## [Binding Self – GEVURAH and Parshat Hayei Sarah](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/binding-self-gevurah-and-parshat-hayei-sarah)

There’s a story about Rabbi David of Lelov, before he became a *rebbe*, that he fasted from Sabbath to Sabbath for six years in an attempt to purify and open himself to a direct knowing of the Divine. At the end of the six years he still hadn’t achieved what he was looking for, so he took on yet another six years – twelve years total of fasting and other restrictive practices.

Still, he failed to achieve is aim. He had heard about a great *rebbe,* Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, that he was known as a “healer of souls,” and he thought that this *rebbe* might be able to help him.

So, he set off to visit Rabbi Elimelekh and spend *Shabbos* with him. When he arrived in town, he secured a place for himself at the inn and came to the *beis medrash* (House of Study) on Friday afternoon before prayers. Many *hasidim* were there, and Rabbi Elimelekh greeted each one, shaking their hands and wishing them *Gut Shabbos*. David pushed his way through the crowd and put out his hand eagerly. But, Rabbi Elimelekh just ignored him; he didn’t return the greeting and didn’t even look at David, but just passed him by.

David left the *Beis Medrash* feeling downcast and rejected and went back to his room, where he sat on the bed dumbfounded, not knowing what to do. Eventually, he concluded that it must have been a mistake; the *rebbe* must have somehow not seen him there, or mistaken him for someone else. So, he headed back to the House of Prayer and again extended his hand to the *rebbe* just after the evening prayers. But again, Rabbi Elimelekh just turned away and completely ignored him.

There was no mistake this time; Rabbi David was devastated. He went back to his room and spent *Shabbat* alone, alternating between grief and anger. He resolved to leave as soon as *Shabbat* was over and never return there again.

But Saturday afternoon, as the time approached for Rabbi Elimelekh to teach at the *Shalosh Seudes,* the “Third Meal” of *Shabbat,* David could not restrain himself from going back and trying to catch a few words of the *rebbe’s* teaching. He didn’t go inside, but stood at the window and listened. After a short while, he heard the *rebbe* say:

“It sometimes happens that a person wishes to achieve the inner connection, *devekus* with *Hashem.* Maybe he even fasts for six years, and still not satisfied, he fasts yet another six years, but still nothing! And so he comes to me, thinking that I can give him the final something that he lacks to crown all his efforts and give him the *devekus* he seeks*.* But the truth is, all that fasting is a service not to *Hashem,* but to the idol of his own pride; such a person has to be utterly broken down and go to the very depths of their being. From there, they must start serving *Hashem* sincerely, with a truthful heart, from the bottom up.”

Rabbi David nearly fainted when he heard these words. Trembling and sobbing by the window, he waited until the *Havdalah* ceremony was over, after which he made his way to the entrance. Dizzy and bewildered, he opened the door with great fear and stood on the threshold, not daring to enter.

Immediately, Rabbi Elimeliekh rose from his chair, ran over and embraced his motionless visitor exclaiming, “*Barukh haba!* Blessed is he who comes!” David was drawn into the room and invited to sit next to the *rebbe* at the table. The *rebbe’s* son, *Elezar*, couldn’t believe his eyes, and he leaned over and whispered to his father: “Abba, this is the man you turned away twice because you couldn’t stand the sight of him!”

“No my son,” Rabbi Elimelekh replied, “That was a completely different person. Don’t you see – this is our dear friend Rabbi David!”

Fasting and other restrictive practices are common in Judaism and other spiritual traditions. What is their purpose? Why would the seeker willingly cause their body suffering? It is because our tendency is to identify with our experience. If we feel hunger, we tend to think, “I” am hungry. If we feel angry, we tend to think, “I” am angry.

But the intentional taking on of deprivation allows us to consciously say not that “I am hungry,” but that “I am *aware* of the hunger.” And even deeper: “I *am the awareness of* the hunger.”

And this is the key – not the mere cultivating of the ability to endure suffering, but the transcending of the “me” that doesn’t want to suffer, the knowing of ourselves as far more than any particular experience that we might unconsciously identify with. In this way, the fast (or other restrictive practice) becomes a doorway into the field of consciousness that we are beyond the ordinary ego – the simple radiance of being that is not separate from or other than Being Itself.

But there is the danger, as there is in any spiritual practice or endeavor, that we might identify with the practice itself; that rather than lead us into true realization of the Divine, we end up with a “spiritualized ego” – a sense of “me” that engages in fasting (or whatever), giving a feeling of spiritual status, not unlike any other materialistic kind of status.

That is, apparently, what happened to Rabbi David. His fasting didn’t result in the transcending of ego, but in the reinforcing of it. We can see this in the story, how he begins by eagerly pushing his way up to the *rebbe* and extending his hand. But by the end of the story, the *rebbe’s* medicine had taken effect – David doesn’t even enter the space until invited. Instead he waits on the threshold, revealing his release from the grips of ego, from that sense of “me” that wants something, that feels entitled to *get.*

Fasting, along with other restrictive practices that put limitations on our natural impulses, are expressions of the Fifth Path, the *sefirah* of *Gevurah,* meaning “Strength” or “Might.” When practiced with the right *kavanah* (attitude), they can help us develop the inner strength to break free and remain free from the seductive power of ego – that is, the tendency to identify with our experience. But to have the right *kavanah,* we have to understand the egoic impulse within; we have to understand its dynamic.

This is why the *mitzvah* from the *Aseret Hadibrot* (Ten Commandments) that is associated with *Gevurah* is לֹא תִּגְנֹב – *lo tignov – don’t steal.*

Of course, in the literal sense, not stealing is an obvious ethical necessity. But on a deeper level, not stealing is more than not taking property that doesn’t belong to you; it means living with the realization that the “me” is not *entitled;* the “me” is, after all, a psychological self-sense that is itself on loan; even our very self-sense is not something we own. Put another way – everything we receive is, in fact, a gift from the Divine.

Accordingly, the “Saying of Creation” that is associated in the Zohar with *lo tignov,* the *mitzvah* to not steal, is the passage where God gives the gift of food to human beings:

וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֗ים הִנֵּה֩ נָתַ֨תִּי לָכֶ֜ם אֶת־כָּל־עֵ֣שֶׂב ׀ זֹרֵ֣עַ זֶ֗רַע אֲשֶׁר֙ עַל־פְּנֵ֣י כָל־הָאָ֔רֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵ֛ץ אֲשֶׁר־בּ֥וֹ פְרִי־עֵ֖ץ זֹרֵ֣עַ זָ֑רַע לָכֶ֥ם יִֽהְיֶ֖ה לְאָכְלָֽה׃

*Elohim said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; for you they shall be for food…”*

* Genesis 1:29

It is interesting that the paradigm for human eating in the Garden of Eden is vegetarianism; meat eating isn’t mentioned until after the great flood of Noah, after humans had reached a dangerous level of corruption. Accordingly, there is the recognition in Judaism that meat eating tends to reinforce the predator-like tendencies of ego, and so the eating of animals is limited and up-leveled by the practices of *kashrut.* This is another example of how self-limiting *gevurah* practice aids in sanctification and self-transcendence.

*Kashrut* has many dimensions which utilize eating as symbol and metaphor for spiritual realities. For example, the species of “kosher” animals must both chew their cud and have cloven hooves – both of which represent specific ways of relating consciously to our experience:

“Chewing cud” means thoroughly thinking things through, not jumping to judgment, but rather investigating and probing with the mind as deeply as possible before asserting what is true and what is not. This is the *sefirah* of *Binah,* Understanding. And, just as a “cloven hoof” has two contact points with the earth, so too does being conscious require us to see situations from different angels, to engage in multi-perspectival thinking; this is the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah,* Wisdom.

The signs of kosher species of fish, which are the presence of both fins and scales, also have a spiritual meaning. “Fins” means being able to flow with what is, not resisting Reality as it unfolds, but receiving the moment from the hands of the Divine. “Scales,” on the other hand, mean nevertheless protecting oneself from influences that are dangerous or harmful; we can be open and give ourselves to the truth of the moment, saying “yes” to what is, while also making decisions toward this and away from that, saying “no” to things as well. The coexisting of the “yes” and the “no” is the balance between *Hesed* and *Gevurah,* embodied in the Sixth Path of *Tiferet,* which we will look at in the following lesson.

Another aspect of *kashrut* is *sh’khitah –* the kosher slaughter of mammals and birds. Again, the principle of “not stealing” is embodied, as the animal is slaughtered in a compassionate and relatively pain-free way, accompanied by a *brakhah,* a prayer that expresses thanks for the life we are taking, as well as the intention to receive the *mitzvah* of compassionate slaughter.

Another aspect of *kashrut* is the not mixing of meat and milk, which comes from the *mitzvah* of “not cooking a calf in its mother’s milk” – again, a symbolic act aimed at bringing compassion and sensitivity to the taking of animal life. We will look at this one more in a different lesson.

Finally, there is the practice of not eating blood. Much of the blood from the animal is drained at the time of slaughter, and blood is further removed through a process of salting the meat. Again, the idea here is to put constraints around our predator-like impulses.

There is another *mitzvah* connected to blood*,* not directly related to *kashrut,* but similar in principle:

לֹ֥א תֹאכְל֖וּ עַל־הַדָּ֑ם

*You shall not eat* **on** *the blood…*

* Leviticus 19:26

In context, this strange verse seems to be a prohibition of a particular idolatrous practice – probably something related to necromancy, in which an animal is slaughtered in some kind of ceremony and its flesh is eaten as it lies in its blood. But the rabbis understood this verse to be the *mitzvah* of self-restraint in general, not being gluttonous or voracious, as it says in *Pirkei Avot:*

כַּךְ הִיא דַּרְכָּהּ שֶׁל תּוֹרָה, פַּת בְּמֶלַח תֹּאכַל, וּמַיִם בִּמְשׂוּרָה תִשְׁתֶּה, וְעַל הָאָרֶץ תִּישַׁן, וְחַיֵּי צַעַר תִּחְיֶה, וּבַתּוֹרָה אַתָּה עָמֵל, אִם אַתָּה עֹשֶׂה כֵן אַשְׁרֶיךָ וְטוֹב לָךְ. אַשְׁרֶיךָ בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְטוֹב לָךְ לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא

*Such is the way of Torah: bread with salt you shall eat, and rationed water shall you drink; on the ground you shall sleep, and a life of constraint you shall live; and in the Torah shall you labor.*

*If you do this, “Happy shall you be and it shall be good for you.” (Psalms 128:2) “Happy shall you be” in this world, “and it shall be good for you” in the world to come.*

* *Pirkei Avot* 6:4

In other words, true happiness doesn’t come from self-gratification; it comes from developing inner strength and devoting ourselves to wisdom. At the same time, it is important to understand this *mishna* in the context of the tradition in general; the Jewish path is not one of asceticism, as you might think if all you read was this *mishna.* The “bread and salt,” meaning eating simply and living un-extravagantly, is the weekday meal. On *Shabbos,* feasting and drinking are uplifted, because they are in honor of the Divine; the sensual world is not denied, but sanctified.

Just as *Avraham* represents the *sefirah* of *Hesed*, loving-kindness, so *Avraham’s* son *Yitzhak* represents *Gevurah*. The source for this attribution came in the last *parshah:*

וַיֹּ֡אמֶר קַח־נָ֠א אֶת־בִּנְךָ֨ אֶת־יְחִֽידְךָ֤ אֲשֶׁר־אָהַ֙בְתָּ֙ אֶת־יִצְחָ֔ק וְלֶךְ־לְךָ֔ אֶל־אֶ֖רֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּ֑ה וְהַעֲלֵ֤הוּ שָׁם֙ לְעֹלָ֔ה...

*And (the Divine) said, “Take your son, your special one whom you love, Isaac, and go for yourself to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as an elevation offering…”*

* Genesis 22:2

God tells *Avraham* to take his beloved son *Yitzhak*, who was miraculously born to him in his old age, and slaughter him as a sacrifice on the mountain. *Avraham* obeys, and just as he lifts the knife to kill his son, an angel of God stops him, saying:

אַל־תִּשְׁלַ֤ח יָֽדְךָ֙ אֶל־הַנַּ֔עַר וְאַל־תַּ֥עַשׂ ל֖וֹ מְא֑וּמָּה כִּ֣י ׀ עַתָּ֣ה יָדַ֗עְתִּי כִּֽי־יְרֵ֤א אֱלֹהִים֙ אַ֔תָּה וְלֹ֥א חָשַׂ֛כְתָּ אֶת־בִּנְךָ֥ אֶת־יְחִידְךָ֖ מִמֶּֽנִּי׃

*“Do not send your hand against the boy, nor do anything to him; for now I know that you are surrendered to the Divine and have not withheld your beloved son from Me.”*

* Genesis 22:12

This story represents the ultimate fruit of *Gevurah –* the total surrender of all we cling to most tightly. It’s a disturbing story. In its plain meaning, losing a child is a parent’s nightmare; slaughtering one’s child is incomprehensible. But that is why the story is so potent – *Avraham’s* surrender and self-transcendence is total. Not only is he losing a child, he is losing his very reason for existence, which is dependent on *Yitzhak* to carry forth his purpose as the father of Jewish people.

But then, the angel stops him; meaning – surrender doesn’t necessarily mean destruction. In the end, all that we have and all that we are is only temporary; we eventually have to let go of everything. But before that time, we can let go while we are still alive; we can “die before we die” – we can surrender now, and practice surrendering again and again, by practicing restraint of the self.

Another expression of surrender, self-restraint and not-stealing comes in this *parshah*, which is connected to the particular rabbinic understanding of לֹא תִּגְנֹב *lo tignov, don’t steal.* The *mitzvah* of not stealing is mentioned elsewhere in the Torah, and so the rabbis explained the repetition of this law by explaining that *lo tignov* in the Ten Commandments does not mean *don’t steal* in general, but rather means *don’t kidnap.*

In this *parshah, Avraham* instructs his servant *Eliezar* to go back to *Avraham’s* homeland to find a wife for *Yitzhak.*

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֵלָיו֙ הָעֶ֔בֶד אוּלַי֙ לֹא־תֹאבֶ֣ה הָֽאִשָּׁ֔ה לָלֶ֥כֶת אַחֲרַ֖י אֶל־הָאָ֣רֶץ הַזֹּ֑את הֶֽהָשֵׁ֤ב אָשִׁיב֙ אֶת־בִּנְךָ֔ אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יָצָ֥אתָ מִשָּֽׁם׃

*And the servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman doesn’t want to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?”*

וַיֹּ֥אמֶר אֵלָ֖יו אַבְרָהָ֑ם הִשָּׁ֣מֶר לְךָ֔ פֶּן־תָּשִׁ֥יב אֶת־בְּנִ֖י שָֽׁמָּה׃

*Abraham answered him, “On no account must you take my son back there!*

וְאִם־לֹ֨א תֹאבֶ֤ה הָֽאִשָּׁה֙ לָלֶ֣כֶת אַחֲרֶ֔יךָ וְנִקִּ֕יתָ מִשְּׁבֻעָתִ֖י זֹ֑את רַ֣ק אֶת־בְּנִ֔י לֹ֥א תָשֵׁ֖ב שָֽׁמָּה׃

*And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be clear of this oath to me; but do not take my son back there.”*

* Genesis 24: 5, 6, 8

Once again, just as in the *Akeida* (the story of the binding of *Yitzhak* on the altar), *Avraham* is ready to surrender his whole purpose for being. He needs to find a bride for *Yitzhak* to be the mother of the future generations, but if the woman doesn’t want to come with him, so be it. And again, the lesson is: let your life be a movement toward your goal; live with purpose and do your best to accomplish your purpose, but also *surrender* your purpose – know that everything is in “God’s hands” so to speak. Don’t identify with the “me” that wants this and doesn’t want that; “bind” your ego on the altar of the present moment.

And this brings us to the deepest level of *Gevurah,* the binding of the mind itself. Moment by moment, thoughts arise, both in relation to our goals and in distraction from our goals. But the power to take the reins of the mind in our hands and choose which thoughts to think and which to dismiss is our innate power and our core responsibility; through this inner *Gevurah,* we are set free.

***More on Hayei Sarah...***

**​**[**Fiddler on the Balcony – Parshat Hayei Sarah**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/fiddler-on-the-balcony-parshat-hayey-sarah)
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הֲבֵ֤ל הֲבָלִים֙ אָמַ֣ר קֹהֶ֔לֶת הֲבֵ֥ל הֲבָלִ֖ים הַכֹּ֥ל הָֽבֶל׃
Vanity of vanities – says Kohelet – vanity of vanities, all is vanity!
(Ecclesiastes 1:2)

King Solomon’s wisdom book seems aimed at destroying our sense that we can make a difference with our actions; there is no ultimate profit from our efforts:

מַה־יִּתְר֖וֹן לָֽאָדָ֑ם בְּכָל־עֲמָל֔וֹ שֶֽׁיַּעֲמֹ֖ל תַּ֥חַת הַשָּֽׁמֶשׁ׃
What profit is there for a person in all their effort that they labor under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth stands forever…
(Ecclesiastes 1:3)

The bigger reality – the sun above and the earth below – are unaffected by our little ambitions and dramas:

דּ֤וֹר הֹלֵךְ֙ וְד֣וֹר בָּ֔א וְהָאָ֖רֶץ לְעוֹלָ֥ם עֹמָֽדֶת׃
A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth stands forever…
(Ecclesiastes 1:2-4)

Everything that comes eventually goes, so mah yitron – what’s the point? Why be concerned with future gain, when the cycle of birth and death simply goes on and on?

עֵ֥ת לָלֶ֖דֶת וְעֵ֣ת לָמ֑וּת
A time to live, a time to die…
(Ecclesiastes 3:2)

This is in stark contrast to our parshah, in which Abraham goes to great lengths to determine the direction of his lineage:

לֹֽא־תִקַּ֤ח אִשָּׁה֙ לִבְנִ֔י מִבְּנוֹת֙ הַֽכְּנַעֲנִ֔י אֲשֶׁ֥ר אָנֹכִ֖י יוֹשֵׁ֥ב בְּקִרְבּֽוֹ׃
You will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell –

כִּ֧י אֶל־אַרְצִ֛י וְאֶל־מוֹלַדְתִּ֖י תֵּלֵ֑ךְ וְלָקַחְתָּ֥ אִשָּׁ֖ה לִבְנִ֥י לְיִצְחָֽק׃
For to the land of my birth you shall go and take a wife for my son Isaac.
(Genesis 24:3-4)

He commands his servant Eliezer to take an oath that he will do his best to find a wife for Isaac from Abraham’s homeland, requiring him to travel far and seek the right woman to bring back. It might seem that Abraham is doing the thing that King Solomon warns against, רַעְי֥וֹן רֽוּחַ – striving after wind.

But when Eliezer goes off to find her, his task is strangely easy – he serendipitously meets the girl right away. When he explains to her family his mission and tells the synchronistic story of how they met, they reply:

מֵיְהוָ֖ה יָצָ֣א הַדָּבָ֑ר לֹ֥א נוּכַ֛ל דַּבֵּ֥ר אֵלֶ֖יךָ רַ֥ע אוֹ־טֽוֹב
This matter is from the Divine – it is not possible for us to say to anything bad or good…
(Genesis 24:50)

In other words, yes – Eliezer made a great effort and traveled to Abraham’s homeland to find Rebecca, but his effort was in alignment with what needed to happen – it was מֵיְהוָ֖ה – the story was unfolding from Reality, from the Divine – it wasn’t mere הֶ֙בֶל֙ וּרְע֣וּת ר֔וּחַ – vanity and striving after wind, because it was in service of the greater Reality.

There is an analogue here with our practice: if our practice is aimed at gaining something for ourselves that we can hold onto, if it is motivated by “getting,” than it too is הֶ֙בֶל֙ וּרְע֣וּת ר֔וּחַ – vanity and striving after wind. All experiences come and go; the point is to enjoy this moment, as King Solomon says a little further on:

אֵֽין־ט֤וֹב בָּאָדָם֙ שֶׁיֹּאכַ֣ל וְשָׁתָ֔ה וְהֶרְאָ֧ה אֶת־נַפְשׁ֛וֹ ט֖וֹב בַּעֲמָל֑וֹ גַּם־זֹה֙ רָאִ֣יתִי אָ֔נִי כִּ֛י מִיַּ֥ד הָאֱלֹהִ֖ים הִֽיא׃
There is nothing good for a person but to eat and drink and to enjoy the goodness from his effort; for this, I see, also comes from the Hand of the Divine.
(Ecclesiastes 2:24)

One’s efforts are vanity only if they are aimed at establishing something permanent for yourself in the future, because they are already a gift in the present; they are מִיַּ֥ד הָאֱלֹהִ֖ים – from the Hands of the Divine. This is true of ordinary food and drink, but on the deepest level, it is true of the present in all its fullness: this moment is fleeting, fragile, and impermanent – so enjoy it now! In this way there is still effort, but it is an effort to simply step up to the present with a willingness to be the vessel for the blessing of simply being. The key is to approach this moment without judgment:

מֵיְהוָ֖ה יָצָ֣א הַדָּבָ֑ר לֹ֥א נוּכַ֛ל דַּבֵּ֥ר אֵלֶ֖יךָ רַ֥ע אוֹ־טֽוֹב
This matter is from the Divine – it is not impossible for us to say to anything bad or good…
(Genesis 24:50)

This moment is now emerging from the Divine, from Reality – it is. Come to this is-ness without looking for good or running away from bad, and there is a natural joy that has the power to conquer all fears and doubts. This is why music is such a powerful spiritual tool. Music has the power to embody both happiness and sorrow, while penetrating to the deeper joy of Being that underlies them both.

The Rabbi of Apt once proclaimed a fast for the townspeople during a time of great distress, in order to call down Divine mercy. But when Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhyn heard about it, he hired some musicians to play the most beautiful music night after night on his balcony. The town was in a state of fear and misery, but when the hasidim would hear the sweet sounds of the fiddles and clarinets floating down from above, they would begin to gather in the garden, until there was a whole crowd of them. The music would soon triumph over their dejection, and they would dance, stomping their feet and clapping their hands.

People who were indignant about this complained to the Rabbi of Apt that the time of fasting he had ordered was turned into a time of rejoicing. The Rabbi responded, “What can I do? I cannot condemn one who takes the commandment in the Torah seriously: ‘When you go to war in your land against the enemy that oppresses you, you shall sound the trumpets…’” (Numbers 10:9)
[**Communing in the Field – Parshat Hayei Sarah**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/communing-in-the-field-parshat-hayei-sarah)
11/1/2018  [1 Comment](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/communing-in-the-field-parshat-hayei-sarah#comments)

Did you ever see one of those fake little plastic pieces of sushi?

They look so delicious, but of course, they are not really food. Or, consider those fake, plastic plants they have on the tables in restaurants sometimes. They look nice, so why doesn’t everyone have only plastic plants? What’s the point of having real plants that you have to water?

Plastic plants and plastic sushi have their place. Maybe you need plastic sushi to make an enticing display in order to get people to come into your restaurant. Maybe plastic plants are adequate for adding some decoration to your dining table. But the fake items are meaningless in and of themselves; they’re only useful because they point to the real thing. Once you feel enticed by the plastic sushi and come into the restaurant, you’re not going to order the plastic sushi; you want real food.

Similarly, there are character traits that are fake, and character traits that are genuine.

Fake character traits have their place. When you’re playing a certain role like an employee, or a parent, or a student, or whatever, there are appropriate behaviors that are useful to follow, even if they’re not genuine. Politicians have to especially be masters of fake character traits.

But if you want to find the genuine Divinity of your own being, if you want real peace, real wholeness, real realization, no amount of mimicking behaviors will get you there. For That, you have to go to the root of your own being, and turn fully toward the Root of All Being, which are ultimately the same thing: The Beloved “Being-ness” of this moment.

There is a hint in this week’s reading:

Abraham’s servant, Eliezer, had gone to the city of Nahor to find a wife for Isaac. He returns with Rebecca in the late afternoon, riding on a camel. Isaac goes out into the field as they approach:

וַיֵּצֵ֥א יִצְחָ֛ק לָשׂ֥וּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶ֖ה לִפְנ֣וֹת עָ֑רֶב וַיִּשָּׂ֤א עֵינָיו֙ וַיַּ֔רְא וְהִנֵּ֥ה גְמַלִּ֖ים בָּאִֽים
Isaac went out toward the evening to commune in the field. He lifted his eyes, and behold – camels were coming!

Each piece of this wonderful verse instructs us in how to meet the genuine Beloved.

Vayeitzei Yitzhak – Isaac/laughter went out…

Isaac’s name, Yitzhak, actually means laughter. It refers to the laughter of his mother Sarah, who laughed both with humor and joy at the idea of giving birth at her advanced age of ninety. The idea here is that just as Sarah couldn’t imagine being fruitful in her old age, so too we often develop a negative attitude about what is possible. We may think, “How can I possibly experience the Divine? I can’t even control my own thoughts for more than a second!”

But this attitude itself keeps us locked in the perspective of the ego, of the separate “me.” Instead, decide right now to let go of negative thinking. Know that you are, in essence, Divine, and that all you need do is begin shifting your attention to That which you already are. “Go out” to the fulness of this moment, to your experience as it is right now, with an attitude of openness.

Lasuakh basadeh – to commune in the field…

Everything that you are perceiving right now is living within your field of awareness. This field doesn’t itself have any shape or border, but…

Lifnot erev – before the evening/mixture…

The word for evening, erev, also means mixture, since it is the time when day and night mingle. Similarly, there is a rich mixture within our experience right now – sensory perceptions, the space and objects and beings around us, as well and different feelings and thoughts within. Our experience spans a vast spectrum of pleasant and unpleasant, everything intimately mixed in one experience that is the present moment.

Vayisa einav – he lifted his eyes…

Know that the full mixture within your experience right now is not at all separate from the vast space of awareness within which it is arising. Everything is, in fact, literally made out of your consciousness. Furthermore, it isn’t “your” consciousness; you are the consciousness. And so, all things within your experience are literally manifestations of your own being, constantly shifting and moving. “Lift your eyes” – bring your awareness into direct connection with whatever is happening, now.

V’hinei, g’malim ba’im – behold, camels were coming!

The camel is a symbol of self-abundance, as the camel carries around the nourishment it needs in its hump as it traverses the desert. Similarly, as you learn to shift into the oneness of your experience in the present, the sense of peace and completeness, ofshalom/shalem, can begin to blossom. Perhaps you are getting a glimpse now… but if not, don’t give up! The camels are coming!

[**For the Love of Pain – Parshat Hayey Sarah**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/for-the-love-of-pain-parshat-hayey-sarah)
11/10/2017  [1 Comment](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/for-the-love-of-pain-parshat-hayey-sarah#comments)

 **“V’ayavo Avraham – Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and weep for her..."**

This week’s Torah reading is Parshat Hayei Sarah, which means, “The Life of Sarah,” and it begins by declaring that Sarah’s life was one hundred and twenty-seven years. Then it says, and I’m paraphrasing, “Vatamat Sarah – Sarah died – Vayavo Avraham – Avraham came – lispod l’Sarah v’livkotah – to eulogize Sarah and to weep for her.”

So, first Sarah dies, then Avraham comes and eulogizes her, then he weeps. It’s a strange verse. Why does it say that Avraham “comes?” Where is he coming to? And if he’s coming to Sarah after she dies, wouldn’t he weep first, and then eulogize her? And to whom is he eulogizing? Isn’t a eulogy something you deliver to others? But this verse doesn’t mention any other people. It just says that he comes – doesn’t say where he’s coming to – then he eulogizes, then he weeps.

To answer, let’s reflect first on the question, what is death? Death means the end of a continuity; the end of something or someone that came into being, that was born, that had some span of life, and then expires. And when a loved one that plays a major role in your life dies, it’s not just the person that dies, it’s a continuity in your life that dies as well. Our lives contain all kinds of continuities – the place we live, the bed we sleep in, and so on. And part of that tapestry of continuity is composed of our relationships. If one of those relationships comes to an end because the person comes to an end, then something of ourselves as died as well; the tapestry, or the form of our lives gets torn. And of course, the experience of being torn is pain.

So, at this deeper level, we’re talking about pain. And what’s the normal response to pain? AAHH! Crying out. But that’s not what Avraham does. – Vayavo Avraham lispod l’Sarah v’livkotah. First Avraham comes, then he eulogizes, then he cries out. Why?

Normally, we cry out in pain because we don’t like the pain. In fact, that’s the whole reason for pain to exist. Pain is there as a signal for danger, so it has to be unpleasant; you’re supposed to not like it. You feel your hand burning, you’ve got to get it out of the fire fast. If you only noticed intellectually, “oh, my hand is in the fire, that’s dangerous,” you’d already be burned. You need something to force you to get out of the fire immediately, and that’s pain. So, crying out is a venting of that impulse to get away from the thing causing you pain, and get yourself to safety. It’s also a signal for others to help you, just as when a baby cries out, and the parent immediately tries to see what’s wrong and help. That’s the ordinary way we operate.

But there’s another way to relate to pain, and that is instead of trying to get away, to deliberately bring yourself into connection with the pain, to come to the pain. Vayavo Avraham – come to the pain that is arising and be with it on purpose; that’s the practice of Presence, of being conscious with your experience, rather than be taken over by your impulse to escape. Again, it’s not that there’s anything wrong with that impulse. If your hand is burning, you should certainly escape by moving your hand out of the fire. But when we feel emotional pain, the impulse is the same; you want to get away from it, vent, blame and so on. But if instead you become present with your pain, then you use the pain to strengthen your Presence, to dis-identify from your impulses, and to ultimately know yourself ever more deeply as the space of consciousness within which your experience in this moment is arising.

So, on this Shabbat Hayei Sarah, the Sabbath of Life, may we remember to come ever more deeply into the truth of this moment, both in pain and joy, and through Presence with whatever is, grow in our experiential knowledge of the radiant awareness that we are. Good Shabbiss! ​

[**The Telephone- Parshat Hayey Sarah**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/november-25th-2016)
11/25/2016 [1 Comment](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/november-25th-2016#comments)

Once I saw a video of some children being shown an old telephone from the 1970s, complete with a rotary dial.

“What is it?” they wondered.

When they were told it was a phone and how it worked, how you dial numbers by pushing the wheel around, they said, “Wait, you mean all this phone does is call people?”

For many of is, it’s hard to imagine a time when our calendar, internet, email and a million other functions weren’t instantly available on our phones. What a miracle! But recently I noticed that whenever I take out my phone, there’s a slight pain in my stomach, because I don’t want all those functions to distract me from the reason I took out the phone in the first place.

Have you set out to do something, gotten distracted, and completely forgotten what it was you had intended to do?

In the Haftorah for this week’s reading, King David is old and lying on his deathbed. Meanwhile, his son Adonijah has taken power against King David’s will, throwing a big party and inviting all his supporters, while excluding those close to David.

The prophet Nathan and King David’s wife Bathsheba enter King David’s bed chamber and inform him about what’s going on. The king is roused and swears that his son Solomon must succeed him.

Every intention that arises within the mind and heart arises within a particular kind of situation. As time goes on, situations change; in fact, “time” and “change” are not two separate things. Like King David’s desire for Solomon to succeed his kingship, the moments of our original intentions can become old and dim, while new moments and new desires arise. Like the thousands of apps, reminders, alerts, and new emails popping up, we sometimes find ourselves thinking: “Wait, what was I doing?”

But let’s stand back for a moment, back from all the different intentions and priorities of life. Before you had relationships, before you had values, before you had goals- can you go back before any of that and ask,

“What was I doing? Why did I come into this life in the first place?”

Every intention, whether positive or negative, has its root in some thought or feeling- the desire for happiness, the desire to help the world, the desire to create or to destroy. Consciousness is like the smartphone- its functions are infinite, and the mind is infinitely complex!

But is there something simple, something far more deep than any thought or feeling?

Before you wanted anything, before you had an opinion, there was consciousness- this miracle of perception somehow awakened within your body-mind and began meeting the world as it appeared.

The world- sometimes nurturing, sometimes beautiful, sometimes loving, sometimes painful, sometimes horrific.

But whatever the form the world happens to takes in any given moment, behind it all is this simple awareness: the awakening of Reality to Itself. And this awakening is happening, right now, as the Presence that you are.

Can you remember why you came into existence?

On this deepest level, awareness comes into existence simply to be aware. And behind all the complexity of life is this simple truth- you are aware- which is to say, you are awareness.

Know yourself as this Presence- behind your thinking, behind your words, behind your actions- and you become like the air we breathe: ever-present, completely surrounding us from without and nourishing us from within, yet essentially separate from all the drama of our existence- intimate and transcendent in one.

But to do this you have to get back to basics. Like the rotary phone that only did one thing, you have to find the one thing within yourself behind all the many things. A great way to start is, become aware of the air!

​Become aware of the ever-present nourishment which is your own constant breath, and you can begin to notice that your noticing is just like the air. The noticing itself is your ever-present consciousness within which all experience arises.

And, paradoxically, it is through the awakening of this transcendence beyond the world that you become a great force of blessing within the world, because it is through the openness of your transcendence that genuine love can flow.

Can you remember your original intention- to be awake?

King David is the symbol of Moshiakh- the awakening of all humanity out of the dream of separation. This dream is so powerful- it creates all the suffering we inflict upon ourselves and others.

His rightful heir is Solomon- the symbol of wisdom. We come into this world to awaken as that wisdom- to embody consciousness in form and thereby heal the world. We humans have become so lost in form, so caught within its web. The rogue son has taken over and usurped the throne.

But any moment, and that means this moment, is the potential to rouse David from his slumber and get the world back on track. Awaken!

It is told that in the late 1700s, when Reb Shneur Zalman was incarcerated in a Russian prison, a guard noticed the great presence of the rabbi and went to ask him a question:

“You are a holy man. There is a question that has been bothering me about the scriptures. When Adam was in the Garden of Eden and he ate from the forbidden fruit, it says that God asked him where he was. How is it possible that God didn’t already know where he was?”

Reb Shneur Zalman answered- “It’s like this. At every moment and at every time, God is asking you- where are you? Right now you are twenty-seven years old. Are you fulfilling the purpose of your life?”

At this point the guard almost fell over, because the rabbi had mentioned his actual age, and there was no way he could have known. At that moment, a deep knowing awakened within the guard and he devoted himself to love and service.

On this Shabbat Hayey Sarah, the Sabbath of Life, may we remember ever more deeply who we are really- the Presence and Life of Reality Itself. May that Presence be free from the dream of all fear and negativity, and may our words and deeds become sources of blessing on this earth, today.

Good Shabbos!
love,
​brian yosef​

[**The Fiancé- Parshat Hayei Sarah**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-fiance-parshat-hayei-sarah)
11/4/2015 [2 Comments](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-fiance-parshat-hayei-sarah#comments)

Back in the summer of 1988, I was home from music school after Freshman year.

One night, I went out with some high school friends to a diner. One of them surprised us with the news that he had met the girl of his dreams and they were getting married.

“Really? Are you sure it’s the right thing?” we asked.

We were only nineteen. The idea of getting married was inconceivable to us.

“I know it’s the right thing,” he replied. He then went on to recount all the serendipitous events “proving” to him that she was his perfect life partner.

“I’ve never been so sure about anything in my entire life,” he said.

Having never experienced that kind of certainty myself, I was suspicious, but I didn’t question it further.

The next summer, in 1990, we all went out again, and he told us what horrors had transpired after they were married: She had stolen his car, emptied his bank account and disappeared. So much for serendipity!

Sometimes, in our enthusiasm to “trust the universe”, we give away our power to make decisions. Rather than ask ourselves the crucial questions, we instead look for signs and coincidences to confirm that we’re on the right track, that things are beshert.

In this week’s reading, Abraham sends his servant Eliezer back to their homeland to find a wife for Isaac. When Eliezer arrives at the city of Nahor, he prays:

“Hashem… let it be that the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please tip over your jug so that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will even water your camels,’ her will you have designated for your servant, for Isaac…”

At first glance, it might seem that Eliezer is making this same kind of mistake, relying on an external sign to tell him what to do, rather than using his own intelligence to find the right wife for Isaac.

Or is he?

If Eliezer had prayed that the girl should be wearing a purple dress, or have a really big hat, certainly that would have been arbitrary.

But what does he say?

He says that she should offer water to him and his camels. In other words, she should be a mentch- a kind and generous person.

He’s not giving away his power in favor of superstition; he’s actually specifying the exact criteria by which to make his decision: she should be kind and generous. He doesn’t want Isaac to marry someone who will steal his money and his donkey! If she’s not a mentch, he’s not interested.

If you want to live with clarity and purpose, if you want to truly say “yes” to your life, you’ve got to be able to say a clear “no” as well. The “yes” and the “no” go together.

Saying “no” can be really difficult. So many things can get in the way- stories in your head telling you what you “should” do, feelings of guilt for letting others down, or lack of trust in yourself.

But, there are decisions that only you can make. Take your power in your hand and meet your destiny! Don’t be blown around by the winds of fate!

To be decisive doesn’t mean you shouldn’t trust. Trust your ability to make your decision!

Then, after you’ve made your decision, trust whatever happens next. Surrender to what happens. Ultimately, we have no control over how things unfold, but we always have the power to choose.

Are there decisions you are avoiding?

Or, after you make decisions, are you easily derailed because you can’t say “no” to other things that come along? Do you ever blame others for your inability to follow through on your own decisions?

Remember- your life is like a boat. The steering wheel is in front of you. Take it and steer; don’t wait for someone else, don’t blame anyone else. The ocean has its own currents, but you are the captain.

And, if you’re not sure yet which decision to make, that’s fine too. Be uncertain. Sometimes it's wonderful to just go with the currents. Sometimes life really can be a magical tapestry of serendipity, effortlessly bringing you to good things.

But sooner or later, that kind of magic ends, and the currents leave you drifting aimlessly, or even worse, headed toward the rocks. When that happens, take the wheel and decide which way to go! Then, a new kind of magic begins.

Each of us has a completely unique path with unique decisions to be made. But there is one decision that is completely universal. It’s the decision that each of us faces at all times: the decision to fully inhabit this moment.

To fully inhabit this moment, the “yes” and the “no” must be one: “yes” to what is, “no” to resisting what is.

And yet, if a feeling of “resisting what is” arises, you must say “yes” to the presence of that feeling- because in that moment, “resistance to what is”- is what is!

In this way, resistance is transformed into non-resistance; the “yes” and the “no” are completely one.
​
What is this moment like?

Is it peaceful? Is it tense? Is it gentle? Is it harsh? Are you willing to decide, right now, to say “yes” to this moment, as it is?

This is actually the most important decision you will ever make, because it's the foundation of all other decisions. Without this decision, there is unrest; there is struggle.

But with this decision, your potential for real peace can manifest. With this decision, the Messiah is born, little by little.

Martin Buber, in his essay Judaism and the Jews, tells the story that when he was a child, he read an "old Jewish tale" that I later found in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a):

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met the Prophet Elijah. He said to him, “When will the Messiah come?”

Elijah answered, “Go ask him! The Messiah sits at the gates of Rome, waiting among the poor, afflicted with disease.”

Buber says that he later came upon an old man and asked him, “What does he wait for?”

The old man answered, “He waits for you.”

On this Shabbat Hayei Sarah, the Sabbath of Life, may we remember our power to decide for this life, for this moment. May true and lasting peace be swiftly born in the world for love, wisdom and healing.

Good Shabbos!
-b yosef​

[**Coming Today to the Wellspring of Nothingness - Parsh﻿at Hay﻿ey Sarah**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/drinking-from-the-nothing-spring-parshat-hayey-sarah)
11/13/2014  [1 Comment](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/drinking-from-the-nothing-spring-parshat-hayey-sarah#comments)

We have so many needs and desires- from food and shelter to companionship to livelihood to enjoyment- the list goes on. But at the root of all that we want and aspire toward is this common simple adjective: “good”. We want a delicious meal because it’s “good”, right?

But what is “good”? You might think that the delicious food is the cause of the goodness you experience. But if you look more closely you will see- besides the sensuality of the food itself, there is a deeper goodness that is not from the food. It is a goodness that arises from your appreciation, from your openness and presence with the food. While it is true that the food may have elicited this experience, it isn’t the cause of it. This goodness is the basic quality of what you are. In fact, it is the basic quality of what everything is- it is simply Being Itself. Beneath your thoughts and feelings, there is this wellspring of nourishment, of bliss without a cause. The mind thinks it needs this and that in order to have goodness- but let go of all the conditions and you will see- the goodness is there, shining forth from everything.

In this week’s reading, Parshat Hayey Sarah, Abraham’s servant Eliezer is sent out on a mission to find a wife for Abraham’s son, Isaac. Eliezer finds Rebecca by a wellspring of water after praying for a sign. He prays that the one he seeks should give him water to drink and also water his camels. Immediately, Rebecca appears by the spring and fulfills his prayer.

In the symbolic language of Torah, both the wellspring and Rebecca herself represent the Divine as the simple goodness of Being, shining forth from everything. In Kabbalah, this goodness is the feminine Divine Presence- the Shekhinah. When Eliezer recounts how he came upon Rebecca, he says, “va’avo hayom el ha’ayin”- literally, “I came today to the spring.”

The Hebrew of this phrase is so rich- “ayin” means “spring”, but it also means “eye”- hinting that the way to “come to the spring”- to tap the wellspring of goodness within- is to come into your senses, to come out of your mind and into what your senses are receiving. Coming into the senses brings you into “today”- hayom- the present!

Even deeper- the word for “to” in the phrase “to the spring” is "El", which also means “Divinity”. So come into your senses, enter the present, and drink from the wellspring of Divinity that offers Herself to you constantly. Like Rebecca, she is generous, and her waters are unceasing.

There is another word with the same sound as ayin but spelled a little differently. This other ayin means “nothingness”, hinting at the stillness needed to receive Her ever-present flow. The mind must give up its activities, its obsessions, its busyness. Then, into that space flows the life giving waters, nourishing not only our spirit, but healing our bodies- our “camels” as well. May this Shabbat open a true space in our lives and may we all be nourished by the goodness that flows into that space!