[**The Friend – Parshat Bekhukotai**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/parshat-bekhukotai)

I admit, I come up with little manipulative tricks to get my kids to come to synagogue.

Like, if my son wants to play video games after Shabbat, he has to be in the service for at least an hour. Last week, he left the service after about twenty minutes. After *Havdallah,* I called out to him as he rushed away toward the computer: “No video games, honey.”

“WHAT?? Why not??”

“Because you were only in the service for twenty minutes.”

“That’s not true!”

After some back and forth, I gave him this offer: he can sit and learn with me for a half hour to make up for the missed service, then he can go play. “FINE.”

I brought him a pile of books to see what he would choose, including the twentieth century writers, Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel. I told him, “Martin Buber is kind of the Robert Fripp of Judaism, and Heschel is sort of the Jimi Hendrix of Judaism.” – to put it in musical terms I thought he would appreciate.

He chose Buber.

You may know that Buber is my all time favorite and biggest inspiration, but I was a little reluctant to reveal Buber to him too early, because Buber is critical of many traditional aspects of Judaism, and that could have an opposite effect on a teenager from what I was intending… but we went for it.

In Buber’s essay that he wrote in 1909 called “Judaism and the Jews,” Buber asks a powerful question, in a few different ways:

*Where is there among Jews a Divine fervor that would drive them from their busyness in society into an authentic life? Where is their fulfilment? Where is there a community dominated not by Jewish inertia (called, “tradition”), nor by Jewish adaptability (that “purified,” that is, soulless “Judaism” of a “humanitarianism” embellished with “monotheism”), but by Jewish religiosity in its immediacy, by an elemental God-consciousness?*

Buber is criticizing both Orthodox Judaism and the German Reform Judaism of his day, saying that neither one is expressing the real thing. Then comes the punchline – what he considers to be the real thing: *An elemental God consciousness.*

Reading that last phrase reminded me of when I was in High School and was first set on fire by my encounter with Buber. Elemental God consciousness! But what is that?

There’s a teaching of Reb Baruch of Mezbizh, disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, on Psalm 119, verse 19:

גֵּ֣ר אָנֹכִ֣י בָאָ֑רֶץ אַל־תַּסְתֵּ֥ר מִ֝מֶּ֗נִּי מִצְותֶֽיךָ
*I am a stranger in the land; do not hide your commandments from me!*

Reb Baruch said that this is like when you travel to a foreign land – you don’t speak the language, the customs are strange, and you feel alienated. Then, you meet another traveler from your homeland, also a stranger in the land, and you become great friends with that person, since you are both strangers. If you had met the traveler in your own land, you may never have become friends, but because you both share the experience of being foreigners, you become close intimates.

This, he says, is how it is with us and the Divine.

When we experience the pain of separation or alienation in our lives, that can be the very motivation we need to find “the stranger” – to find connection with the Divine, which is none other than our own innermost being. If we had never experienced the alienation, we may never be motivated to find that Divine connection.

But then, once we do find that Wholeness, it doesn’t stop there:
בָאָ֑רֶץ אַל־תַּסְתֵּ֥ר מִ֝מֶּ֗נִּי מִצְותֶֽיךָ – *do not hide your commandments from me!*

Why this demand? Isn’t the experience of connection with the Divine enough?

If connection with the Divine remains only an experience, even a really wonderful, restorative, liberating experience, it will only be temporary. In order for that connection to be radically transformative, it has to be lived – it has to be expressed in our words and deeds. There’s a hint of this in the beginning of the *parsha:*

אִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַ֖י תֵּלֵ֑כוּ וְאֶת־מִצְותַ֣י תִּשְׁמְר֔וּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶ֖ם אֹתָֽם
*If you walk with My decrees and guard my commandments, to do them…*

The word for “decrees” comes from *hok.* The connotation, however, is that of a “decree” that we can’t understand intellectually, that doesn’t make rational sense, such as the prohibition against eating shrimp.

But the “Divine decree” that is most incomprehensible is the fact of Existence Itself!

We can understand many things, but as soon as we confront the question of *why there is anything at all,* we are brought to the threshold that leads beyond the domain of mind and thinking. To “walk” in the “decrees” of the Divine, then, means to live in constant awareness of the Mystery of being – a Mystery which is not different from the Mystery of our own being – the Mystery of Existence Itself.

This is the “stranger” who becomes our intimate companion – it is the realization that the Mystery of our own being is the same Mystery behind all beings, the Mystery that is Being – *Hashem HuHa Elohim!*

וְאֶת־מִצְותַ֣י תִּשְׁמְר֔וּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶ֖ם אֹתָֽם
*…guard my commandments, to do them.*

But the next step is to live life in service of the Mystery – to dedicate our lives in loving service and, as Buber says, “transmute the Divine from an abstract Truth into a Living Reality” – that’s elemental God consciousness!

So as we come to this *Shabbat Bekhukotai,* may we walk in friendship with the ultimate Mystery through ever deepening Presence, and with humility and an open heart, do our best to serve as the Friend by bringing light to this somewhat darkened…

**More on**​**Bekhukotai...**

[**The Spoon Full of Sugar- Parshat Bekhukota**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-spoon-full-of-sugar-parshat-bekhukotai)**i**
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 ​“In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find that fun and… snap! The job’s a game!”

With that, Reb Mary Poppins formulated her famous aphorism-

“Just a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down!”​
Meaning- when you’re doing something unpleasant, find a way to sweeten it- to change its context so that it becomes a vehicle for delight rather than torturous boredom.

But how do you do that?

In the movie, the children don’t want to clean up the nursery, until Mary Poppins adds some magic and singing animatronic birds to spice things up. When they finish and Poppins tells the children it’s time for their outing, Michael Banks cries, “But I want to clean the nursery again!”

What she added was the miraculous.

Something the children expected to be dull and routine became brilliant and delightful. But what is it that makes things dull and routine in the first place?

Nowadays, I see people walking around with water bottles everywhere. At some point, the importance of drinking a lot of water spread throughout our culture, and now hardly anyone is caught without their water bottles. For many, drinking water has become a routine habit, like checking your phone.

But have you ever taken a sip of water after going thirsty for hours, like after Yom Kippur perhaps? The glass of water might as well be the splitting of the sea.

But the Tanya points out that the splitting of the sea miracle is nothing compared to the miracle of Existence Itself. After all, splitting the sea only involved taking something that existed already- water- and making it behave in an unusual manner. But the real miracle is that water exists in the first place. How is it that there is anything at all?

And yet, this greatest of all miracles seems completely ordinary, even tedious and boring, because we are used to it. Being “used to it” means that we approach this moment through the lens of what has come before- through the monotony of conditioned memory.

But step fully into the present, and the miracle reveals itself: there is nothing ordinary at all about this moment. Step out of your conditioned mind, and it’s as if you step into a different universe. In fact, you do- you step out of the universe of your head, into the universe of the Real.

This week’s parsha opens with a promise:

“Im bekhukotai telekhu v’et mitzvotai tishmeru va’asitem otam…

“If you walk with My decrees and guard My commandments and do them, I will provide your rains in their time… your vintage will last until the end of the sowing…”

The word that’s translated “with my decrees” is the name of this reading- Bekhukotai. A khok is a type of commandment that doesn’t necessarily have an obvious rationale. For example, it’s easy to understand laws like “Don’t murder” and “Don’t steal.” Those laws that “make sense” are called mishpatim. But “Don’t eat shrimp” is not so clear. That’s a khok.

And yet, the truth is that everything is a khok. Does it “make sense” that anything exists at all? Existence is a mystery, a miracle, an enigma!

The next few words say “guard my commandments…”

The word for “commandment” is mitzvah, which in its Aramaic root actually means “to connect.” So if we retranslate the sentence with these underlying meanings, we get:

“If you walk with My Mysteries and guard My Connection…”

In other words, step into the mystery of the present, where Existence is no longer routine, no longer ordinary. Guard your connection with this Mystery, and then-

“Your vintage will last until the end of the sowing…”

Meaning, your drunkenness on the wine of this moment will sweeten all your labors- a spoon full of sugar!

In the late 19th century, there was a hassid by the name of Reb Aharon who lived in the town of Dokshetz.

Every Saturday night in the House of Study, Reb Aharon would make a batch of panes- a hot drink made from boiling water, vodka and sugar. There he would serve the drink to crowds of spiritually thirsty folks before teaching hassidus- spiritual philosophy. People would come from all over to warm their bones and make merry with the panes while they also drank in his holy teachings.

Once a year, Reb Aharon would travel to see his rebbe in Lubavitch- Reb Shmuel. On the Saturday night following his return from Lubavitch, he would concoct an extra large batch of panes for the crowd and then share the luminescent teachings he had heard from the mouth of his master. Those nights were on fire!

Once, when Reb Aharon was in Lubavitch, his rebbe said to him:

“I hear that in Dokshetz, they learn hassidus with panes. Tell me, what connection is there between Torah and getting drunk?”

Embarrassed, Reb Aharon returned home and put an end to his ritual. From then on, he continued his teaching on Saturday nights, but without the panes. People still came to learn, but each week there were fewer and fewer than the last week. Before long, the vibrant crowd was reduced to a few devoted die-hards. The next time Reb Aharon was in Lubavitch, his rebbe asked him-

“What’s doing in Dokshetz?”

Reb Aharon reluctantly reported that his class now attracted only a fraction of the folks that used to come for the “drink-and-learn” format.

“Nu,” said the rebbe, “So bring back the drink- Abi men zol lernen hassidus- so long as they learn hassidus!”

On this Shabbat Bekhukotai, the Sabbath with the Mystery, may we too become drunk on the words of the teaching, and may the teaching lead us into the depths of Mystery that is Nothing but This.

Good Shabbos! Good Shabbos!