

Safeguard the Blessing – Parshat Nasso

פֶּה תְּבָרְכוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם:

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ

Thus shall you bless the people of Israel – say to them: May the Divine bless you and guard you!

- Numbers (*Bamidbar*) 6:23 – 24

In this verse, the Divine tells the *kohanim* (priests) to bless the people by praying that the Divine should bless the people. It is strange – why does the Divine need the people for this? If *Hashem* wants to give blessing, why doesn't the *Hashem* just do it without the priests having to say it first?

But this is the point: The Divine blessing is always already inherent in simply being; our very existence is blessing. But, because our being-ness is constant, our tendency is to not notice it; we have to *consciously receive* the blessing of this moment in order to experience it and appreciate it. Just as the priests had to *say* the blessing, so must we become aware of the blessing by bringing our minds and hearts to the blessedness of this moment.

The verse hints at this by combining being “blessed” with being “guarded” –*yivarekhekha, v'yishm'rekha*.

Meaning, if we want to receive the blessing that is constantly given, we have to “guard” our hearts and minds so as not to be swept away by thoughts and feelings that obscure the blessedness.

These two realities, blessing and guarding, are represented by the two letters *bet* and *shin*:

ב – *Bet, Brakha*, “Blessing”

ש – *Shin, Shomer*, “Guard”

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

בְּכֹל יוֹם אֲבָרְכְךָ וְאֶהְלֶלְךָ שְׁמִיךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

Every Day/all day (constantly) I will bless You, and I will praise Your Name unto Eternity!

שׁוֹמֵר ה' אֵת כָּל אֹהֲבָיו וְאֵת כָּל הַרְשָׁעִים יִשְׁמִיד

Guarded will be all who love the Divine, but all the wicked will perish...

- *Ashrei*, Psalm 145

Together, these two letters make **שב** *shuv*, “return.”

The ups and downs, the beauty and ugliness, the love and hate, the bitterness and sweetness of our time-bound lives tend to obscure the blessedness that is ever-present, but we always have the power to **שב** *shuv*, to return; even a person who is thoroughly wicked and emmeshed in creating suffering and destruction has this power to *shuv*. This is hinted by the word **רשע**, “wicked person.”

...וְאֵת כָּל הַרְשָׁעִים יִשְׁמִיד

...but all the wicked will perish –

That is, the wickedness itself perishes when the wicked person changes. But in order to change in a positive way, a person must “see” the reality of their situation:

A **רשע** *Rasha*, a “wicked person,” is:

ר *Reish* which means, “beginning,”

ש *Shin*, as in *shanah*, which means “change,” and

ע *Ayin* – which means “eye,” as in “seeing.”

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

In other words, *true change begins with seeing*.

This is why, if we wish to awaken the Divine Blessedness within, we must *simply see* this moment as it appears to us. Seeing, meaning not visual seeing but rather perceiving the truth of this moment, is the key to transformation.

But also, if we wish to bring about positive change in others, we must embody the change ourselves. We cannot force anyone else to change, but if we embody love and not hate, the *רשע* who *sees* this in us is offered a doorway to *שוב* *shuv*, to return to the Divine essence of their own being. This is why it is so important for us to be watchful, to “guard” ourselves constantly, for any moment the blessedness that we reveal in our words and actions could potentially transform the whole world.

May the tremendous suffering of these times awaken fundamental transformation in ourselves, in our culture and in our species – *amein*.

בְּכֹל יוֹם אֲבָרְכֶךָ וְאֶהְלֶלְךָ שְׁמִיךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד

Every Day/all day (constantly) I will bless You, and I will praise Your Name unto Eternity!

More on Nasso...

Burning Down the House – Parshat Naso, Shavuot

If you look back in time through your family photos, you will eventually find pictures of people not smiling. It’s an interesting thing – why didn’t people smile back then when posing for pictures? And why and when did people start smiling as we do today?

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

It's funny – a person could be grumpy, then someone comes along to take a photo and they instantly manifest an expression of deep happiness. In a sense, the old paradigm is more honest; if we want to take a snapshot of life, the practice of always smiling probably gives a false impression, that life is constantly fun and joyful, when we know that is not.

Today this trend gets extended with social media – Facebook posts in which people look like all is wonderful and everyone is having a great time are very common. Often, I've heard people say, "How are you?" and then, before an answer comes, "I know you are great because I see your posts on Facebook!"

Happiness is a wonderful thing, but what about honesty? Psalm 15 says:

מִי יֵשֶׁבֶן בְּהַר קְדֹשׁךָ – Who can dwell on Your holy mountain? דַּבֵּר אֱמֶת בְּלִבְבוֹ – One who speaks Truth from their heart...

Truth is a basic middah, a basic spiritual quality, necessary for transcending the mundane and realizing the sacred, for “dwelling” on the “holy mountain.”

And yet, in Pirkei Avot, Shamai says:

וְהָיָה מִקְבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסָבָר פְּנִים יְפוֹת – Receive every person with a cheerful face.

And later in the text, Rabbi Yishmael takes it even further:

וְהָיָה מִקְבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּשִׂמְחָה – Receive every person with joy!

So, which is it? Is it best to be honest about our feelings, or should we “put on a happy face?”

A disciple once asked the Hassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, which is the true path – the path of sorrow or the path of joy?

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

He answered that there are two kinds of sorrow, and two kinds of joy. The wrong kind of sorrow is when you become negative, think of yourself as a victim and complain about your life. The right kind of sorrow is when you simply feel your suffering and the suffering of others in an honest way, without embellishment, without getting caught by the negativity.

The wrong kind of joy is when you only become happy about things you like, when things are going your way, when you get what you want. The right kind of joy, on the other hand, is like when a person's house burns down, and as they rebuild what was destroyed, they rejoice over each and every brick.

It's a remarkable image – the right kind of joy is like when your house burns down. The genius of this teaching is that the right kind of joy and the right kind of sorrow are really the same thing; they are merged in the truth of our experience, that everything we love and enjoy will eventually burn down. If our happiness is based on gratification alone, then we are slaves to our experience.

But there is a deeper joy that arises from the depths of who we are, beneath our temporary experience, beneath the “house” of our thoughts and feelings. That is the simple joy of being, the joy of existence, which becomes available when we let the “house” of ego “burn down” and fully open to the truth of our experience without resistance – even, paradoxically, the experience of pain and suffering. And in that openness, we begin this moment anew, rejoicing over every “brick” – over every action offered in service of building a home for the Divine during this brief life we are given.

This deep openness of consciousness to whatever arises is very simple, but it's not easy, because the complexities of life can easily distract. That's why we have spiritual teachings and practices – to develop our ability to remain awake and free in the midst of life.

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִו־אִשָּׁה כִּי יִכְלָא לַגִּדֹר גִּדֹר נָזִיר לְהִזְיֹר לַיהוָה:

מִיָּזִן וְשָׁכַר יִזְיֹר...

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If anyone, man or woman, explicitly swears the vow of the Nazir, to abstain for the sake of the Divine, he shall abstain from wine and intoxicants...

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

The Nazir mentioned in the parshah is someone who has become disconnected from the Divine and wishes to come back. How do they do it? They take a period of abstinence from alcohol and haircuts!

Why?

Alcohol is a way of altering our inner state, while grooming our hair is a way of altering our outer state. In other words, they are examples of manipulating our experience toward our liking. By abstaining from both, one can get in touch with that deeper level of awareness that simply receives the moment as it is, that “lets the house burn down,” so to speak. This level of awareness experientially knows the Oneness of the Divine as the basic condition of Reality, prior to the impulse to do something about it. Through this practice, the Nazir could find their way back to the Divine, back to their deepest nature, and then return to ordinary life from this higher place.

Last week was the festival of Shavuot, during which the biblical Book of Ruth is traditionally read. This book begins with Naomi’s house “burning down” as great tragedy befalls her: first, her husband dies, and then both of her sons die. She tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their families, but her daughter-in-law Ruth swears allegiance to Naomi, and they return to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem, penniless. Someone says, “Could this be Naomi?” but Naomi tells her that is no longer her name:

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶלֶיָּהוּ אֵלֶי-תִקְרָאנָה לִי נַעֲמִי קְרָאנָה לִי מֵרָא פִי-הֵמָּה שְׂבִי לִי מֵאֵד

“Do not call me Naomi (pleasantness),” she replied. “Call me Mara (bitterness), for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter.”

After that, their luck begins to change. Ruth serendipitously meets the wealthy Boaz, a relative of Naomi, ends up marrying him, and they have a son who ends up being an ancestor of King David, who is believed to be the ancestor of the future Moshiakh, the salvation of all humanity.

The hint is: their salvation begins to sprout when Naomi expresses her bitterness: “Call me Mara (bitterness), for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter.” She is not complaining about her lot, she is receiving it from the hands of the Divine. She is speaking Truth from the heart –

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

her experience isn't pleasant, it is bitter – but from that honesty, her fortune begins to change and will lead ultimately to world salvation. In other words, it is from the openness to the bitter that a deeper, transcendent joy can arise.

And so, for us – may we open to the truth of our experience with simplicity and without resistance, receiving everything from the hands of the Divine, and may we merit to feel the deeper joy that arises from that openness. May we share that joy with everyone we encounter: וְהָיָה מִקְבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּשִׂמְחָה – Receive every person with joy – and may true peace and salvation sprout for this world, speedily in our day!

Why Did I Wake Up Lonely? Parshat Nasso

Last night, around 1 AM, our two-year old daughter wandered into our bedroom and cried, “Why did I wake up lonely?”

Sometimes Torah comes in the form of adorableness!

I think she meant to ask why she woke up alone, not lonely. But, I realized, this can be a concern for many people on the Path- “if I wake up spiritually, will I be lonely?”

Put another way- “If I awaken to a new level of consciousness, will I still be able to relate to people? Will I feel all alone if I let go of all the games and dramas that I am used to playing out with people?”

It's true, there is an aspect of waking up that requires aloneness, but not necessarily loneliness.

On the inner level, there has to be a willingness to let go of your addiction to thinking. As long as the mind is constantly generating a stream of thought, the world will appear as a projection of your thought. Let go of your stream of thinking, and you open to the Divine

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

Presence appearing in all its glory and unity. This happens when your consciousness fully stands alone, not seduced by the compulsive narratives of the mind.

This week's reading, Parshat Nasso, is the finale for describing the construction of the Mishkan- the sanctuary of the Divine Presence. In preparation for the Mishkan becoming activated, the Israelites are told to expel anyone who is a tzaru'a, a zav, or who is tamei lanafesh.

All three of these terms have to do with bodily things that many people would consider to be...well... kind of gross! Metaphorically, they are related to ways that our thoughts, speech and actions can keep us unconscious and in "exile" from the Presence.

"Tzaru'a" means someone with a particular skin affliction, and is associated with the sin of lashon hara- gossip and slander. Since the skin is the boundary of a person but also the place of intimate connection with others, this mythic disease is an expression of relationships getting tarnished through destructive speech.

"Zav" means some kind of bodily emission and is associated with sexuality. Metaphorically, the outward emission represents the way thoughts of sexuality can be a kind of "reaching" or "grasping" for gratification, a loss of vital energy and presence.

These two represent the polarity of unconsciousness- "Tzaru'a" is negativity and destructiveness (like anger), and "zav" is wanting, grasping, neediness. Both of these lead to an absence of sacred presence in the body, which brings us to the third one:

"Tamei Lanefesh" means spiritually contaminated by a corpse. To the degree that you become seduced by the energies of "I hate" and "I want", your body is temporarily dead to the Sacred Presence that is actually not separate from your own living, conscious, being. In order for your body to become a sanctuary again, these forces and the thoughts they produce must be "expelled from the camp" in a sense. You must stand alone from them.

And yet, standing alone in this way removes the energies that contaminate your relationships. Free from negativity and neediness, you potentially increase your connection with others.

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

Standing alone does not mean being alone or isolated. So, in this game of waking up, you don't have to fear being lonely at all. It's just the opposite.

This Shabbos may we increase our connection to others by consciously letting go of any inner narratives of judgment, negativity, complaining, wanting and needing, and instead open fully to people as they are, in their beautiful uniqueness.