**[The Magician – Parshat Va'eira](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-magician-parshat-vaeira)**

When I was little, being sick meant that I got to stay home from school and watch TV all day. What else was I going to do? The dangerous part of this, of course, is that being sick was *incentivized.* I don’t remember if that was a problem for me, but I’m extra aware of this problem nowadays for my own children. That’s because “television” is now much worse – it’s no longer a big piece of furniture in the living room enjoyed by all, but rather it’s a little device that can be watched with headphones under the covers.

We know that sitting around watching television or YouTube for hours and hours isn’t ideal for the nervous system. Even without the ample scientific evidence telling us what the brain needs to stay healthy, we know it intuitively: learning, creativity, physical exercise. Any decent children’s school will be giving a good dose of all three to its students every day.

And yet, while we know this is good for us and therefore give it to our children, many adults won’t give it to themselves. For many, the end of school marked the end of learning and the beginning of a work life that is mostly mechanical and uncreative…and we suffer for it.

The remedy is something Judaism has always known: keep learning! Make learning part of your daily routine:

רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶן תְּרַדְיוֹן אוֹמֵר, שְׁנַיִם שֶׁיּוֹשְׁבִין וְאֵין בֵּינֵיהֶן דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה, הֲרֵי זֶה מוֹשַׁב לֵצִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וּבְמוֹשַׁב לֵצִים לֹא יָשָׁב.
אֲבָל שְׁנַיִם שֶׁיּוֹשְׁבִין וְיֵשׁ בֵּינֵיהֶם דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה, שְׁכִינָה שְׁרוּיָה בֵינֵיהֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר אָז נִדְבְּרוּ יִרְאֵי יְיָ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ וַיַּקְשֵׁב יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמָע וַיִּכָּתֵב סֵפֶר זִכָּרוֹן לְפָנָיו לְיִרְאֵי יְיָ וּלְחֹשְׁבֵי שְׁמוֹ.

*Rabbi Hanina ben Tradion said, “If two sit together and there are no words of Torah between them, then this is a session of scorners, as it is said: “In the session of scorners he does not sit” (Psalms 1:1); but if two sit together and there are words of Torah between them, then the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) abides within them, as it is said: “Then those in awe of the Divine spoke one with another; and the Divine listened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before the Divine, for those in awe of the Divine and who meditate on the Divine Name.” (Malachi 3:16)*
(Pirkei Avot 3:3)

The *Shekhinah* is not merely an esoteric belief. Every new thing we learn literally builds new neural pathways and the brain is enlivened. There is a natural joy in learning and growing (be it physical, intellectual or creative), because it is only through learning and growing that our aliveness is active, that our tremendous potential is realized. This is *Shekhinah sheruyah veineihem – the Divine Presence dwells within them;* it the actual experience of learning and growing.

*The Divine listened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written…*

When we learn, our nervous system literally grows and changes. This is the “Book of Remembrance” – the new neural pathways that we create.

*For those in awe of the Divine and who meditate on the Divine Name…*

There are many kinds of learning. We are most familiar with the type of learning that happens on the level of thought, but meditation in which thought is suspended is also a kind of learning; it is learning how to give the mind rest from thought while remaining totally conscious. This is “meditating on the Divine Name” – using sounds or sacred words as foci for the mind, while intentionally letting go of thoughts as they arise. It is far better to combine meditation with conceptual learning rather than practice only one or the other, because meditation keeps the mind fresh, alive, creative and conscious of the awesome mystery that lies beyond the grasp of thought.

There is a hint of this in our *parshah:*

וַיֹּ֣אמֶר יְהוָ֔ה אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֥ה וְאֶֽל־אַהֲרֹ֖ן לֵאמֹֽר׃ כִּי֩ יְדַבֵּ֨ר אֲלֵכֶ֤ם פַּרְעֹה֙ לֵאמֹ֔ר תְּנ֥וּ לָכֶ֖ם מוֹפֵ֑ת וְאָמַרְתָּ֣ אֶֽל־אַהֲרֹ֗ן קַ֧ח אֶֽת־מַטְּךָ֛ וְהַשְׁלֵ֥ךְ לִפְנֵֽי־פַרְעֹ֖ה יְהִ֥י לְתַנִּֽין׃
*The Divine spoke to Moses and Aaron saying, “When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, ‘produce a wonder for yourselves,’ you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh,’ and it will become a serpent.”*
(Exodus 7:9)

A disciple asked Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk about the meaning of this verse: “Why does Pharaoh say, תְּנ֥וּ לָכֶ֖ם מוֹפֵ֑ת  *t’nu lakhem mofet – produce a wonder for yourselves.* He should say, *produce a wonder for ME.* The point is to convince Pharaoh with the miracle, not themselves!

Rabbi Elimelekh explained, “When a magician produces a wonder, it’s only a wonder to the audience, not to the magician; the magician knows how the trick is done. But a miracle is not accomplished by the person who facilitates the miracle, but by the Divine, and so the miracle is just as much a wonder to the one doing it as it is to others who witness it. So, this is what Pharaoh is saying: *Don’t give me a magic trick, let me see a miracle that would be just as much a wonder to you as it is to me!”*

Regular learning is essential for living a joyful and fulfilled life. But the danger is that the more information and understanding the mind acquires, the less susceptible it becomes to the Mystery and to Awe:

גָּ֘ד֤וֹל יְהוָ֣ה וּמְהֻלָּ֣ל מְאֹ֑ד וְ֝לִגְדֻלָּת֗וֹ אֵ֣ין חֵֽקֶר
*Great is Existence; abundantly praised as Divine – It is a Greatness beyond all comprehension…* (Psalm 145:3)

This is why meditation together with learning is so important; in learning to rise above thought by practicing regularly, the mind is washed from its arrogance and complacency and enlivened to behold the Supreme Mystery yet again, right now…

***More on Parshat*[Va'eira](https://4246290-338316515408691068.preview.editmysite.com/editor/main.php)...**

[**Missing the Train – Parshat Va'eira**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/missing-the-train-parshat-vaeira)

The other day, one of the folks in our community wrote me that he often feels like his mind is a train station and his thoughts are the trains, constantly taking off every few seconds. He wants to just let the “trains” go and stay in the “train station,” but he feels compelled to hop on every “train” that leaves, compulsively journeying into nearly every thought that arises. “When will I learn to relax and just stay in the train station?” he wondered.

He's in good company! At the end of last week’s reading, Moses wonders in a similar way:

וַיָּ֧שָׁב מֹשֶׁ֛ה אֶל־יְהוָ֖ה וַיֹּאמַ֑ר אֲדֹנָ֗י לָמָ֤ה הֲרֵעֹ֙תָה֙ לָעָ֣ם הַזֶּ֔ה לָ֥מָּה זֶּ֖ה שְׁלַחְתָּֽנִי׃

*Then Moses returned to the Divine and said, “My Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me?*

Moses is on his Divine-given mission to free the Israelites, but he’s feeling like a failure. Similarly, when we commit to getting free from our own minds, we may feel like failures as well. Those trains are so tempting!

Part of the problem is expressed in the metaphor of “staying in the train station.” That doesn’t sound very enticing, does it? Going on different journeys, on the other hand, that’s enticing! And this is why we get carried away so easily with our thoughts; they promise adventure. They promise understanding. They promise new ideas, new plans, cherished memories and fantasies of possibility. No wonder we get carried away so easily by those trains!

If we want to get free from our own minds, we need to be seduced by something more powerful, more compelling than our own thoughts. This is the hidden message of the Divine response to Moses:

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר יְהוָה֙ אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֔ה עַתָּ֣ה תִרְאֶ֔ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר אֶֽעֱשֶׂ֖ה לְפַרְעֹ֑ה כִּ֣י בְיָ֤ד חֲזָקָה֙ יְשַׁלְּחֵ֔ם וּבְיָ֣ד חֲזָקָ֔ה יְגָרְשֵׁ֖ם מֵאַרְצֽוֹ׃

*Then the Divine said to Moses, “You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land.”
​*
Pharaoh, the symbol of ego and enslavement to the mind, will let them go free because of a “greater might” (literally, a “mighty hand”). What could be greater than the enticingly seductive power of thought?

וַיְדַבֵּ֥ר אֱלֹהִ֖ים אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֑ה וַיֹּ֥אמֶר אֵלָ֖יו אֲנִ֥י יְהוָֽה׃

*The Divine spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am Existence Itself.”*

Meaning: the “I” is not separate from All Existence, because every experience, every perception, every thought, every feeling that arises in our awareness is inseparable from awareness, *and we are the awareness.* The *ani,* the “I,” is really the *ayin* – the open space of perception, vast and borderless, and nothing is separate from that openness.

So, don’t try to control your mind; don’t try to discipline yourself to “stay in the train station” while your mind tempts you with all kinds of things. Know that your awareness is not just a train station, not just the place from which the “trains” of thought arise, but is rather an ocean of bliss, complete and ever-creative, ever-renewing. Consciousness is the true adventure. Let yourself be seduced by That. Let yourself fall in love with That, and don’t worry about the trains. Thoughts can seem powerful, but the awareness that you are is the יָד חֲזָקָה – the mightier hand – if you let yourself be seduced…

[**The Gift Beyond Self – Parshat Va'eira**](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-gift-beyond-self-parshat-vaeira)

When Moses complains that he can't confront Pharaoh due to his "sealed lips," Hashem responds with the strange words: *"N'tatikha Elokim L'faro – I give you, a God, to Pharaoh!"*

What does this mean?

There is a dimension of your being that transcends all your problems, all your reactions, all your conditioning. It transcends your thoughts, your opinions, your goals, your hopes, and your fears. Every experience you have arises within It, and disappears back into it. It is a vast, free, wellspring of peace, healing and renewal, regardless of what happens in your experience.

When we are unconscious of this vast dimension of being, we tend to identify with the content of our experience; we feel that our thoughts, our feelings, and our bodies are "me." That's the Pharaoh; it's the "me" that wants to control things, that seeks approval, that judges.

But when you remember the awareness within which everything in your experience appears and disappears, then you know your own Divinity – your own absolute freedom from the tyranny of ego. Then, there can be a tremendous sense of gratitude – *N'tatikha Elohim L'faro – I give you, a God, to Pharaoh!*

Your own Being is not separate from or other than God, and that's the most supreme Gift; though it's an even greater gift to know it! As it says (Pirkei Avot 3:18): "Beloved are human beings, for they are created embodiments of the Divine. But they are *extra* beloved in that it is *made known* to them that they are embodiments of the Divine!"
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[**The Plague- Parshat Va'eira**
​](https://www.torahofawakening.com/weekly-torah/the-plague-parshat-vaeira)

This week’s reading begins the onslaught of plagues against Pharaoh and Egypt. Appropriately, the other day I went into the bathroom to find the toilet teaming with huge ants- darting with lightning speed along the outside and inside of the bowl. A plague of ants!

I flushed the toilet- hundreds were sucked down the pipe in seconds… only to make room for hundreds more which miraculously emerged from under the rim. Ah… the wildlife of Costa Rica!

Not sure what to do, I glanced around the bathroom, when a movement caught my eye outside the window. It looked like a woody stick was caught in some cobwebs behind the window screen, but this stick was moving. I looked closer- it was a “stick bug”- a huge locust-like insect camouflaged like a stick. It had gotten caught in a nest of old webs.

I went out around the house to the window in order to free the entangled stick bug. I used a real stick to twirl the webby strands like spaghetti. The stick bug struggled free and leaped onto an adjacent boulder sticking out of the earth. (That boulder’s new name is Mt. Sinai.)

For me, those old webs were mere feeble threads, easily overcome with minimal effort. But to the stick bug, they formed an unbreakable prison.

So too with those psychological webs that ensnare the soul!

From the outside, it’s easy to see how a person can get free- they just have to stop thinking a certain way, or stop doing a certain habit. But from within the mind of the person who’s caught, it can seem impossible. That’s why it can be so incredibly helpful to have someone else- a teacher, coach or friend- to give you feedback and perspective.

There’s a story in Talmud about this idea:

Rabbi Yohanan was a great miracle-worker and healer. When he visited a sick person, he would ask, “Are these afflictions dear to you?”

They would then answer, “Neither they nor their reward.” Then he would take them by hand and they’d be instantly healed.

One day, Rabbi Yohanan fell sick. Rabbi Hanina went to visit him and asked, “Are these afflictions dear to you?”

Answered Rabbi Yokhanan, “Neither they nor their reward.”

Then, just as Rabbi Yohanan had done for so many others, Rabbi Hanina offered his hand and healed Rabbi Yohanan.

The Talmud then asks, why did Rabbi Yohanan need Rabbi Hanina’s help? Let him heal himself! It then answers its own question:

*“Ayn havush matir atzmo mibeit ha’asurim-*
*“A prisoner cannot release himself from prison.”*

Just as a prisoner needs someone else to get free, so too the right person can help liberate you, spiritually speaking.

And yet, if someone gives you the perspective you need to get free from the thought-webs of your own mind, then that means there must be a part of yourself that’s *already free.* Otherwise, it would be impossible to see beyond your limited perspective and you’d be stuck forever. The part that “sees” was never stuck in the first place.

As the traditional morning blessing says,

*“Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh HaOlam, shelo asani oved-*
*“Blessed are You, Divine Being, our own Divinity, who has****not****made me a slave…”*

Now matter how stuck you get, your essential identity is free from that web of thoughts and personal stories that the “me” gets caught in. In fact, the “me” and the “web” are the actually the same thing. But your essential identity, beyond the “me,” is always free.

Of course, when you’re stuck, you’re not living in your essential identity; you’re resisting it. In this week’s reading, Moses too resists freedom, complaining that he can’t possibly confront Pharaoh:

*“Behold, I have sealed lips- how is Pharaoh going to listen to me?”*(Ex. 6:30)

But Hashem reassures Moses in an incredibly surprising way-

*“Re’eh- n’tatikha Elokim l’Paro-*
*“See! I have made you God (Elohim) to Pharaoh...”*

Moses is God? What does this mean?

But the key is in the first word- *“Re’eh- See!”*

That which sees, the awareness that looks through your eyes, is the master over all the other forces within. It is the God within- your essential identity. If you don’t know that, you identify with the other forces- with feelings, with thoughts, with memories, with ideas- all those webs of the personality, of “Pharaoh.”

But as soon as you “hear” the Divine command to *see* (meaning, "be aware") then the exodus begins, and your essential identity starts to awaken.

But not only is your awareness the master over your personality- it’s even deeper than that. There’s a hint of this at the very beginning of the *parsha* (Ex. 6:2):

*“Elohim said to Moses, ‘I am YHVH.’”*

The first divine name, *Elohim,*means the divine personality. It’s the deity. The second Name, the unpronounceable *Y-H-V-H,*is far more expansive, meaning Existence Itself, not a divine being *merely within* existence.

The message here is that your essential identity is not something separate from the rest of Existence. Your essential identity *is* Existence, waking up *as you*, yet completely beyond “you.”

The awakening of your essential identity beyond your personality is actually something very simple. And while it may take years of learning and practice for this awakening to stabilize completely (if ever), it takes no time at all to shift into an awakened state, at least temporarily. In fact, lots of learning and practice can sometimes get in the way of it, if your learning and practice become part of your ego- if they become strands in the web of your mind-created identity.

But, crack open your heart and you naturally and effortlessly slip from the webs and step onto the rock of Sinai for yourself.

One year, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak held the Passover Seder so perfectly and devoutly, that every word and ritual glowed with holiness and secret significance. The next morning, while he sat in his room joyful and proud, a Voice came to him:

“More pleasing to Me than your seder is that of Hayim the water-carrier.”

The rabbi asked around about the man whose name he had heard, but no one knew who he was. So, some of his disciples went off to search for him.

At the outskirts of the city in a poor neighborhood, they found the hovel of Hayim the water-carrier. They knocked on the door and a woman answered:

“Yes, my husband is Hayim the water-carrier, but he drank a lot yesterday and he’s sleeping it off now. If you try and wake him you’ll find he won’t even be able to move.”

They went in anyway and shook him. He just blinked and tried to turn over and go back to sleep, but they wouldn’t give up. They pulled him out of bed, carried him on their shoulders to their rebbe’s house, and sat him up in a chair.

Reb Levi Yitzhak leaned toward him and asked, “Reb Hayim dear heart, what *kavanos*(mystical intentions) were in your heart when you gathered the *humitz*(leavened foods)?”

The water-carrier looked at him dully, shook his head and replied, “Master, I just looked around and gathered it together.”

The astonished *tzaddik*continued his questioning- “And what *kavanah*did you have in mind when you burned it?”

The man pondered, looked distressed, and said hesitatingly, “Master, I forgot to burn it, and now I remember- it’s still lying on the shelf.”

“Hmm,” the rabbi puzzled, “And tell me, Reb Hayim, how did you celebrate the seder?”

Then something seemed to light up in the eyes of the man, and he replied in humble tones-

“Rabbi, I’ll tell you the truth. You see, I’ve always heard that it’s forbidden to drink brandy on the eight days of *Pesakh,*so yesterday morning I drank enough to last me all eight days, and I got tired and fell asleep.

“Then my wife woke me in the evening and said, ‘why don’t you celebrate the seder like other Jews?’

“‘What do you want from me?’ I said, ‘I am an ignorant man, son of an ignorant man, and I don’t know what to do and what not to do.’

“Still, I went and sat down to the table, where she had placed *matzos*and eggs. Broken hearted, I began to sing a wordless melody. My wife joined me, and we sang together mournfully, pouring out our hearts.

“I cried, *‘Ribono Shel Olam-*Master of the World! You brought our ancestors out of Egypt to freedom- will you make us free too?’

“As we sang, something started to change inside me. The burden of my life- my troubles- my fears- none of it seemed to matter anymore. I looked around- everything seemed to glow with the most beautiful light. My wife could see it too. We felt as though we were tasting true freedom- as though *we*were coming out of Egypt.

“So the two of us sat and sang and drank and rejoiced. Then I got tired, lay down, and fell back asleep.”

On this *Shabbos Va’eira,* the Sabbath of Appearing, may we learn to not fall back asleep from the Divine when She appears. Instead, may we bring our wakefulness into connection with everyone we meet. May the world be transformed in the image of our Divine potential, bringing an end to all the unnecessary plagues we unconsciously create for ourselves and for the earth, speedily in our day- *Moshiakh Akhshav!*