**Held – ס SAMEKH and *Parshat Devarim***

**The Fox and the Scorpion**

Have you ever had the experience of being in conflict with someone, and then realizing that the same conflict has happened a thousand times before, in different forms? It is as if the conflict is a virus, a replicating pattern. It has no real life of its own; it is just a dead, repetitive, automatic story that lives off your life energy, playing itself out again and again.

Once there was a scorpion who was looking for a way to get to the other side of a river. As he searched up and down the banks, he came upon a fox who was about to swim across.

“Please let me swim on your back!” implored the scorpion.

“No way!” replied the fox, “You’ll sting me!”

“Why would I do that?” argued the scorpion, “If I stung you, we would both drown.”

After thinking about it, the fox agreed. The scorpion climbed up on his back, and the fox began to swim across. But, when they were about half way across the river, the scorpion stung the fox. As the poison began its work, the fox started to sink.

“Why did you do it?” said the fox, “Now we’ll both drown!”

“I couldn’t help myself,” said the scorpion, “It is in my nature.”

Is it in your nature to always react in the same old ways, perpetuating the same old conflicts? Or is there a way out?

There is a way out, but it can be difficult because the old patterns are usually motivated by the desire to escape pain. Something happens that triggers a painful emotion, and we may lash out unconsciously or passive aggressively in an attempt to vent the pain and punish the one who caused it.

But, it doesn’t work, because it just perpetuates a dynamic that guarantees the cycle will continue – that is, until we wake up to realizing that there is another way; this means seeing the pattern, and choosing to stop feeding it. This usually involves feeling the triggered pain on purpose, without doing anything about it – *just being with it.*

You might think that a lot of meditation can help you “just be with it,” and that is true, but it can also sometimes create a hinderance. Meditation can give you beautiful and blissful experiences, and if you get attached to those experiences, then the pain that life brings can sometimes be even harder to endure. I often hear people lament about having to come down from the “lofty mountain” of the spirit to deal with the pain of life.

It reminds me of a passage I read in one of Ram Dass’ books, where he talks about coming down from a spiritual high and literally “seeing” a tidal wave coming toward him – a tidal wave made out of all the broken relationships, tedious responsibilities, unconscious expectations – the whole mess. It is natural to resist the pain of that tidal wave, and yet, what are we really resisting? What are we holding on to?

I remember going to the dentist when I was maybe seven years old, and he gave me nitrous oxide while he filled a cavity. It gave me the experience of feeling like I was floating in a warm ocean, breathing under water, in total bliss. At some point, he shut off the nitrous oxide, and I pleaded, “No! A little bit more!” I remember his response: “All good things must come to an end.”

If we want to live free from our conditioned patterns, we must be willing to move with the changing moment; we must be willing to not cling to anything. And yet, the patterns are so strong – how can we stand up to them and recognize that we need not be controlled by them?

The moment is like water, ever changing, ever shifting, and nothing is permanent – nothing in the outer world, and nothing in our inner world of consciousness; this truth is expressed in the letter מ *mem*. And yet, there *is* something solid to stand on; there is a foundation from which we can live on purpose, free from conditioned patterns. That support is available as our own deepest nature; and our nature is not separate from our Source and Destination. This truth is expressed by the letter ס *samekh,*which means “support.”

**Parshat Devarim**

*Devarim* means “words,” referring to the words spoken by Moses to the Children of Israel as this last book of the Torah opens. They too stand by a river, the Jordan, while Moses recounts the story of their highest moment, when they stood at Mt. Sinai and heard the Divine speak to them. But rather than dwell on the details of that experience, Moses simply says this:

יְהֹוָ֧ה אֱלֹהֵ֛ינוּ דִּבֶּ֥ר אֵלֵ֖ינוּ בְּחֹרֵ֣ב לֵאמֹ֑ר רַב־לָכֶ֥ם שֶׁ֖בֶת בָּהָ֥ר הַזֶּֽה׃

*Hashem, our Divinity spoke to us at Horeb, saying: “It is too much already for you to still be dwelling by this mountain!”*

* *Devarim*(Deuteronomy) 1:6, *Parshat Devarim*

In other words, don't be the scorpion, trapped in your conditioned patterns – life is change. The world is turning, and you must turn with it; you cannot stay forever in an experience from the past.

…  וּסְע֣וּ לָכֶ֗ם וּבֹ֨אוּ הַ֥ר הָֽאֱמֹרִי֮

*Journey for yourselves and come to the mountain of the Amorites…*

The journey is “for yourselves” – it is for your own happiness and fulfillment that you must not cling to your idea of happiness and fulfillment!

*…and come to the mountain of the Amorites.*

The word for “Amorites” has the same letters as the verb “to speak” – אמר *aleph-mem-reish.* The hint here is that you must leave the “mountain” where you hear God’s “speech” so that you can come to a *new* mountain, where there will be new “speech.” Don’t cling to the old speech; it  is dead.

Then it goes on to say:

וְאֶל־כׇּל־שְׁכֵנָיו֒ בָּעֲרָבָ֥ה בָהָ֛ר וּבַשְּׁפֵלָ֥ה וּבַנֶּ֖גֶב וּבְח֣וֹף הַיָּ֑ם

*…and to all who dwell in the plains, in the hill country, the lowlands, the desert, and the seacoast…*

The point is not only the next “mountain” experience you will come to. There is also the “plain” – the *aravah* – the ordinary, daily work of life, a mixture (ערב *erev*) of many different kinds of experiences. This is related to the letter ק *koof,*which is about finding holiness in the ordinary.

Then there is the “lowland” – the *sh’felah* – times of sadness, of tragedy, of failure – all part of the Divine, all part of Reality. This is נ *nun,*the impermanence of all forms, a bitter but necessary medicine for the distortions of the ego.

Then there is the “desert” – the *negev* – times when your life and work don’t seem to be yielding anything good, and you must nevertheless persevere. This is when we need the letter ז *zayin,*which is about focus, and the *sefirah* of *Netzakh,*which is persistence, to train us to stay focused and committed to our goals.

Then there is the “seacoast” – the *hof hayam* – like when the children of Israel stood at the Sea of Reeds, with the Egyptian army behind them. These are times when the outcome is unknown, when we are tempted to fear and despair. This is when we need כ*kaf,* which is the quality of courage, and י *yod,*which is trust, for taking the leap into the unknown.

Finally, it says you will come all the way to *HaNahar HaGadol* – the “Great River!”

The Great River is at the end of the journey, because if you can learn to work with life in all of its manifestations, you will see that life *is itself* the Great River. God incarnates in the forms of your mind and your body to take a little journey on the Great River, and this moment is the arena within which we are learning how to journey. Our task is to remember that the Divine is our own deepest identity, and rely on That, rest in That. We may fall again and again from the sense of stability that comes from knowing our deepest nature, but as it says, סוֹמֵךְ לְכָל־הַנֹּפְ֒לִים *Somekh L’khol HaNoflim – the Divine supports all who have fallen!* (Psalm 145)

And, as we come to rely more and more strongly on that inner support of the Divine that is not separate from our own nature, we can also be a useful support for others as well…

**The Lifeguard**

I have a memory of being very young, maybe three or four, and my parents (probably mistakenly) took me to some kind of vacation resort. We were by the pool, and I saw someone running. I had heard that running wasn’t allowed, so I went up to the lifeguard in his tall chair and yelled up to him: “Is it true that there’s no running allowed around the pool?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“Okay,” I answered, and proceeded to dart off past him. In an instant, he tossed his whistle up in the air, caught it in his mouth, and emitted a piercing whistle blast that caught me in my tracks. I froze. “Don’t *you* run,” he said. I had been thinking about the other person I saw running, and my brain hadn’t applied the rule to myself.

How similar it is with remembering not to “run” away with our own thoughts and feelings…

It is relatively easy to see when someone else is trapped by *their* thoughts and feelings. We see someone being defensive, angry, or complaining, or blaming, and it’s easy to diagnose. But when we become annoyed with that person for getting caught, how easy it is to get caught ourselves; we resist the resistance of others, and can’t see that we ourselves are resisting.

But the truth is, if we wish to be an effective support for others in their wakefulness, the most important thing is not to necessarily to give advice or feedback (though sometimes that is appropriate); the most important thing is to *embody wakefulness ourselves*. After all, there is a synergy between people; awakening begets more awakening, and unconsciousness usually begets more unconsciousness.

So, in the moment that we perceive the ego of someone else and forget to be aware of our own, we must remember: there is only one time to be awake, and that time is always *now.*This can be difficult because *now* is constant; we tend to be unconscious of things that are constant, like our breathing, for example.

How can we maintain constant connection with the inner ס *samekh*and receive the support we need for being awake? The key is to use that which is *not* constant to remind us of the constant, to use time and change to stay awake to the Changeless and the Timeless.

**The Circle and the Spiral**

 וֶהֱוֵי זָהִיר בְּמִצְוָה קַלָּה כְבַחֲמוּרָה
*Be careful with a light mitzvah as with a grave one…*

* *Pirkei Avot, 2:1*

There are lesser and greater *mitzvot;*obviously, the *mitzvah*to light a Shabbat candle is not as great as the *mitzvah*to not murder someone, for example. And, yet, this *mishna*is saying we should be just as careful with the lesser ones as with the greater ones. How can this be? If we should be just as careful with the lesser ones as with greater ones, doesn’t that destroy the whole idea that are lesser ones and greater ones?

The word for “careful” is זָהִיר *zahir,*which can also mean “watchful” or “attentive.” Understood this way, it is not saying that it is just as important to observe the lesser *mitzvot*as the greater ones; it is saying that no matter what *mitzvah*you are doing, you should be just as *zahir –*you should be just as attentive, just as *present.*And furthermore, it is our awareness of the very fact that not all *mitzvot*are equal that reminds us: even though the *mitzvot*are not all equal, *we can bring equal Presence to them all.*

Furthermore, as different as the various *mitzvot*are, even more varied are our moments in life; you cannot compare a moment of childbirth or a moment of death to a moment of putting toothpaste on your toothbrush. And yet, the message is: הֱוֵי זָהִיר *hevei zahir – be present*in all moments, great and small. And, *use*your awareness of the great and small to remind you: the moment to be *zahir*is always *this*moment.

לֹֽא־תַכִּ֨ירוּ פָנִ֜ים בַּמִּשְׁפָּ֗ט כַּקָּטֹ֤ן כַּגָּדֹל֙ תִּשְׁמָע֔וּן
*Don’t show favoritism in judgment; like the lesser as the greater, you shall listen.*

* Deuteronomy 1:17

In this verse from the *parshah,*Moses is telling the Israelites how the judges should behave: they shouldn’t show favoritism, but they should judge fairly, not giving preference to either the poor and powerless or to the great and powerful.

But on a metaphorical level, כַּקָּטֹן כַּגָּדֹל֙ *kakaton kagadol –*regardless of whether the moment is mundane and insignificant or crucially important, תִּשְׁמָע֔וּן *tishma’un  –*listen! Be fully present.

The marriage between the constant and the changing is embodied in the shape of the ס *samekh,*which is like a circle. In the plain sense, the circle implies equality, sameness; this is the practice of being conscious in all moments and situations equally. But, the circle can also be a spiral, which is moving ever upward; this is the both the hierarchy of less and more important moments to which we can practice bringing the same, “circle” awareness. The spiral also represents our own evolutionary movement, the blossoming of our potential to live more and more wakefully, to recognize the Divine more and more clearly in all things, in all moments, great and small.

When Rabbi Yitzhak Mer of Ger was a boy, someone said to him: “My boy, I will give you a *gulden*if you can tell me where God lives.”

The boy replied, “I will give you two gulden if you can tell me where He doesn’t!”