## [**Revealing Blessing – BINAH and Parshat Lekh L'kha**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/revealing-blessing-binah-and-parshat-lekh-lkha)

The art of ritual is a way of consciously framing the drama of life.

Things are happening – but what is it that is happening? From the ordinary perspective, we are navigating through time, enacting our intentions and reacting to what comes, oscillating between joys and sorrows, successes and failures.

But ritual invites a deeper frame within which our successes are gifts from their Divine root; it invites a perspective within which our labors and even our sorrows are offerings to their Source. Our willingness to feel the pain of life, like Isaac bound to the altar, transcends the mere machinations of human drama and becomes an act of self-transcending love, connecting us with the enduring Reality within which our fleeting separate existences appear and disappear. In this way, the drama of ritual becomes a practice for actual life, a lifting of our personal stories up onto the stage of the present moment.

In Torah, the classic representation of this stage is the *mizbeiakh,* the altar.

In the Torah’s particular version of the universal and ancient human phenomenon of making offerings upon altars, there is an awareness of a danger in ritual; the possible side-effect of a skilled priesthood presiding over a sophisticated enactment of ritual offerings is that relation with the Divine can become an elitist business. Its function of uplifting human life out of the pettiness and negativity of ego and into the light of humility and gratitude can easily become distorted and serve instead to merely spiritualize the ego – to drag God down, rather than lift the human up.

It is with this awareness that the Torah instructs regarding the building of the *mizbeiakh:*

לֹ֥א תַעֲשׂ֖וּן אִתִּ֑י אֱלֹ֤הֵי כֶ֙סֶף֙ וֵאלֹהֵ֣י זָהָ֔ב לֹ֥א תַעֲשׂ֖וּ לָכֶֽם׃

*You shall not make with Me any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold.*

מִזְבַּ֣ח אֲדָמָה֮ תַּעֲשֶׂה־לִּי֒ וְזָבַחְתָּ֣ עָלָ֗יו אֶת־עֹלֹתֶ֙יךָ֙ וְאֶת־שְׁלָמֶ֔יךָ אֶת־צֹֽאנְךָ֖ וְאֶת־בְּקָרֶ֑ךָ בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר אַזְכִּ֣יר אֶת־שְׁמִ֔י אָב֥וֹא אֵלֶ֖יךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּֽיךָ׃

*Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My Name to be spoken, I will come to you and bless you.*

וְאִם־מִזְבַּ֤ח אֲבָנִים֙ תַּֽעֲשֶׂה־לִּ֔י לֹֽא־תִבְנֶ֥ה אֶתְהֶ֖ן גָּזִ֑ית כִּ֧י חַרְבְּךָ֛ הֵנַ֥פְתָּ עָלֶ֖יהָ וַתְּחַֽלְלֶֽהָ׃

*And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned it.*

* Exodus 20: 21, 22

We are prone to make gods of material wealth, of status, of power – these are the gods of the ego. Therefore, in making the altar to the One, the Israelites are instructed not contaminate it with reference to those values – it must be made of earth, or stones that are as they are, not manipulated by human artifice.

The eighteenth century Hasidic master, Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhyn, went deeper into this passage about the priestly ritual of the past, seeing in it a model for practice in the present: The “altar of earth,” said the Rabbi of Rizhyn, is silence, which is the superior kind of practice. But, if we do make an “altar” of words, we shouldn’t “hew” them or “chisel” our words, because our artifice would profane it!

The hint here is that our *avodah,* our spiritual practice, should consist of both silence and words, meditation and prayer. (And if we must choose one over the other, silence wins!) There is a hint of this paradigm in the *parshah,* in its description of *Avram* building his altars when he first enters the land of Canaan:

וַיַּעֲבֹ֤ר אַבְרָם֙ בָּאָ֔רֶץ עַ֚ד מְק֣וֹם שְׁכֶ֔ם עַ֖ד אֵל֣וֹן מוֹרֶ֑ה וְהַֽכְּנַעֲנִ֖י אָ֥ז בָּאָֽרֶץ׃

*Avram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.*

וַיֵּרָ֤א יְהוָה֙ אֶל־אַבְרָ֔ם וַיֹּ֕אמֶר לְזַ֨רְעֲךָ֔ אֶתֵּ֖ן אֶת־הָאָ֣רֶץ הַזֹּ֑את וַיִּ֤בֶן שָׁם֙ מִזְבֵּ֔חַ לַיהוָ֖ה הַנִּרְאֶ֥ה אֵלָֽיו׃

*Hashem appeared to Avram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And he built an altar there to the Divine Who had appeared to him.*

וַיַּעְתֵּ֨ק מִשָּׁ֜ם הָהָ֗רָה מִקֶּ֛דֶם לְבֵֽית־אֵ֖ל וַיֵּ֣ט אָהֳלֹ֑ה בֵּֽית־אֵ֤ל מִיָּם֙ וְהָעַ֣י מִקֶּ֔דֶם וַיִּֽבֶן־שָׁ֤ם מִזְבֵּ֙חַ֙ לַֽיהוָ֔ה וַיִּקְרָ֖א בְּשֵׁ֥ם יְהוָֽה׃

*From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and he built there an altar to the Divine and called the Name of the Divine.*

* Genesis 12:7, 8

*Avram* builds two altars; the first is in response to the Divine that “appears” to him:

וַיִּ֤בֶן שָׁם֙ מִזְבֵּ֔חַ…וַיֵּרָ֤א יְהוָה֙

*Vayar Hashem… vayiven sham mizbeiakh… The Divine appeared… and he built there an altar*…

Meaning, *Avram* became aware of the Eternal dimension of Being, and his altar was a monument to this moment of revelation. This represents the Altar of Silence, the practice of meditation. This is also the perspective *Hokhmah,* the spacious field of awareness within which the oneness of experience appears.

וַיִּֽבֶן־שָׁ֤ם מִזְבֵּ֙חַ֙ לַֽיהוָ֔ה וַיִּקְרָ֖א בְּשֵׁ֥ם יְהוָֽה =

*Vayiven sham mizbeiakh Ladonai, Vayikra b’Shem Adonai – And he built an altar… and called the Divine Name* –

Meaning, now *Avram* is crying out to the Eternal, and his altar is the stage upon which this crying out happens. This is the Altar of Words, the practice of prayer. This is also the perspective of *Binah,* the thinking mind which conceives of “me” and “beyond-me,” the longing heart which seeks transcendence and connection with That.

According to Rabbi Yisrael, prayer must not be “hewn;” we must not

“chisel” our words. But what does this mean? Interestingly, “not chiseling” can actually mean two opposite things:

On one hand, “not chiseling words” can mean spontaneous prayer, not using pre-conceived words and not composing your words in advance; this is “praying from the heart” – not thinking too much, but letting the words flow.

On the other hand, it can also mean *receiving the words from the tradition* – that is, chanting the traditional prayer texts that were composed long ago – not altering them or creating them yourself.

However, these two seeming contradictory approaches to prayer, channeling words spontaneously or reading them from a book, can be harmonized. There is a hint in the *parshah,* in the opening passage when *Avram* begins his journey:

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר יְהוָה֙ אֶל־אַבְרָ֔ם לֶךְ־לְךָ֛ מֵאַרְצְךָ֥ וּמִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֖ וּמִבֵּ֣ית אָבִ֑יךָ אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךָּ׃

*Hashem said to Avram, “Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you…”*

* Genesis 12:1

From the moment we are born, and perhaps before, we are being “chiseled” by many different forces; the pure and bright consciousness we are becomes etched with our experience of the world. About this, *Avram* is told to leave it all behind:

לֶךְ־לְךָ֛ מֵאַרְצְךָ֥ וּמִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֖ וּמִבֵּ֣ית אָבִ֑יךָ – *“Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, and from your father’s house…”*

This verse mentions three things that Avram should leave, representing three types of conditioning:

מֵאַרְצְךָ֥ – *mei’artzekha – your land…*

These are the experiences to which we are accustomed – the familiar world we wake to and move within every day.

מִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֖ – *mimolad’t’kha* – *your birthplace*…

This means our culture, our values, and world-view.

מִבֵּ֣ית אָבִ֑יךָ – *mibeit avikha* – *your father’s house*…

This is the deepest strata of conditioning – our behaviors, our personal habits, the way that we live.

Our introduction to *Avraham*, the progenitor of the Jewish people, paints him as one who hears the call to break through old conditioning, to discover something new. How is he to do that? The second half of the verse tells us:

אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךּ – *el ha’aretz asher arekha – to the land that I will show you.*

In other words, the path to breaking free from the bonds of conditioning and entering into realization of the Unconditioned is to become aware of what is being “shown” now – being present to Reality that is before us, coming to this moment afresh with our senses and letting our conditioning drop away. And this brings us back to a verse in our first passage:

בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר אַזְכִּ֣יר אֶת־שְׁמִ֔י אָב֥וֹא אֵלֶ֖יךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּֽיךָ׃

*…in every place where I cause My Name to be spoken, I will come to you and bless you!*

And this is the paradox: that the path to *transcending the conditioning of the past* is to receive the Divine Name *from the past;* to break free from the conditioning of our ancestors, we chant the sacred texts that come to us *from* our ancestors.

Because in receiving the “Names,” the sacred words that come to us from tradition, we enact the ritual drama of offering our attention on the altar of the moment; we receive Reality as it comes to us, without acting upon it, without that conditioned urge to adjust and manipulate that comes from our personal preference for *this* and not for *that.*

This is the second meaning mentioned above of “not-chiseling words” – receiving them from tradition. But in order for this to really be effective, our chanting of sacred text must not be mechanical – it must also *include* the first meaning, which is to be spontaneous, unrehearsed, not pre-conceived.

But the words are preconceived! How can they also be spontaneous?

There is a verse from which is derived the *mitzvah* of *Birkat Hamazon,* the blessings said after eating. It comes in a passage which describes the experience of receiving the pleasures of the senses in the natural world:

כִּ֚י יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ מְבִֽיאֲךָ֖ אֶל־אֶ֣רֶץ טוֹבָ֑ה אֶ֚רֶץ נַ֣חֲלֵי מָ֔יִם עֲיָנֹת֙ וּתְהֹמֹ֔ת יֹצְאִ֥ים בַּבִּקְעָ֖ה וּבָהָֽר׃

*For the Divine your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill;*

אֶ֤רֶץ חִטָּה֙ וּשְׂעֹרָ֔ה וְגֶ֥פֶן וּתְאֵנָ֖ה וְרִמּ֑וֹן אֶֽרֶץ־זֵ֥ית שֶׁ֖מֶן וּדְבָֽשׁ׃

*a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey;*

אֶ֗רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֨ר לֹ֤א בְמִסְכֵּנֻת֙ תֹּֽאכַל־בָּ֣הּ לֶ֔חֶם לֹֽא־תֶחְסַ֥ר כֹּ֖ל בָּ֑הּ אֶ֚רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֣ר אֲבָנֶ֣יהָ בַרְזֶ֔ל וּמֵהֲרָרֶ֖יהָ תַּחְצֹ֥ב נְחֹֽשֶׁת׃

*a land where you may eat bread without poverty, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper.*

And here is the verse from which the blessings after eating is based:

וְאָכַלְתָּ֖ וְשָׂבָ֑עְתָּ וּבֵֽרַכְתָּ֙ אֶת־יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ עַל־הָאָ֥רֶץ הַטֹּבָ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר נָֽתַן־לָֽךְ׃

*And you shall eat and be satisfied and you shall bless Hashem your God for the good land which the Divine gives to you…*

* Deuteronomy 8:7, 8, 9

The key here is that our prayer must spring from our experience: *Be satisfied, and then bless!*

In other words, our prayers must spring from our hearts. The words themselves can be received externally from the lineage, but our expression of the words must spring from the heart. We can do this by putting our hearts into the words – by feeling whatever is present, whatever mood or emotion springs forth from within, and channeling that energy into our *davening*.

On an external level, this tapping into the energy of the heart can be helped along by the spontaneous expression of *melody.* This is the “jazz” of *tefilah –* the improvisatory intoning of prayer. You need not be a musician to do this, but it does take practice. The essence is, relax your attention into your heart and into your gut, let your feelings manifest in the vibrations of your voice, through the vessel of the words. Interestingly, the Hebrew phrase above describing the chanting of Divine Names is *azkir et Sh’mi –* literally, “remembering My Name.” *Azkir,* “remember,” is the same root as Arabic word *zikr,* the Sufi practice of chanting Divine Names.

The most basic form in *davening* is the traditional blessing formula:

**בָּרוּךְ** אַתָּה יְהֹוָה אֱלֹהֵֽינוּ מֶֽלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם – *Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Ha’Olam*

“Blessed are You, Existence/Reality, our own Divinity, Sovereign of the Universe”

This phrase forms the opening line of the many *brakhot* (blessings) that the rabbis composed in response to the verse – *And you shall eat and be satisfied and you shall bless…*

Traditionally, there are at least one hundred of these composed blessings to be chanted every day. In this way, the Torah *mitzvah* of giving thanks for our food becomes the model upon which all kinds of enjoyment, as well as all kinds of service in the world, are lifted up on the altar of the present moment through the many *brakhot* that the rabbis composed for this purpose. There is again a hint in the *parshah:*

וְאֶֽעֶשְׂךָ֙ לְג֣וֹי גָּד֔וֹל וַאֲבָ֣רֶכְךָ֔ וַאֲגַדְּלָ֖ה שְׁמֶ֑ךָ וֶהְיֵ֖ה בְּרָכָֽה׃

*I will make of you a great people, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.*

וַאֲבָ֣רֶכְךָ֔ – *avarekh’kha – I will bless you –* meaning, when we leave our conditioning of the past and taste the blessing of this moment by fully receiving and chanting the sacred words of the *brakhot,* then –

וֶהְיֵ֖ה בְּרָכָֽה – *vehyeh brakhah – and you will be a blessing –* in this recognition and receiving of blessing, we ourselves *become* blessing, meaning that we experience our own being as actual blessedness, and this self-knowing is essential if we are to be a light in the world and fulfill the function of being a *goy gadol,* a people of Greatness.

The recognition of blessing, of course, implies the distinguishing of blessing from its opposite, as well as distinguishing the “me” from the blessing that “I” am receiving; it is the beginning of separation between subject and object, between consciousness and the content of consciousness; it is the beginning of duality.

This beginning of duality, of the Eternal Present stepping into life-in-time, is *Binah,* “Understanding,” the third *sefirah* on the Tree of Life, and is expressed in the third “Saying of Creation”:

וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֱלֹהִ֗ים יִקָּו֨וּ הַמַּ֜יִם מִתַּ֤חַת הַשָּׁמַ֙יִם֙ אֶל־מָק֣וֹם אֶחָ֔ד וְתֵרָאֶ֖ה הַיַּבָּשָׁ֑ה וַֽיְהִי־כֵֽן׃

*Elohim said, “Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, that the dry land may appear.” And it was so.*

* Genesis 1:9

Both “water” and “heavens” are different metaphors for different aspects of consciousness:

יִקָּו֨וּ הַמַּ֜יִם מִתַּ֤חַת הַשָּׁמַ֙יִם֙ אֶל־מָק֣וֹם אֶחָ֔ד – *Let the waters… be gathered into one place –*

Meaning, “waters” are the experience of Oneness – the *Makom Ekhad,* the “One Place.”

וְתֵרָאֶ֖ה הַיַּבָּשָׁ֑ה – *that the dry land may appear –* meaning, within the Oneness of awareness, duality arises – different perceptions appear; these are the “dry land” which we sanctify through our receiving them as blessing, as it says:

וְאָכַלְתָּ֖ וְשָׂבָ֑עְתָּ וּבֵֽרַכְתָּ֙ אֶת־יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ עַל־הָאָ֥רֶץ הַטֹּבָ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר נָֽתַן־לָֽךְ׃

*Ve’akhalta v’savata uveirakhta et Adonai Elohekha al ha’aretz hatovah asher natan lakh – And you shall eat and be satisfied and you shall bless Hashem your God for the good land which the Divine gives to you!*

*Ha’aretz hatovah –* the “good land” is none other than the seeing of the goodness of what is now appearing – אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךּ – *el ha’aretz asher arekha – to the land that I will show you…*

This is the essence of blessing.

***More on Lekh L'kha...***

[**Flower and Chalice – Parshat Lekh L'kha**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/torah-of-awakening-teachings-408656/flower-and-chalice-parshat-lekh-lkha)

There is something magical about friends holding up a glass of some fermented beverage, looking at one another, saying some formula of affirmation, then drinking.

L’hayim!

Nearly every culture has its version of this practice. In Judaism, it has become deeply ritualized as the act of sanctification – Kiddush – for many sacred times and rituals. But even without any overtly spiritual intention, the act of raising the glass has an elevating effect that even the most materialistic person is unlikely to escape. Something about the receptivity and openness of the vessel, filled with intoxicating, joy producing substance, raised up in well-wishing affirmation with friends… it is indeed a kind of kiddush regardless of the context.

Another nearly universal practice with a similar effect is the giving of flowers. Like the glass filled with wine, the flower too conveys a sense of openness, grace, and beauty that express the same well-wishing affirmation when offered to another.

The Zohar links together the images of the flower and the cup of wine:

                                                          רִבִּי חִזְקִיָּה פָּתַח, כְּתִיב, כְּשׁוֹשַׁנָּה בֵּין הַחוֹחִים. מָאן שׁוֹשַׁנָּה, דָּא כְּנֶסֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל

Rabbi Hizkiyah opened, “It is written, like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens.” What is a rose? It is the Assembly of Israel. Because there is a rose, and then there is a rose! And just as a rose among thorns is tinged with red and white, so the Assembly of Israel consists of judgment and mercy… וְשׁוֹשַׁנָּה דָא אִיהִי כּוֹס שֶׁל בְּרָכָה – and this rose is the cup of blessing…  Concerning this mystery it is written, “I will raise the cup of salvation.” This is the “cup of blessing,” which should rest on five fingers, and no more, just as the rose rests on five sturdy leaves that represent the five fingers… they are the five gates…
(Zohar, Haqdamat Sefer HaZohar [Introduction], translation by Danny Matt)

Here, the flower and the cup are the community. But on a more immediate level, they are actually representations of our own bodies. Just as the rose is filled with nectar and the cup is filled with wine, there is a sweet blessedness when we fill our bodies with the light of consciousness. How do we do that? By bringing our consciousness more intensely into the “five gates” – that is, present moment awareness through the five senses.

כְּשֽׁוֹשַׁנָּה֙ בֵּ֣ין הַחוֹחִ֔ים – like a rose among thorns…

But, there are challenges – “thorns” – which can block the “wine” of consciousness from flowing into the “cup” of the body. The three main “thorns” are: fear, desire and excessive thinking.

There is a hint of this in Avram’s plea with the Divine that he have some assurance of the promise that his offspring will come to possess the land:

וַיֹּאמַ֑ר אֲדֹנָ֣י יֱהוִ֔ה בַּמָּ֥ה אֵדַ֖ע כִּ֥י אִֽירָשֶֽׁנָּה׃ וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֵלָ֗יו קְחָ֥ה לִי֙ עֶגְלָ֣ה מְשֻׁלֶּ֔שֶׁת וְעֵ֥ז מְשֻׁלֶּ֖שֶׁת וְאַ֣יִל מְשֻׁלָּ֑שׁ וְתֹ֖ר וְגוֹזָֽל׃

And he said, “O Divine Lord, how shall I know that I am to possess it?” The Divine answered him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird.” (Genesis 15:8, 9)

The “heifer” is fear, expressed as Avram’s torment:

וְהִנֵּ֥ה אֵימָ֛ה חֲשֵׁכָ֥ה גְדֹלָ֖ה נֹפֶ֥לֶת עָלָֽיו׃ – And behold, a great dark dread descended upon him. (15:12)

The “goat” is excess thinking, expressed as Avram’s demand for assurance:

בַּמָּ֥ה אֵדַ֖ע – By what can I know…

The “ram” is desire, his preoccupation with a future goal:

כִּ֥י אִֽירָשֶֽׁנָּה – that I am to possess it?

The animals are each cut in half, hinting that we need to free ourselves from the inner tyrannies of the mind and heart. But –

וְאֶת־הַצִפֹּ֖ר לֹ֥א בָתָֽר – He didn’t cut the bird… (15:10)

The two wings of the bird represent the positive counterparts to desire and fear, which are love and discipline. Love and discipline are also symbolized by the red and white colors of the rose, mentioned in the Zohar above. Both are necessary – discipline provides the regular structure to engage your practice, while love is the actual content of the practice. The fluttering of both wings together represents the harnessing of the movement of the mind, directing intention – kavanah – toward the Divine goal.

In other words, while the animals represent the tyranny of the heart and mind, the birds represent the redirection of the heart and mind into prayer. The idea is of course not to destroy the heart and mind, but only to destroy their tyranny by realizing your mastery over them. Then, you can use their energy to discover and reveal your Divine essence, so that the “wine” of consciousness fills the “cup” of your body. Then, the awareness becomes like a fire, illuminating the five senses and burning up the “thorns” of fear and desire, revealing their Divine root:

 וַיְהִ֤י הַשֶּׁ֙מֶשׁ֙ בָּ֔אָה וַעֲלָטָ֖ה הָיָ֑ה וְהִנֵּ֨ה ... וְלַפִּ֣יד אֵ֔שׁ אֲשֶׁ֣ר עָבַ֔ר בֵּ֖ין הַגְּזָרִ֥ים הָאֵֽלֶּה
The sun had set; it was dark and, behold! A flaming torch passed between the parts… (15:17)

One time, when Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhyn was traveling through the city of Sanok, several opponents of the Hassidic movement (mitnagdim) came to him and complained:

"In our congregation we pray at dawn, and after that we sit wrapped in tallis and tefilin (prayer shawl and phylacteries) and learn a chapter of the Mishnah. Not so with you hasidim! You pray way after the set time has passed, and when you're finished praying, you sit drink schnapps. And you are called 'devout' and we are called the 'adversaries!'"

Lieb, Rabbi Yisrael's assistant, laughed when he heard their complaint and retorted: "The prayers of the mitnagdim are cold and lifeless, like a corpse. And when you sit and guard a corpse, you must study the chapter of Mishnah prescribed for the occasion. But when we hasidim have done our prayers, our hearts glow and are warm like one who is alive, and whoever is alive must drink some schnapps!"

The rabbi was silent for a moment and then added, "We'll let the jest pass. But the truth of the matter is this: ever since the Temple was destroyed, we offer prayers instead of sacrifices. And just as the sacrifices in ancient times were disqualified if one's heart was not pure, so it is with prayer. That is why the yetzer hara (evil urge) tries ruse after ruse to confuse one who prays with all kinds of distracting thoughts.

"But, the hasidim outsmart the yetzer hara with a counter-ruse: after praying, they sit and drink and wish one another l'hayim! To life! Each tells the other what is burdening their hearts, and then they say to one another, 'May Hashem grant your desire!'"

"And since our sages teach that prayers can be said in any language whatsoever, this toasting and speaking to one another while drinking is a kind of prayer. But all the yetzer hara sees is friends drinking together, so it stops bothering them!"

[**Look Up – Parshat Lekh L'kha**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/look-up-parshat-lekh-lkha)

When I was young, there was something called “television.” I remember those long afternoons: as the sunlight that poured through the living room windows waned minute by minute, the glow of the television grew stronger and stronger – the Brady Bunch, the Flintstones, All in the Family, the Jeffersons, Carol Burnett, Star Trek. Total absorption. As the hours went by, and the nagging feeling that other things had to get done (like my homework) increased, I would cling ever more ferociously to the characters and narratives beaming from the screen. Eventually the spell would be broken only by hunger, or having to go the bathroom, or my mother.

Oh yes, the screen is still just as strong; stronger in fact.

No more need for big pieces of furniture; my daughter can take a screen under a blanket and hide from everyone. Where did she go?

I have strategies for prying my children away from their screens. Usually, there are meltdowns and tears. But occasionally, I am successful. It works best if I am present when the screen time begins, and I can secure an agreement; a “covenant” of sorts: “Do you promise to turn off the screen and give it to me when I ask you to, without any arguments and without any Please Abba Just One More Minute?

“Yes, Abba.”

Then, when it’s time, the power of the covenant kicks in, and she gives it right back – no resistance at all. This proves: no matter how hypnotized we become by something, we do have the power to let it go, if we are properly prepared.

This is so crucial to understand, if we wish to put down an even more powerful screen –the screen of our own minds, upon which we project the drama of our lives – also known as “ego.”

Most people are glued to the screen of ego almost constantly, looking up only occasionally when the walls of the heart are breached, or when a temporary lapse in the noise of the mind allows the radiant silence to shine through, even if for only a moment.

But we need not be screen addicts; we can put down the ego anytime. Listen: The Voice of the Beloved is calling you to dinner – there’s a banquet prepared just for you! Let go of your judgments about yourself and others. Let go of how you wish things were. Let go of your obsessions, assertions, denials, angers, grudges… there is something so much better than all of that, if you would be willing to set it aside, look up and go.

לֶךְ־לְךָ֛ מֵֽאַרְצְךָ֥ וּמִמּֽוֹלַדְתְּךָ֖ וּמִבֵּ֣ית אָבִ֑יךָ אֶל־הָאָ֖רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֥ר אַרְאֶֽךָּ
Go for yourself from your land, from your family, from your father’s house, to the land I will show you…

All those opinions, assertions, cravings, disappointments – they seem so real, so important. But they aren’t the real you. They are imprints from your “land” – your culture, your inherited identity, patterns from your family, your experiences, your traumas – but you need not be imprisoned by them.

Lekh L’kha – go for yourself – el ha’arets asher arekha – to the land that I will show you…

We’re being called to the banquet hall and the feast is waiting. The Voice is calling you constantly, and whatever is constant is easily ignored. But you can tune into the Call if you’re willing to wake up from the ego’s hypnosis. The key is to have a covenant– commit to stop at regular times, turn away from the pull of the ego and toward the fullness of this moment…

 וַיִּֽבֶן־שָׁ֤ם מִזְבֵּ֨חַ֙ לַֽיהֹוָ֔ה וַיִּקְרָ֖א בְּשֵׁ֥ם יְהֹוָֽה
And there he built an altar and called upon the Name of the Divine…

The essential thing is to build a space in time, and commit to regularly withdraw from the ego’s momentum for long enough to connect with Reality, with the Divine. If you want to hear the Call, then call out – this is the movement of prayer. And then, be the stillness that hears – this is the spaciousness of meditation. Make a covenant to do it every day – even a few minutes goes a long way!

ק֚וּם הִתְהַלֵּ֣ךְ בָּאָ֔רֶץ לְאָרְכָּ֖הּ וּלְרָחְבָּ֑הּ כִּ֥י לְךָ֖ אֶתְּנֶֽנָּה
Rise up, walk the Land, it’s length and breadth, because to you I give it…

The ego believes itself to be a separate entity, navigating through the “Land.” But in truth the Land is fully yours. You are the Land, because everything arising in your experience in this moment is truly you; it all arises in the open space of this moment, which is not separate from the awareness that you are...

**"River of Light" – Parshat Lekh L'kha and Morning Sh'ma Blessing 1**

This week’s Torah reading, Parshat Lekh L’kha, begins with God telling Avram: “Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.” (Bereisheet 12:1)

If you examine your experience right now, in this moment, you’ll probably see that most of the content of your experience is nothing new. You may be in a place that you’ve been many times, with sights, sounds and feelings that are familiar. And generally speaking, unless you’ve recently moved, or if you’re traveling, or changing careers, or if you’ve just had a child or started or ended a relationship, or endured another kind of loss (and if so, may you have comfort and healing), unless you’re experiencing some big changes like these, then life tends to feel familiar, maybe even old hat. And that’s why many people become restless with routine, wanting to break the monotony with travel or doing new things. Other people are just the opposite, clinging to what’s familiar, and feeling insecure and even frightened by change, which is of course inevitable.

But these two poles of experience – craving something new and novel, on one hand, and being afraid of change, on the other, both happen on the level of the conditioned mind. Meaning, the aspect of your experience that derives from the past. For example, if you’ve had a strong emotional experience with another person – either positive or negative, it doesn’t matter – then when you see that person again, some of those old emotions are bound to reemerge. And those old emotions will influence your experience of that person in the present. Sometimes we call that “having baggage” with somebody. It’s like if you’re traveling and seeing brand new places, but you can’t fully appreciate it because you’re lugging around too many suitcases. That’s how relationships and other parts of life can often become, so long as you’re stuck in the conditioned mind, which really means being stuck in the past.

So, this is the Divine call to Avram: Don’t be stuck in the past! Let go of the way you experienced things yesterday, and come “el ha’aretz asher arekha – to the land that I am now showing you.”

So, this is actually not just a story, it’s an instruction. You can keep in mind – Reality as it’s being revealed in this moment is completely unique. Even when things seem totally familiar, even monotonous perhaps, keep in mind that that’s your conditioned mind. The familiarity comes from memory, from the past. And that’s a good thing; you don’t want to get rid of your memories, G-d forbid, but rather, simply recognize the truth that this is a new moment. Just like a river that seems to stay the same, but the actual flowing water is always new, so this moment is also completely fresh and new, when you allow your conditioned mind – meaning, your thinking and your judging – to subside and simply come to this moment as it is, el ha’aretz asher arekha – Divine revelation is always now. That’s the practice of Presence.

But what if you keep getting stuck by your conditioning? How do stay present and deepen your presence, when conditioning can seem so powerful? Again, the main thing is recognizing your conditioning. And to do that, it’s helpful to see that there are three main levels, alluded to by the verse:

“Lekh l’klha mei’artz’kha, umimoladt’kha, umibeit avikha – Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house…”

Mei’artz’kha means, “from your land.” This refers to the situation-scape of your life; your responsibilities, your aspirations or lack thereof, your current challenges and so on. This is often the most common distraction from Presence; you try to meditate, and your mind starts going through your to do list, or starts trying to solve problems, and so on. But again, don’t try to get rid of those thoughts or judge yourself for having them. Take it as a sign that your mind works, and that it’s there when you need it, thank G-d. Then, simply recognize – there’s my mind, doing what it does – and bring yourself back to the revelation of this moment – el ha’aretz asher arekha – to Reality as it is now being revealed.”

The next level is, umimoladt’kha, which means, “from your relatives.” These are your relationships, and this level tends to be more emotionally charged than the first level. The other day I was talking to someone who made a mistake at work, and she was so distraught about how upset her coworkers would be, how much suffering she probably caused them, and so on. But the next day, when she told a coworker how she got no sleep with all her worrying, the coworker said, “get a life!”

We are social beings, we are wired to care about others and care what others think about us. And in the right dosage, this is also useful for normal functioning. But again, recognize: There’s my mind and its old conditioning, pulling me into its drama. Just recognizing it frees you from its tyranny, and you can choose to lekh lekha – go for yourself out from your past, and into this moment. Or, it can also be translated, lekh lekha – go to yourself –meaning, go to your true self, beneath your conditioning. Go to your actual experience in this moment.

Which brings us to the last level, “umibeit avikha” which means, “from your father’s house.” This is the deep-seated conditioning that comes from how you were programmed in childhood, and can be the most emotionally charged, because it tends to be what we are most identified with. What are you trying to get out of life? What are you most afraid of? What is most important to you? This is the deepest strata of ego identification. Again, there’s nothing wrong with having desires and fears and values, as long as you know that all of that is not the real you; they are parts of your conditioning.

Then, after you recognize all your conditioning for what it is, you can simply choose to shift your attention into your present moment experience, so that you stop empowering the illusory part of the conditioning. Again, the conditioning is still there when you need it, but by shifting into the present, the conditioning becomes more like a lucid dream. You might still be in the dream, but you know it’s a dream, rather than thinking it’s real.

So then, what is real? Meaning, what is the Reality of who you are, beneath your conditioned mind? It’s the light of awareness that perceives the conditioning, as well as the aretz asher arekha, Reality as it is revealed in this moment. In fact, your conditioning is part of haaretz asher arekha; it’s part of the landscape of the present moment, part of the ever-shifting content of your experience. But That which is experiencing, that radiant light of awareness within which all experience comes and goes, that’s the deepest level of you.

The tefilot, the traditional prayers, are all pointing to this truth. Structurally speaking, all the liturgy points to the Sh’ma, the centerpiece of all the prayers, calling us to awaken. The Sh’ma is decorated by special blessings that come before and after. I the morning, the first of the Sh’m’a concludes with, “Or hadash al tzion tair – Shine a new light on Zion –hinting at this quality of newness inherent in your awareness, because awareness is like light; it’s tair – shining and illuminating whatever is perceived in its field...

[**Why Aren't You Worried? Parshat Lekh L'kha**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/why-arent-you-worried-parshat-lekh-lkha)

This is my family’s final week in the Bay Area as we pack up the entire house and prepare to leave on Tuesday for our year in Costa Rica.

And, serendipitously, this week’s Torah portion happens to be Lekh L’kha- the beginning of Abraham and Sarah’s journey as well.

But those who know me know that I don’t care for hot weather and I don’t really speak Spanish.

So they ask me, “Are you anxious? Are you worried?”

Let me tell you about worry:

Several years ago, I helped train eleven and twelve-year-olds for their bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, at a congregation out in the suburbs.

One day, the school director asked me into her office.

She spoke about the lack of progress in some of the students, and asked how we could best help them get prepared. I told her my teaching plans and also suggested some new ideas, but she seemed somehow dissatisfied. She had a puzzled look on her face and seemed like she wanted to say something.

“Is there anything wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I guess I don’t feel like you are worrying enough about these kids. I want you to worry about them.”

She was uncomfortable that I wasn’t worrying!

If you want to stop worrying in your own life, it’s important to understand the psychology of worry. Why do we cling to worry so much that a lack of worry seems suspicious?

It’s because we tend to equate worrying with caring. We are afraid that if we aren’t worried, then we won’t be motivated to do what is right; we won’t care.

But this is true only if you lose connection with the present and instead become absorbed into the narrative of whatever it is that you care about. When you live in the story of what you think is going on, rather than what is going on, than the drama of the story takes over your emotional life. “Caring” and “worrying” become one in the same.

When the worrying becomes unbearable, you’ve got to replace the story in your head with some other story. That’s why so many folks feel the need to distract themselves from life with television, movies, gossip or whatever. The story-addicted mind can only relax and let go of the story it worries about by grasping onto some other fake or more entertaining story.

But if you live in what really is going on- that is, live in the present- then worry is nothing but excess tension. What would you need that for?

When you are present, you can express your intention without being in tension.

To fully enter the present, you must leave behind your assumptions. If you believe that you must worry in order to get anything done, then that will be true for you.

But beliefs come from the past, and you can free yourself from them. Relax your mind and let go of whatever it thinks it knows. Touch this moment as it is- its texture, it's sounds, its feel. Leave behind the known land of assumptions and habits and you may discover something new, as God tells Abraham in this week’s reading:

“Lekh l’klha mei’artz’kha… el ha'aretz asher arekah...”

“Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you…”
(Bereisheet 12:1)

Abram (who later becomes Abraham) is told to leave everything familiar- his land, his family, his parents, to discover “the land I will show you.”

If you continue to cling to your assumptions and habits, the result is known- you will get more of what you’ve gotten in the past! But if you are willing to leave all that behind, you can’t possibly know what will be the result. You can only be “shown” by taking the jump and seeing what happens.

It’s true that life occasionally brings us to moments of opportunity and decision-

-but when it comes to living in the present, every moment (which really means this moment) gives us this opportunity. For the only thing that is old about this moment is the narrative you bring to it. Meet this moment afresh, and everything is new.

The Baal Shem Tov is said to have taught the following on the opening blessing of the Amidah, the central Jewish prayer.

He asked, “Why do we say, ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob’? Why don’t we simply say ‘God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’? It’s because when each of the patriarchs met the Divine, it was completely new. It wasn’t the story of the Divine given by their parents.”

Connection with the Divine is not something that can be given. It can’t be transmitted from parent to child, or from teacher to student. The Real God is not the story of God we read about in books.

Rather, God is This which meets you afresh, in this moment. In fact, there is nothing except God meeting you afresh, in this moment!

As we enter this Shabbat of Going Forth, may we deeply hear the Divine Voice that calls to us from the heart of this moment, inviting us to meet It/Her/Him anew as this moment.

Good Shabbos!
-brian yosef

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[**The Future is the Present- Lekh L'kha**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-future-is-the-present-lekh-lkha)

 "Lekh L'kha- Go, for yourself, from your land, from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land I will show you..." So says Hashem to Avram at the beginning of this week's parsha.

These three things- land, family and home- are security of the known; they are extensions of self, indicated by "Your land" and  "your relatives".  "The land I will show you"- this is the unknown, the future.

We cling to the known and resist the uncertainty of the future, though we know it is coming. But it is possible to dive fully into the unknown now, to release the burden of all our preconceptions we carry in this moment. In this letting go, we can see that this moment is in fact "the land I will show you"-  it is not "ours"- we cannot grasp it- but we can behold it. And yet, when you release resistance and fear and enter this moment fully, then you are truly at home; you are not living in your idea of the present, you are living in the real present. Then you can feel the mystery of the future in the present, and the unburdened heart can bubble with possibility!