## Sacred Space – ק KOOF and Parshat Ki Tavo

**Please Remove Your Shoes**

The letter ק *koof* is associated with the root קדש *K-D-Sh*, which means “holy,” “sacred,” or “transcendent.” In particular, ק *koof* has to do with recognizing the sacred in the ordinary, the transcendent in the mundane. The passage of Moses’ encounter with the burning bush expresses this recognition:

וַיֹּ֖אמֶר אַל־תִּקְרַ֣ב הֲלֹ֑ם שַׁל־נְעָלֶ֙יךָ֙ מֵעַ֣ל רַגְלֶ֔יךָ כִּ֣י הַמָּק֗וֹם אֲשֶׁ֤ר אַתָּה֙ עוֹמֵ֣ד עָלָ֔יו אַדְמַת־קֹ֖דֶשׁ הֽוּא׃

*And (Hashem) said, “Do not come closer to here. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the Place upon which you stand is holy earth –* admat kodesh...”

- *Shemot* (Exodus) 3:5

שַׁל־נְעָלֶ֙יךָ֙ מֵעַ֣ל רַגְלֶ֔יךָ – *Remove your sandals from your feet…*

Rabbi Moshe of Kobryn taught:

“Remove the habitual which encloses your ‘foot’ – which comes between you and your experience of the world – and you will know that the place upon which you find yourself is holy; for there is no rung of human life on which we cannot find the holiness of the Divine everywhere and at all times.”

In other words, the sacred dimension of being is ever accessible in all experiences, all encounters – we need only remove our conditioning, our habitual way of seeing things as mundane and unspiritual. How do we do this?

**Parshat Ki Tavo**

וְהָיָה֙ כִּֽי־תָבֹ֣וא אֶל־הָאָ֔רֶץ אֲשֶׁר֙ יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ נֹתֵ֥ן לְךָ֖ נַחֲלָ֑ה וִֽירִשְׁתָּ֖הּ וְיָשַׁ֥בְתָּ בָּֽהּ׃

*It will be when you come into the land that Hashem, your Divinity gives to you as an inheritance and you take possession of it and dwell within it…*

*- Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 26:1, *Parshat Ki Tavo*

The *parshah* then goes on to talk about a special ritual of gratitude that involves putting the first fruit of one’s harvest into a basket, making a pilgrimage to the Temple, and offering the fruit in gratitude for having come out of slavery in Egypt, and into the the “land flowing with milk and honey.”

וְהָיָה֙ כִּֽי־תָבֹ֣וא אֶל־הָאָ֔רֶץ *V’hayah ki tavo el ha’aretz – It will be when you come into the land…*

On a simple level, this is a farmer’s gratitude ritual for the goodness of the produce of the earth. But on a deeper level, “coming into the land” means *coming into the place you already are,* being fully present with the “earth” – meaning, whatever happens to be present in the moment.

וְהָיָה֙ כִּֽי־תָבֹ֣וא *V’hayah ki tavo* – *It will* ***BE*** *when you come in…*

This is hinted at by *V’hayah ki tavo – It will* ***BE*** *when you come in –*meaning, entering the *mode of Being.* The word וְהָיָה *v’hayah,* “it will be,” actually consists of the letters of the Divine Name in a slightly different order. Thus, we might understand that to encounter the Divine, we need to “come into” the mode of Being.

Our lives consist of both Doing and Being, but we tend to identify with the Doing mode. Doing is “going out” – reaching toward a goal we imagine in the future. This is how we create and accomplish things, which is wonderful and necessary. But if it is not balanced by the mode of Being, if there is total identification with the mind and with Doing, then there is no sacredness. There is also no peace or contentment, because one is constantly focused on a goal in the future; there is never any “arrival.”

What is the solution?

וְהָיָה֙ כִּֽי־תָבֹ֣וא אֶל־הָאָ֔רֶץ *V’hayah ki tavo el ha’aretz – It will be when you come into the land…*

Come fully into the place that you are, by connecting your awareness with the *aretz –* the earth on which you dwell, this body through which you live, and with anything else that is perceived; this is Presence.

**The Basket of Gratitude**

וְלָקַחְתָּ֞ מֵרֵאשִׁ֣ית כׇּל־פְּרִ֣י הָאֲדָמָ֗ה

*V’lakakhta mereishit kol p’ri ha’adamah –* *You shall take from the first fruits of the earth…*

- 26:2

There is a “fruit” is ripening right now – that “fruit” is fulness of this moment; it is the “fruit” of all that has come before.

Our “first fruit,” then, is the raw present, before we impose our conditioning upon it. The content of this moment is complex; it often contains both joy and suffering, and we may have stories and judgments about it. But *before* the stories, before the judgments, there is simply this life, this consciousness, meeting this moment as it is.

When we descend deeply into ourselves, when we return from the journeys of the mind and into the reality of the naked present, it can dawn on upon us: there is a choice! We have the choice to hold this moment in the “basket” of gratitude.

This is not a denial of suffering. In fact, it is often thanks to our suffering that we are awakened to those things that truly matter, to the blessings we are constantly receiving but often take for granted.

And when we realize that this is in fact *our* *choice*, that we can choose to collect our “first fruits” in the “basket” of gratitude, we shift into awareness of the fundamental holiness of Reality, the sacredness of Being. This is the path of ק *koof.*

When that happens, we can then say as the ancient farmer said:

וַיּוֹצִאֵ֤נוּ יְהֹוָה֙ מִמִּצְרַ֔יִם *Vayotzieinu Hashem mimitzrayim – Hashem brought us out of Egypt* –

Meaning – we are brought out of the contracted bundle of mind-identified ego (*Mitzayim,* “Egypt”) through simply being (*Hashem,* “Existence” or “Being”).

וְשָׂמַחְתָּ֣ בְכׇל־הַטּ֗וֹב *V’samakhta v’khol hatov –* *And then you will rejoice with all the goodness that you are given, you and the strangers among you...*

**Heaven on Earth**

There is a passage in the morning prayers:

כִּי הוּא לְבַדּוֹ מָרוֹם וְקָדוֹשׁ פּוֹעֵל גְּבוּרוֹת עֹשֶׂה חֲדָשׁוֹת בַּֽעַל מִלְחָמוֹת זוֹרֵֽעַ צְדָקוֹת מַצְמִֽיחַ יְשׁוּעוֹת בּוֹרֵא רְפוּאוֹת נוֹרָא תְהִלּוֹת אֲדוֹן הַנִּפְלָאוֹת

*For the Divine alone is exalted and holy, Doer of mighty deeds, Maker of newness; Master of battles, Sower of acts kindness, Causing salvation to sprout forth, Creator of remedies, Awesome in praise, Lord of wonders!*

Rabbi Barukh’s disciples came to him and asked, “*Hashem* is called *‘Creator of remedies, Awesome in praise, Lord of wonders.’* Why? Why should ‘remedies’ come before ‘praise’ and ‘wonders’?

He answered, “*Hashem* does not want to be praised for supernatural miracles. And so here, through the mention of ‘remedies,’ Nature is introduced and put first; in this way it is clear that *everything* is a miracle and a wonder.”

**The Mystery of the Commonplace**

Many common experiences are completely ineffable and inexplicable, yet we take their reality for granted because they are so common. Like the flavor of food, for example. Or music – can you explain the experience of listening to music? Can we even know what music is? Of course not – music is a mystery. Flavor is a mystery.

And yet, if someone says, *“mmmmm”* we understand they’re enjoying food, because we know that experience. If we see someone dancing to the rhythm, we know they are hearing the music. We can’t really explain it, but because we know the experience, we can recognize the outward signs of the experience in someone else.

כִּֽי־הִנֵּ֤ה הַחֹ֙שֶׁךְ֙ יְכַסֶּה־אֶ֔רֶץ וַעֲרָפֶ֖ל לְאֻמִּ֑ים וְעָלַ֙יִךְ֙ יִזְרַ֣ח יְהוָ֔ה וּכְבוֹד֖וֹ עָלַ֥יִךְ יֵרָאֶֽה׃

*Behold! Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick clouds the peoples; but upon you the Divine will shine, and Its Presence will be seen over you.*

- Isaiah 60:2, *Haftora Ki Tavo*

What does this passage in the *haftora* mean *– the Divine will shine* and *Its Presence will be seen?* It sounds like a contradiction – if “darkness covers the earth,” how can the “Presence” be seen?

But that’s the point – you cannot “see” the Divine any more than you can “see” the flavor of food, or “smell” the sound of music. The dimension ק *koof,* the sacred within the ordinary, is nevertheless not an uncommon experience; we know the outward signs of it, just like we recognize the savoring of food or dancing to music.

What are the outward signs?

הַמַּכִּיר אֶת מְקוֹמוֹ – *Knowing one’s place*

- *Pirkei Avot*, 6:6

In the rabbinic wisdom text *Pirkei Avot*, there is a list of qualities one needs to acquire wisdom, and among them is *hamakir et m’komo – knowing one’s place.* It may sound like a negative thing, like being passive and not speaking up for yourself. But the word for knowing, *makir,* also means “friend” – so the “knowing” is like the knowing of a friend; it is a knowing of love, of relationship. The word for “one’s place” – *m’komo –* is a form of *Makom,* which is also a Divine Name. So, to be *hamakir et m’komo* means to “make friends” with the place you are actually in, right now, and thereby connect to the Divine Presence that shines beneath the surface of all things.

When we encounter someone who practices this, we can recognize it – we sense an inner light, a friendly aliveness, a peaceful presence. We may not be able to conceptualize it or explain it – *darkness shall cover the earth –* but nevertheless there is the recognition – *Its Presence will be seen.*

From this quality of making friends with the present moment, there naturally arises the next quality mentioned in the *mishna:*

וְהַשָּׂמֵחַ בְּחֶלְקו – *and being happy with one’s portion…*

It is good to appreciate what you’ve got. But to be truly *samayakh b’helko – happy with one’s portion –* we must realize *what we are* on the deepest level:

וְעָלַ֙יִךְ֙ יִזְרַ֣ח יְהוָ֔ה וּכְבוֹד֖וֹ עָלַ֥יִךְ יֵרָאֶֽה *– And upon you the Divine will shine, And Its Presence will be seen over you…*

This Presence, this Light, *is what we are* – it is the awareness that befriends this moment and expresses Itself as radiance and peace within the one who realizes.

And yet, even though we are this Light, it is easily concealed; we must make the effort to realize this Light by coming to this moment as a friend, by being *hamakir et m’komo* – making friends even with our own darkness, with our own negativity. Because it is through *Presence With* the negativity – with the fear, with the anger, with the resentments, with the irritability – that we can reclaim the consciousness that has temporarily taken a negative form and transmute it back into Light. When that happens, it can then be said:

ק֥וּמִי א֖וֹרִי כִּ֣י בָ֣א אוֹרֵ֑ךְ וּכְב֥וֹד יְהוָ֖ה עָלַ֥יִךְ זָרָֽח – *Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; The Presence of the Divine has shone upon you!*

- Isaiah 60:1, *Haftora Ki Tavo*

**Conquering Darkness with Light**

There is a Hasidic story that the once the Jews of the town of Apt were threatened by a local decree against them and were in great distress, so the Rabbi of Apt issued a command for a universal fast in order to call down God’s mercy. But when Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhyn heard of the threat, he called for his favorite *klezmorim* (musicians) to come and play on his balcony every evening. As the sounds wafted down, a crowd of *Hasidim* would begin to gather below, and as the gathering grew, they would begin to dance.

Word eventually came to the Rabbi of Apt of what was happening: “Rabbi! Your decree of a time of fasting has been turned into a time of rejoicing by Rabbi Yisrael!”

The Rabbi of Apt responded by quoting a *pasuk:*

וְכִֽי־תָבֹ֨אוּ מִלְחָמָ֜ה בְּאַרְצְכֶ֗ם עַל־הַצַּר֙ הַצֹּרֵ֣ר אֶתְכֶ֔ם וַהֲרֵעֹתֶ֖ם בַּחֲצֹצְר֑וֹת וֲנִזְכַּרְתֶּ֗ם לִפְנֵי֙ יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹֽהֵיכֶ֔ם וְנוֹשַׁעְתֶּ֖ם מֵאֹיְבֵיכֶֽם׃

*“When you come into battle in your land against an aggressor who attacks you, you shall sound the trumpets, that you may be remembered before Hashem your Divinity and be delivered from your enemies…*

- *Bamidbar* (Numbers) 10:9

“How can I judge someone who is taking this command of the Torah to heart?”

In this story, the response of the Rabbi of Apt to the impending calamity is to impose austerity. This is a common traditional response; when life brings us danger, the practice is to try to avert the danger through asceticism. In this taking of suffering upon oneself on purpose, the belief is that you can stop the danger from manifesting externally.

The logic of this type of approach comes from our ordinary experience of relationships. You may have experienced that when a person realizes they have wronged you, and they come to you with sincere apologies and grief, it is not difficult to forgive them.

But there is also another path; instead of being repentant and sorrowful, the offender might do something so delightful that the offense is forgotten. This is often true in the case children! While children might occasionally be sorry, usually their offenses are forgiven when they do something adorable.

In terms of Kabbalah, the ascetic approach is the path of *Gevurah*, while the approach of delight is the path of *Tiferet*. In the story, it is the playing of music that draws down Divine compassion, hence the association of *Tiferet* with “beauty” and “splendor,” which are straightforward translations of *Tiferet,* but also with “compassion,” or *rakhamim.*

Another dimension of the story is the description of the scene: the musicians play up on the balcony, and the music wafts downward to the gathering *Hasidim* below, who begin to dance. This is the transcendent beauty of *Tiferet* above, arousing *Yesod* below, which represents the foundational functions of joy and community.

In addition to the association of *Tiferet* with beauty and compassion, *Tiferet* is also associated with *emet,* truth.

…תורָתְךָ אֱמֶת: תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לְיַעֲקב. חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם

*Your Torah is Truth; Grant Truth to Jacob, Kindness to Abraham…*

- *Atah Kadosh* liturgy (weekday *Shakharit*, *Shabbat Minkha*, *Motzei Shabbat Maariv*)

In this liturgical text, Abraham is associated with *Hesed/*Kindness, while Jacob is associated with *Emet/*Truth. In Kabbalah, the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, come to be associated with three *sefirot, Hesed, Gevurah* and *Tiferet;* hence the association of *Tiferet* with Truth.

But this is strange – how can *Tiferet* represent beauty and compassion, and also truth?

Beauty and compassion make sense; we experience beauty, and this arouses compassion. But to have compassion, we often have to *ignore truth* to some degree; we *overlook the truth* of a person’s guilt in order to respond compassionately. Furthermore, beauty is often an external effect that *covers up truth,* as when a person puts on makeup or dyes their hair. We can “photoshop” an image to make a person look more beautiful than they actually are. In recording, we can digitally “fix” a person’s voice when they sing off key, hiding the truth of how they actually sang.

There is a hint to this riddle in the *parshah:*

אֶת־יְהוָ֥ה הֶאֱמַ֖רְתָּ הַיּ֑וֹם לִהְיוֹת֩ לְךָ֨ לֵֽאלֹהִ֜ים וְלָלֶ֣כֶת בִּדְרָכָ֗יו וְלִשְׁמֹ֨ר חֻקָּ֧יו וּמִצְוֺתָ֛יו וּמִשְׁפָּטָ֖יו וְלִשְׁמֹ֥עַ בְּקֹלֽוֹ׃

*You say today that Existence Itself will be for you as God, that you will walk in Its ways, that you will guard Its practices and commandments and ethical rules, and that you will listen to Its Voice.*

וַֽיהוָ֞ה הֶאֱמִֽירְךָ֣ הַיּ֗וֹם לִהְי֥וֹת לוֹ֙ לְעַ֣ם סְגֻלָּ֔ה כַּאֲשֶׁ֖ר דִּבֶּר־לָ֑ךְ וְלִשְׁמֹ֖ר כָּל־מִצְוֺתָֽיו׃

*And Existence Itself affirms today that you are to It a treasured people, as said to you, and to guard all of Its commandments,*

וּֽלְתִתְּךָ֣ עֶלְי֗וֹן עַ֤ל כָּל־הַגּוֹיִם֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר עָשָׂ֔ה לִתְהִלָּ֖ה וּלְשֵׁ֣ם וּלְתִפְאָ֑רֶת וְלִֽהְיֹתְךָ֧ עַם־קָדֹ֛שׁ לַיהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֶ֖יךָ כַּאֲשֶׁ֥ר דִּבֵּֽר׃

*And you will be set far above the nations that were made, for praise and fame and splendor (Tiferet), and you will be a holy people to Hashem your Divinity, as said.*

- Deuteronomy 26.17-19

This passage describes the benefits that the Children of Israel will receive for living in alignment with the Divine. Each of these qualities are aspects of *Tiferet:*

עֶלְיוֹן *Elyon* – exalted, above, transcendent; this is *Tiferet* in relation to *Malkhut,* as *Tiferet* is symbolized by the Sun, and *Malkhut* by the Earth.

לִתְהִלָּה *Lit’hilah* – “for praise,” particularly through song. This is the beauty of music, as in the story above. The Psalms, which were sung by the Levites in the temple, are called *Tehilim.*

לְשֵׁם *L’shem* – “for name” meaning “famous.” The artists and musicians are the beloved icons of culture, the celebrities that embody the beauty and transcendence of *Tiferet.*

תִפְאָ֑רֶת *L’tifaret* – for *Tiferet!* That is, for “beauty” or “splendor.”

But how are we to receive all this *Tiferet?*

אֶת־יְהוָ֥ה **הֶאֱמַ֖רְתָּ** הַיּ֑וֹם לִהְיוֹת֩ לְךָ֨ לֵֽאלֹהִ֜ים

*You* ***say*** *today that Existence Itself will be for you as God…*

The qualities of *Tiferet* come not merely from doing the *mitzvot,* but from *verbally expressing the Reality of the Sacred.* In other words, they result from expressing the truth of our deepest recognition. This is the underlying message of the Jewish idea of *brit,* of covenant: The Torah is not merely the legislation of right action, but the commitment to bear witness to the truth of the sacred. In this way, beauty and compassion come not to cover up truth, but arise as expressions of it. This expression of the truth of the sacred is the path of ק *koof.*