you can say to yourself repeatedly- “Whatever suffering comes my way is for the purpose of illumination.” So write that down, and say it to yourself over and over. In this way, any ordinary situation that produces suffering can be an opportunity to increase the light of consciousness and ultimately open to greater joy and bliss in simply Being.

So as we approach this *Shabbat Tetzaveh,* the Sabbath of Command, may we all receive this *mitzvah-*this commandment- to ignite the eternal flame of awareness with the oil that’s pressed out of us through whatever suffering happens to come our way. And as our light increases, so too may we transform our actions to crush any stuck patterns of negativity and open to the blessing inherent in this life...

[**Take Off Your H﻿eadphones! Parshat Tetzaveh**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/take-off-your-headphones-parshat-tetzaveh)**​**

**2/16/2016**

Do you ever listen to music in headphones?

Sometimes I’ll want to hear the same song in my headphones over and over again, until I get sick of it. The song takes on a personal theme quality, and I want it to score my whole life.

But imagine going out to see the singer of your favorite song perform live. Would you pull out your headphones and listen to a recording of it, rather than listen to the actual concert?

Of course not!

And yet, that’s often what happens in the spiritual sense, when your mind becomes engrossed in some thought, idea, desire, or memory. Rather than live life as it’s happening, you're absorbed in your own mind.

It’s like listening to a recording in headphones when the real thing is happening live right in front of you!

This week's reading begins:

*“V’atah tetzaveh et b’nai Yisrael...”*

 *“And you shall command the Children of Israel that they should take for you pure olive oil, pressed, for illumination, to kindle a lamp continually.”*

“Oil” represents awareness.

To “take” the “oil” means to take your awareness into your own hands. Your mind need not wander about like a child- you can take “command” of it.

*“… pressed, for illumination”*

Ordinarily the mind wanders aimlessly, and awareness glows dully in the background. But if you “press” your awareness, which means bringing your mind back again and again to the present, it will begin to glow brightly, illuminating your mind.

*“… to kindle a lamp continually.”*

With ordinary fire, once you kindle it, it burns on its own. But with consciousness, you must “kindle” it “continually.” This means developing the habit of reeling your mind back, again and again, to the Reality of this moment.

Once, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak began greeting everyone after prayers as if they had just returned from a long journey.

*“Shalom Aleikhem! Shalom aleikhem!”* exclaimed the rebbe to each and every congregant.

When they gave him strange looks, he responded-

“Why do you look surprised? While the *hazan* was singing*,* you weren’t here at all. This one was in the market place, this one was on a cargo ship, this one was relaxing at home. When the singing stopped, you all returned, so I greeted you *shalom aleikhem!”*

The Greatest Singer of All performs a concert right now. It’s the only concert there is- the magical unfolding of this moment!

On this *Shabbat Tetzaveh,* the Sabbath of Command, may we remember to heed the Great Command that sings to us continuously: Be present! And through our mindfulness, may the consciousness of all humanity be elevated, so that awareness and love may reign supreme in the minds and hearts of all.

Good Shabbos!