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| Shining Inward – כ KAF and Parshat Beha’alotkha |

***Can’t You Do Anything Right?***

*As important as it is to be conscious in our words and actions, it is also crucial to admit when we haven’t been conscious. This takes a different kind of courage – the courage to confess our imperfection, the courage to tell the truth.*

*Reb Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, a disciple of the Maggid and brother of Reb Zushia, used to say how he knew that he was assured a place in Olam Haba – the “World to Come.” He explained that when he leaves his body and ascends to the upper realms, they will ask him: “Did you study Torah to the best of your ability?”*

*“No,” he would answer.*

*“Did you pray with full kavanah, with all your heart and all your soul?”*

*“No.”*

*“Have you done all the Mitzvot and good deeds that you should have done?”*

*“No.”*

*“Well then come right on in, because we can see you are telling the truth!”*

*We may be conditioned to think that spiritual reward is earned through perfecting ourselves, but actually, it is free. The “World to Come” is not in the future at all, but is present now – it the condition of Wholeness that is inherent in Reality Itself, ever-present and always available.*

*And yet, as we know, it is easy to get blocked from feeling and knowing this Truth for ourselves. One of the main ways we can get blocked is by craving validation. Reb Elimelekh was considered to be a tzaddik, a spiritual master, yet he had no need to claim anything. He admits: “I could have done better.” He is not defending himself to the heavenly court, and therefore, in the absence of a defensive posture, he is open to receive the spiritual Gift that is ever being given.*

*Why does defensiveness cut us off from this Gift?*

*Because defensiveness actually creates the sense of self as something separate, as something incomplete. That’s the paradox – if you cling to a self-image of being be somehow superior, valid, righteous or whatever, you create a sense of self that is inherently inferior, invalid, incomplete and separate.*

*But if you admit – “I could have done better… and whatever good I’ve done is by the grace of God” – then that tense, contractive self-concern can relax, and you can more easily return to the Wholeness that you already are (but that you can’t claim or own).*

*Then, simply to be is a tremendous Gift, not a burden. In fact, it’s the impulse to defend ourselves that is the burden! Let go of that, and the Wholeness of simply being naturally follows.*

***Parshat Beha’alotkha***

*וְהָאִ֥ישׁ מֹשֶׁ֖ה עָנָ֣ו מְאֹ֑ד מִכֹּל֙ הָֽאָדָ֔ם אֲשֶׁ֖ר עַל־פְּנֵ֥י הָאֲדָמָֽה׃*

*And the man Moses was very humble – more so than any other man on the face of the earth.*

* *Bamidbar (Numbers) 12:3, Parshat Beha’alotkha*

*Moses was humble?*

*He was the tireless and sometimes ruthless leader of the Children of Israel. How could he have been humble?*

*But humility doesn’t mean meekness or weakness. It means not grasping after greatness for yourself. It means understanding that the greatness you are comes from beyond “you” – in fact, there is no separate “you” at all, there is just the Mystery of Being in all Its different forms. That's just what Moses did – he was not concerned with his own greatness. He was serving the Greatness that called to him. When your attention is on That, rather than your own image or desire to be validated or seen in a positive light, it is humbling… and liberating.*

*Which brings us to a second paradox: In order to keep our attention on the Divine, rather than on our identity, we have to keep our awareness rooted in the body. That’s right – our fragile, material, temporary, flawed, physical bodies are actually the gateways to Eternity, when our attention is rooted there. There is a hint of this in the opening of the parshah, where Aaron is instructed to kindle the menorah:*

*בְּהַעֲלֹֽתְךָ֙ אֶת־הַנֵּרֹ֔ת אֶל־מוּל֙ פְּנֵ֣י הַמְּנוֹרָ֔ה יָאִ֖ירוּ שִׁבְעַ֥ת הַנֵּרֽוֹת*

*When you kindle the lamps, the seven lamps should shine toward the face of the menorah…*

* *Bamidbar (Numbers) 8:2, Parshat Beha’alotkha*

*The light is your awareness; the menorah is your body. “Kindling the lamps” is becoming present with the body.*

*But why seven lamps?*

*Seven in a symbol of completeness, of the whole person, hinting that we must bring consciousness to all areas of our lives. This is a challenge because there is a tendency to pay attention only to some areas of our lives, while ignoring others; we tend to pay attention to either the inner or the outer, either to the mind or to the heart, either to the physical or to the conceptual, either to the political or to the personal. The key is to bring awareness to all levels, to all dimensions…*

***Integral View***

*Once, one of our community members sent me an article criticizing the “mindfulness industry” and asked for my thoughts on the topic. The article claimed that the marketing of mindfulness totally misleads people into thinking that all they need to get rid of stress and be happy is to practice mindfulness, while ignoring the real problems in our society that actually create stress and unhappiness.*

*While this may be true about mindfulness as an industry, it actually points to a much deeper problem that exists not just in spirituality but in every human endeavor, and that’s the problem of reductionism. When we get excited about something – whether it’s an art, a philosophy, a spiritual practice, a political movement, anything – we tend to reduce everything to that, and ignore other things of vital importance.*

*The mindfulness industry may be exploiting this tendency toward reductionism for its own marketing ends, but the root of the problem is deeper. And, it’s worth noting that there are both “spiritual” people and “political” people who do this: “If only we would change society,” or “If only we would meditate enough” – then our problems would be solved.*

*In the realm of spirituality, this is sometimes called spiritual bypass, but there is also political bypass, economic bypass, and many other bypasses. How can we be truly integral in our view and not unconsciously bypass?*

*First, it is helpful is to understand why we might bypass. Why would we believe in something so strongly that we ignore other things that are also important? If you work in a kitchen, you have to wash both of your hands. No matter how clean you get your left hand, you still have to wash your right hand; there is no point at which your left hand gets SO clean that you no longer have to wash your right hand. Why would we think otherwise when it comes to other facets of life?*

*There are two basic reasons this might happen:*

*The first is that we may recognize some core truth, and that truth gets exaggerated into a bypass. In the case of spirituality, this isn’t hard to see, because the more present we become, the more we are able to be of genuine service to those around us. While our spiritual practice may not seem to have any discernible effect on our political/economic system, it can have a profound effect on the real people we interact with every day. This is no small thing – as we know, our daily interactions with others affect not only the tone of our own lives, but have an incalculable effect beyond our immediate experience on countless beings whom we may never meet.*

*And, while some of us may sometimes have a discernible and occasionally profound effect at the political level, nearly all of us are constantly affecting and are being affected by others that we encounter daily. The quality of our interactions, especially with family and others we are close with, can sometimes make the difference between life and death, or between a healthy life and a life of alienation and misery.*

*It is understandable, then, that in knowing the profoundly transformative and life-changing power of waking up in one’s life, that one might “overstep” and assume that if we awaken, everything else will simply take care of itself.*

*For this reason, it is helpful to remember: meditation can have a profoundly positive effect, but that doesn’t mean it will necessarily and automatically “trickle down” to solve all the world’s problems, or even other personal problems such as health or money issues. For those, we may certainly have to do something else. But still, whatever we may have to do, Presence can help to open the inner space so that we can clearly see the choices before us, rather than be mired in conditioning and reactivity.*

*The second reason is the plain fact that we are not in control of what happens.*

*Nowadays, many of us are experiencing such distress in relation to our larger political, social and natural world realities, that it can be overwhelming. Combine that with the fact that no matter what we do, we are never guaranteed any positive outcome, we can be tempted to give up on trying to exert any influence, and focus instead solely on the immediate personal realm, where we may be more likely to have some positive effect. We know that we can’t control the world – so why should we drive ourselves crazy trying? Resignation is seductive, and to avoid the pain of despair, we might adopt the belief that we really are doing our best simply by meditating.*

*There is a wonderful rabbinic aphorism to help us avoid these pitfalls: Rabbi Tarfon says:*

*לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה.*

*It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to withdraw from it.*

* *Pirkei Avot 2:16*

*Simple, clean, and radiating with truth: yes, we have no certainty, we have no control. It is not upon us to figure it all out; we can’t figure it all out. But we can act, from where we are and from what we see and with what is available to us, to participate in tikkun, in improving the situation. And that means, don’t reduce – the Divine needs to be realized bashamayim uva’aretz – in the heavens and on the earth, both.*

*Let’s look again at the opening of the parshah:*

*בְּהַעֲלֹֽתְךָ֙ אֶת־הַנֵּרֹ֔ת אֶל־מוּל֙ פְּנֵ֣י הַמְּנוֹרָ֔ה יָאִ֖ירוּ שִׁבְעַ֥ת הַנֵּרֽוֹת*

*When you kindle the lamps, the seven lamps should shine toward the face of the menorah…*

*It is a strange sentence – how can the light of the seven lamps be made to shine back toward the menorah? Light would simply shine out in all directions.*

*But on a metaphorical level, the “seven lamps” are the many facets of human endeavor, such as politics, sciences, arts, relationships, and so on, and the menorah as a whole is a glyph that represents an integral vision, including all aspects of the whole person. Each branch expresses its own unique “light” – its own expression of consciousness – and the key is to get them all to illuminate their “root” – the unified human being, the one consciousness that we are beneath all our complexity, beneath all our multifaceted experience.*

***Change Takes Time***

*Many years ago, my wife Lisa joined a group of egalitarian rabbinical students who had gathered at the Western Wall in the Old City, in Jerusalem, to pray and chant Torah. This was a bit risky, as women and men praying together is considered to be illegal by the hareidim (ultra-Orthodox Jews) who dominated (and still dominate) the religious norms of Israel.*

*At some point, while a woman was reading Torah, a few young hareidi boys gathered around the group, snickering, pointing and making fun. The woman just continued, ignoring the taunts. But soon, the older brothers and cousins started showing up, and the taunting intensified. Soon, young men dressed in black and white had surrounded the colorful group and started throwing rocks and other things.*

*The commotion aroused the attention of the police, who quickly came between the hareidim and the students, protecting and allowing them to continue their service despite the increasingly dangerous threat that was forming all around them. As Lisa describes, the whole scene was a fantastic display of color: the rainbow shades of the egalitarian rabbinical students’ dress in the center, a ring blue police uniforms surrounding the rainbow colors, and a growing throng of black and white surrounding the blue.*

*Finally, they finished, many of them shaking and weeping, and the police began escorting them from the plaza. The hareidi men followed and continued hurling insults. One old man with a long beard and long payos (side locks) approached one of the women and shouted: “I have to tell you!”*

*“Don’t talk to me!” the women yelled back.*

*“I have to tell you!” the old man persisted.*

*“I don’t want to hear what you have to tell me!” yelled the woman.*

*“I have to tell you!” retorted the old man, “You are right! And change takes a long, long time.”*

*Here we have the meeting point between the different “branches of the menorah” – the inner and outer life. That old man was reminding the women: it is good to have the courage to come out and stand up for positive change in the outer world. But, it is also important to allow things to unfold as they unfold, to recognize that we are not controlling anything, and to let go. This requires Presence in one’s inner world, so as not to be caught by reactivity and fear.*

*This can be so challenging when confronting the aggression of others. It can be helpful to remember that the hareidim in the story were merely acting out an impulse we all have probably experienced – the sense of being threatened by ideas that we don’t agree with.*

*Why do we feel threatened by ideas?*

*Because our sense of self is derived from our structure of thoughts and feelings; thoughts and feelings are the substance of ego. Ego, like any creature, fights to defend itself and stay alive. Just as an animal will be aggressive toward a perceived threat, so too does ego tend to be aggressive toward ideas that contradict its own deeply held assumptions and conditioning. So, if we are to recognize intolerant, aggressive impulses within ourselves, there has to be this basic shift into objectivity and willingness to question one’s own thoughts.*

*There is a wonderful mishna that expresses this idea:*

*הִלֵּל אוֹמֵר ... וְאַל תַּאֲמִין בְּעַצְמְךָ עַד יוֹם מוֹתְךָ*

*Hillel said, “Don’t believe in yourself until the day of your death…”*

*– Pirkei Avot 2:5*

*Hillel is saying, don’t believe everything you think!*

*Recognize: “Here is a thought of judgment, here is a feeling of fear is arising in my body...”*

*Once you have successfully broken your unconscious attachment to the impulses that arise from the ego by being aware of them, then another challenge may arise – the tendency to identify with those impulses, and therefore with the shame, guilt, and self-judgment that comes from seeing this part of yourself. In the short run, this is a good thing; we must fully acknowledge our unconscious impulses. If we acted on them, we should apologize and make restitution when possible to create a space for healing. But then we must also recognize: we are not our thoughts, we are not defined by our conditioning.*

*For example, today there is a great increase of awareness about racism. In this cultural environment, I have often heard white people say, “I always thought I wasn’t racist, but now I realize that I too am a racist.”*

*אַל תְּהִי רָשָׁע בִּפְנֵי עַצְמְךָ…רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר*

*Rabbi Shimon said… “Don’t judge yourself to be a wicked person.”*

*– Pirkei Avot 2:18*

*Yes, we may become aware of our racist conditioning – racist thoughts arise in the mind, racist feelings arise in the body. But all these are arising within the field of awareness that we are beyond the body, beyond thoughts, beyond feelings. We are that field, that vast spaciousness, beyond all form; we are not the thoughts and feelings that arise within.*

*But to really know this for ourselves in the challenging moments, we must be the witness not only to our undesirable thoughts in those moments, but of all thoughts, at every moment.*

*בְּהַעֲלֹֽתְךָ֙ אֶת־הַנֵּרֹ֔ת אֶל־מוּל֙ פְּנֵ֣י הַמְּנוֹרָ֔ה יָאִ֖ירוּ שִׁבְעַ֥ת הַנֵּרֽוֹת*

*When you kindle the lamps, the seven lamps should shine toward the face of the menorah…*

*Awareness, like physical light, “shines” outward in all directions, open to perceiving whatever is going on externally. But, if we want to awaken, if we want to know ourselves as the light of awareness, we have to deliberately shine that light back into ourselves. We have to look objectively at our own thoughts and feelings and recognize, “I am not limited by that. I am not limited by any identity; I am this Light of Presence, free and inherently benevolent.”*

*And from that self-knowing, we can bring forth the courage we need to both press for positive change in the outer world, as well as overcome and transcend the source of all violence and aggression that lies within – the human ego – for this is the work only we can do for ourselves…*

*הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי*

*He (Hillel) used to say, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”*

* *Pirkei Avot 1:14*