**[Thirty-Two Paths – Parshat Beshalakh](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/thirty-two-paths-parshat-beshalakh)**

Recently some visiting friends from the Bay brought their musical ensemble to perform in Tucson. Their specialty is Jewish music from Spain, North Africa and middle eastern countries, and one of their songs was a setting of a mystical *piyut* (spiritual poem) that mentioned “thirty-two paths.”

Before the performance, after their rehearsal in our living room, the singer and oud player asked me if I knew what the “thirty-two paths” were. I said they were probably from the *Sefer Yetzirah,* an early Jewish mystical text which talks about the “thirty-two paths” as consisting of the twenty-two Hebrew letters and the ten *sefirot.*

We talked a bit about what the *sefirot* are, and she said, “I don’t know much about Kabbalah because when I was little, my Hebrew school teacher taught me that Kabbalah was complete nonsense, not even really part of Judaism. She said that Judaism is a religion of the mind, of concepts and thinking, not mystical mumbo-jumbo.”

She went on to say how, as she got older, she could tell that her teacher was deeply wounded, and that her “Judaism of the head” was probably a defense mechanism against fully feeling her painful emotions.

It’s interesting how we humans, and particularly we Jews, tend to gravitate toward either/or thinking, preferring one side or the other of realities that clearly are composed of two sides. In the case of spirituality and Judaism, the intellect is in indispensable; there is no way you can engage a spiritual path without the discerning power of the mind and thinking.

But, the mind is a tool, and like all tools, there is a time to wield it and a time to put it away. Imagine if you went out to chop some firewood – you would need an axe for the job. The axe would be essential – it would be unlikely that you could meditate the log into splitting.

Imagine now that you went back inside with the chopped wood, built a fire, and curled up on the couch with your loved ones, *but you still had the axe.* There you were, snuggling up to the axe!

That would be strange, right? We might call it neurotic or crazy. Certainly, you should put the axe back in the shed before you curl up on the couch. And yet, that is how some Jewish people are with their minds – they don’t want to set aside mind and thinking, even though it may have served its purpose, and it’s time to move on.

After all, the mind is like the axe – necessary, but also a bit violent in a sense, because the purpose of the mind is to pick apart the wholeness of reality into different parts, question the parts, understand the parts, and try to put them back together the way you want them to be. Again – it is necessary to do this in order to be effective in time, but it doesn’t give us what we can only get from the cessation of thinking and doing, and the arising of simple being, of Presence.

There is a hint in the *parsha.* The Israelites are complaining that they don’t have water to drink, so *Hashem* tells Moses to strike rock with his staff, and water comes forth from the rock to quench the thirst of the people. It then says that the place where this happens was named *Massah* and *Meribah,* because the people quarreled (*riv*, from which *Meribah* is derived) and they tested (*nasotam,* from which *Maasah* is derived.)

This is the job of thought – “quarreling” רִיב and “testing” נַסֹּתָם; from the point of view of thought, we must not “accept things as they are” but rather question, wrestle, and then test our conclusions. But, all this quarreling and testing does not quench our deepest thirst; for that we must go to the “water” of consciousness that flows from the “stone” of silence.

Why?

Because silence is the vast field of awareness within which thought arises; it is its source and basis. If we remain fixated on thought, then our consciousness becomes trapped in form and forgets its essential freedom, its nature as spaciousness and peacefulness.

There is a hint of this in the verse when the Children of Israel are complaining to Moses:

הֲיֵ֧שׁ יְהוָ֛ה בְּקִרְבֵּ֖נוּ אִם־אָֽיִן
*Is the Divine present among us or not?*

This is the usual translation of this verse – the Israelites are questioning whether God is with them or not. But the word for “is,” יֵ֧שׁ  *yesh,* and the word for “not,” אָֽיִן *ayin,* are the kabbalistic designations of the Divine paradox: God is both *Yesh,* Being or Existence, and also *Ayin,* Nothing, meaning not any particular thing. Furthermore, usual meaning of the word for "or" –  אִם is "with," not "or."

Seen in this way, the sentence reads:

הֲיֵ֧שׁ יְהוָ֛ה בְּקִרְבֵּ֖נוּ אִם־אָֽיִן
*The Divine is Yesh/Somethingness within us, with Ayin/Nothingness.*

In other words, if we want to sense the *Yesh,* the Presence of the Divine within, we need to become *Ayin –* we need to let go of thinking and be still and open. Only then can we receive the true nourishment, intimacy with the Presence, as it says in Pirkei Avot, quoting Lamentations:

יֵשֵׁב בָּדָד וְיִדֹּם כִּי נָטַל עָלָיו
*He sits alone in stillness, for the reward is upon him…*
(Pirkei Avot 3:3, Lamentations 3:28)

Rabbi Kalman of Crackow asked Rabbi Hirsh the Servant, who was the successor of Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rymanov: “What is the secret of your way in prayer?”

He replied, “My way was shown to me by my holy teacher, may he merit life in the World to Come. Concerning the Manna, it is written:

וְיָצָ֨א הָעָ֤ם וְלָֽקְטוּ֙ דְּבַר־י֣וֹם בְּיוֹמ֔וֹ
*The people went out and gathered the amount for the day, in its day…*
(Exodus 16:4)

“Every day is different, and every day has its own particular flow that comes to us in prayer, if we make ourselves open enough to receive it. This means there must be space between the words and space within, so that we may perceive from which prayer the flow is coming in each day…”

 ***More on Parshat [Beshalakh](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/thirty-two-paths-parshat-beshalakh)...***

[**Living the Miracle – Parshat Beshalakh**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/living-the-miracle-parshat-beshalakh)

We often hear that we should get out of situations, jobs, or relationships that aren’t good for us. But sometimes staying in a situation, even if it feels bad, is the right thing. For example, when a father abandons his family, doesn’t he do it because the responsibility feels bad to him? Doesn’t he just want to be free? In that case, it’s obvious that “freedom” is not the highest value.

But in the spiritual sense, freedom doesn’t necessarily mean leaving behind that which imprisons us; rather, if we really want inner freedom, we must turn toward our bondage. This may feel counterintuitive; if we want freedom from pain, it’s natural to want to get away from whatever is causing the pain. Just as in the Exodus from Egypt – the Israelites cry out because of their suffering, and Moses leads them out of Egypt and to freedom. That’s the ordinary way of thinking – leave Egypt behind. But there’s a hint of something different in this week’s reading:

דַּבֵּר֘ אֶל־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵל֒ וְיָשֻׁ֗בוּ וְיַחֲנוּ֙ לִפְנֵי֙ פִּ֣י הַֽחִירֹ֔ת
Speak to the children of Israel – they should turn back and encamp before Pi Hakhirot…

When we think of the Exodus story, it’s common to imagine the Israelites fleeing Egypt, then coming to the Sea of Reeds and getting trapped with the Egyptian army behind them and the sea in front of them. But look at the text: they had already past the Sea of Reeds – they were already on their way, when the Divine tells them: vayashuvu – turn back!

They deliberately turned around and back tracked, coming to camp at Pi Hakhirot, in front of the Sea of Reeds. There the Egyptian army caught up with them, and there the miracle of the parting of the sea occurred.

Pi Hakhirot means “Mouth of Freedom.”

The message is: If you want to truly leave bondage behind and go through the “Mouth of Freedom,” you have to first fully turn back toward your “oppressor.” Is there something or someone that “triggers” you, that stresses you out, that makes you angry or uncomfortable? Those feelings are within you; they are only brought to the surface by the external trigger. Until you can be present in the face of those feelings arising and not get caught, not get seduced, you will be in bondage, no matter far you flee from the external trigger.

Instead, וְיָשֻׁ֗בוּ וְיַחֲנוּ֙ לִפְנֵי֙ פִּ֣י הַֽחִירֹ֔ת – shuv – return to the discomfort, and make friends with it, because that is the “Mouth of Freedom.”

Ordinarily, we keep emotional pain alive by feeding it with our thoughts. Just as the soldiers of Pharaoh rode after the Israelites on their horses, so the mind is the “rider” and the emotion is the “horse,” pursuing us and seeking to drag us back into bondage. But stop feeding the emotion with thought, and instead become present your feelings – bring your awareness to your actual experience without adding extra interpretation – and the “army drowns in the sea.” That’s because all pain, all constriction, are nothing but forms of awareness. Bring your awareness to the constricted form of awareness. It may hurt a bit at first, but the constriction cannot persist in the light of Presence; through being conscious, it will let go. Then you too will be able to sing:

 אָשִׁ֤ירָה לַּֽיהֹוָה֙ כִּֽי־גָאֹ֣ה גָּאָ֔ה ס֥וּס וְרֹֽכְב֖וֹ רָמָ֥ה בַיָּֽם
I will sing to the Divine, Transcendently Exalted, horse and rider are cast into the sea…

[**Close- Parshat Beshalakh**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/close-parshat-beshalakh)

Metaphorically speaking, Pharaoh sending out the Israelites is like when we are sent out of our inner bondage by the experience of suffering; we don’t like the suffering, so we’re motivated to find spiritual freedom. And if you want spiritual freedom, there’s a really fast, direct way to get it- just come to this moment as it is, without resistance. That’s the practice of Presence.

But then it says:

“V’lo nakham Elohim derekh eretz p’lishtim ki karov hu- "God didn’t lead them on the road to the land of the Philistines which was closer because God said, ‘The people might reconsider when they see battle and return back to Egypt.’”

And this is the obstacle that many people get caught in when doing spiritual work. You start practicing Presence, then all this inner pain comes up- all your psychological issues and resistances, and rather than be motivated by all that suffering you’d rather go back to your old strategies. It’s easier to just drink some wine and watch a movie!

At that point, you need something even deeper to keep you on track, and that’s the power of faith hinted at in the phrase, “ki karov hu.”

In the plain sense, this simply means, “which was close” referring to the road in the land of the Philistines, which would have been the closer path for the Israelites to take. But the word Hu is also a Divine Name. Karov means close, but it can also mean intimate, connected. So on this deeper level, it’s saying that the Divine is present on the road of battle, that is, the experience of deep suffering.

Have faith in that, because at first you won’t experience it. You’ll experience pain. But know ki karov hu- beneath the suffering is the spacious openness and wholeness of this moment, the Divine Presence that is not separate from your own presence, your own consciousness. You can access this Presence by being present- that is, by being karov, coming close to your actual experience in this moment, especially in suffering. Faith, and prayer, can help you do that.

So as we come close to this Shabbat Beshalakh, the Sabbath of Sending, may we come close, karov, to the Reality of our actual experience and allow that truth to send us out from Mitzrayim- from the constriction of separation, into the wild mystery of Presence.

Good Shabbos!!!
love
brian Yosef

[**"Yo That's Fresh!" Parshat Beshalakh**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/yo-thats-fresh-parshat-beshalakh)

This d'var is dedicated to the swift and complete healing of Shaykh Dr. Ibrahim Baba Farajaje. Baba- you are the miracle.

You may not know that I was a child rapper.

When the first popular hip-hop song “Rapper’s Delight” came out in 1979, I was blown away. I wanted to do that too. I began composing my own raps and started a “crew” with a couple friends. Eventually, my group The Chilly Crew recorded a single on Sugar Hill Records (Though they changed our name to The Chilly Kids). My rap name was “Master Shack.” Though we were never successful commercially (and really we weren't very good)​, we were the first rap group with white people in it, before the Beasty Boys.

But back then, white kids weren’t allowed to like black music.

Most of my friends at that time were African American, and the white kids in my school would regularly taunt me. They called me a “white n\*\*\*\*\*”. They would pelt me with nuts and chips when I would get on the school bus.

One day I responded by throwing my turkey sandwich at the ringleader in the back of the bus. It exploded all over him, getting mustard all over his clothes. The taunts stopped after that.

Since we recorded on Sugar Hill Records, we used to regularly see the performers at the studio- The Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five, and others. Those guys were part of a culture in New York City that defined black slang for the rest of the country, and I used to hear words and phrases from them before they made their way to my little town of Nyack. The most significant slang I of which I had advance knowledge was the expression- “fresh.”

“Yo that’s fresh!” they would say, when they thought something was cool.

When I found out about the word “fresh,” I was excited to go tell my friends at school about it:

“Hey guys, guess what- there’s a new expression that’s going to become the new thing. It’s the word ‘fresh.’ This is how it works- when something is cool, you say, ‘Yo that’s fresh!’”

They thought that was the stupidest thing ever-

“Yo Shack says that we’re gonna be goin around sayin ‘Yo that’s fresh!’ HAHAHAHA!!!” They laughed and didn’t believe me. But within about a month, whenever something was cool, guess what they said?

“Yo that is FRRR-ESH!!!”

Sometimes we discover that Reality doesn’t correspond to the map of reality we hold in our minds. It can be a shock- something you’re so sure of turns out to be completely wrong.

But when being wrong means that things turn out far better than we thought they would, we call that a “miracle.” The Egyptian army is behind us and the sea is front of us- we are doomed. And then, the sea opens before us- a miracle!

Or, we’re stranded out in the wilderness with no food or water- we’re doomed for sure. But then- we wake up in the morning and a strange food covers the ground- Manna from heaven! Another miracle!

These fantastical examples highlight our capacity to realize the miraculous. But in truth, you don’t need fantastical events. As long as you’re alive, you’re being showered with miracles in each moment.

In fact, you are the miracle- in this moment.

But to realize this takes a constant turning of  consciousness toward the present- toward this moment that otherwise gets taken for granted. The greatest of all miracles is constantly unfolding, and so it appears to be ordinary- until the mind that is present pierces the ordinary, straight through to the Divine miracle of Being. This is the meaning of Yisrael- seeing straight through (Yishar) to God (El).

There is a  second element that obscures the miraculous: emotional resistance.

Emotional resistance awakens us out of our complacency, but in the wrong direction. Things that we resist are the anti-miracles- the unexpected turns of Reality that disappoint us, challenge us, hurt us.

But, the more present you are, the less you’ll be caught by the emotional resistance that arises. Instead, the pain breaks open the heart, uncovering our prayerful core. To make effort in consciousness, then, is the way to remove these two barriers to the miraculous- complacency and resistance.

No complacency, no ordinariness- just the shining miracle of this moment. No resistance, no problem- just unfolding situations in the miracle of this moment.

In this week’s reading, the Israelites are led by the Divine in their escape from Egypt:

“Yomam b’amud anan, v’laila b’amud aysh-
     “By day as a pillar of cloud, and by night as a pillar of fire…”

“Night” means times of difficulty and pain.

Emotional resistance arises, creativity and joy are blocked. At such times you have to follow the Amud Aysh- the Pillar of Fire. Meaning, let your awareness burn brightly- stay present, connected to the truth of this moment. If you feel emotional pain- don’t avoid it. As you open fully to the experience, the pattern of resistance itself is gradually (or sometimes suddenly) burned up, and the “challenge” actually becomes a means toward transformation.

“Day” is when things are going as usual.

There’s a tendency to take things for granted, to lose appreciation for the goodness you’re receiving. At such times you have to follow the Amud Anan- The Pillar of Cloud. Meaning, know the uncertainty of the next moment.

Know- everything that’s working well in this moment is a tremendous gift, a miracle beyond comprehension in fact. One day everything we hold dear will crumble back in the Mystery, so open yourself to appreciate the gift that unfolds now from this unknowable Reality.

As the Israelites follow the pillar of cloud and fire and are led to freedom through the Sea of Reeds, they break into singing praises for the miracle of their liberation. This famous “Song of the Sea” tells their story- it expresses their unique identity.

Similarly, when you learn to be present- to follow the pillar of cloud and fire in your own life- you’ll be led on your own unique path of destiny. Free from complacency and resistance, your inner flower will blossom, in a way that’s unique to you. Then, your life becomes your song- or your rap, no matter what your color.

A schoolmaster from the town of Goray used to travel to visit Reb Yaakov Yitzhak, the Seer of Lublin. During one of his visits, the rebbe told him-

“In your town there is a holy spark. Please try to locate it and bring it to me.”

When he came home he considered the learned townspeople one by one, but wasn’t able to identify any of them as the holy spark his rebbe spoke of. So, one night he decided to hide himself in the beit midrash- the House of Study- because he thought if there were some saintly person in the town, that's where he would find him.

In the dead of night, as he hid crouching in the corner, he heard the door open. In walked an odd youth named Mendel. Mendel was an unusual character who was known to gesticulate awkwardly and make strange noises. But this night, the schoolmaster saw Mendel open a volume of Talmud and enthusiastically study out loud, singing the words in his own unique melody, all the while standing on one foot.

As the schoolmaster watched in awe, he accidentally lost his balance and knocked over a tin charity box which crashed to the floor, spilling its jangling coins.

Startled, the youth closed his book at once, strode suddenly over to the stove, clapped his hands loudly and started making strange noises.

The schoolmaster scrambled to his feet, approached the youth and said, “I know full well that your outlandish behavior is intended only to delude people. But your acting can’t fool me, for the Seer of Lublin told me to bring you to him.”

The youth lost no time and set out for Lublin.

When mendel’s father, who was a misnaged (opponent of Hasidism), found out that his son was on his way to the court of a famous hassidic rebbe, he rode after him in hot pursuit. When he caught up with his son, he challenged him:

“Why do you forsake the tradition of your fathers?” his father scolded.

Mendel replied, “In the Song of the Sea, when the Israelites were liberated from their slave identities and celebrated their true identities as children of the Divine, first it is written-

“Zeh Eli v’anvehu-
         This is my Divinity and I will glorify It”

And only later is it written-

“Elohei avi va’arom’meihu-
         “The Divinity of my father, and I will exalt It…”

Mendel’s father was taken aback and silenced, but later he understood- each person must find their own unique path, not merely copy the patterns given to them by tradition.

That youth became the famous rebbe, Menachem Mendel of Kotsk.

On this Shabbat Shira, the Sabbath of Song, may the fire and cloud lead each one of us on the path of presence, toward the full and beautiful unfolding of who we really are. May we find and sing our unique songs, each an expression of the One in the many.

Good Shabbos!
-b Yosef

**F**[**ire and Cloud- Parshat Beshalakh**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/fire-and-cloud-parshat-beshalakh)

In this week’s reading, Parshat Beshalakh, the Israelites escape Egypt and are confronted with many challenges.

But what is a “challenge” exactly?

Challenges exist because there arises an emotional resistance to things happening that conflict with what we want. Since it is impossible to act without being motivated by a want, and since it is impossible for the universe to absolutely conform to our wants, the conditions conducive to creating “challenges” are built into the fabric of reality. There is nothing we can do to change this basic fact: Reality is challenging.

The more conscious you are, however, the less you will be caught by the emotional resistance that arises. And the less caught you are by the emotional resistance that arises, the less it arises!

To make effort in consciousness, then, is the only way to remove your resistance, and hence to remove the problematic quality of life. No resistance, no problem- just unfolding situations.

When you are living in alignment with your deepest values, clear in yourself about what you are dedicated to, you are fully conscious of your intentions and you live life with purpose. When you are conscious of your intentions, it is not such a leap to be conscious of your emotional resistance as well.

However, if you find yourself spending time and energy on things that are not of your full choosing, things that are sapping energy and time away from what truly matter in your life, it is almost impossible to be conscious of your resistance because you are not even conscious about what you are doing. You have allowed things into your life- commitments, relationships, activities, whatever- that have no value to your life mission. Whatever those things are that you unconsciously find yourself stuck in- those are your Mitzrayim- your “Egypt”.

If you want to be conscious and free from the constriction of emotional resistance, you have to first be conscious of your decisions. You have to eject these useless things from your life. You have to say goodbye to the Egypt of purposeless living.

Life will be challenging either way, but why do you need to be challenged by things that are meaningless to you? Is it because of guilt? Because of fear? Because you just never stopped and asked the question, “is this serving my life purpose?” Get rid of it. Let the army of irrelevancy drown in the sea.

Once you free yourself from the Egypt of your unconscious involvements, you’re energy is freed up to apply consciousness in a deeper way. There is a hint of this in the way the Israelites travel after leaving Egypt. It says that Hashem went before them “yomam b’amud anan- by day as a pillar of cloud… v’laila b’amud aysh- and night as a pillar of fire…”

“Night” is when challenges happen. Emotional resistance arises, creativity and joy are blocked. At such times you have to follow the “pillar of fire”- meaning, move your awareness into the burning of the emotional pain- don’t avoid it. As you open fully to the experience, the pattern of resistance itself is gradually (or sometimes suddenly) burned up, and the “challenge” actually becomes a means toward transformation.

“Day” is when things are going well. There is a tendency to take things for granted, to lose appreciation for the goodness you are receiving. At such times you have to follow the “pillar of cloud”- meaning, be aware of the uncertainty of the next moment. Know that everything that is working well in this moment is a tremendous gift, a miracle beyond comprehension in fact. One day everything we hold dear will crumble, so open yourself to appreciate the gift that unfolds now for you from this unknowable Reality.

So get yourself free, then follow the pillars of fire and cloud that lead you on your way through the wilderness of freedom. It is a raw and uncertain road, but interestingly the word used for Hashem leading the people is nakham, which also means to “comfort”. Reality is rough on the ego that seeks comfort. And yet, to follow the pillars of fire and cloud is to find the ultimate comfort- the comfort of not running the show, of surrendering the “me” that wants to run the show. This Shabbat may we step off the stage and receive the true comfort of the One behind all shows. Good Shabbos!