## The Chrysalis – י YOD and BaMidbar

**The Garbage Truck**

One morning, as I lay in bed around 6:30 am, I heard a rumbling sound from deep within whatever dream I was having.

“That sound… it means something… something important… what is that sound?”

The garbage truck!

I had forgotten to put out the garbage the night before, and the can was pretty full. I leapt out of bed, slid into some pants, darted downstairs and out the front door. I looked and saw that the garbage truck had already passed my house and was halfway down the street! I grabbed the can and ran after him, rolling it behind me.

When I caught up, I started to politely ask him if he would take it, but before even one word came from my lips he grabbed it from me violently, almost knocking me over and barked something like “GIMMEE IT!” …I think.

Wow – he had certainly had his coffee already. Maybe a little too much, but I was grateful that he had taken it at all. That was maybe my first experience of getting out of bed according to how traditional Jewish teaching says we should get out bed…

**The Urgency of the Eternal**

The codes of Jewish law are somewhat paradoxical about getting up in the morning. On one hand, they say that one should leap out of bed – no laziness! Not a moment should be wasted – there is much to do! Get up with the “strength of a lion” and jump into the day.

*It is imperative for a person to be strong as a lion. Immediately upon awakening, you should rise with alacrity for the service of the Blessed Creator, before you are over-whelmed by your* yetzer hara *with various excuses not to rise, and be outsmarted and seduced in the winter: “How can you rise now so early in the morning when the weather is so cold?” Or, in the summer it will argue: “How can you rise from your bed while you are still not satisfied with enough sleep?” or other similar claims…*

* *Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh*, 1:4

On the other hand, before you get up, you should take a moment to receive the gift of your life, chanting: *“Modeh/Modah ani lifanekha-* I give thanks before you…”

Then should you leap into your day?

No, you should ritually wash your hands, with the *kavanah* (intention) to purify your heart so that you can serve with love in all your actions.

Okay now should you leap your day?

No. First there are many blessings to be chanted, many prayers to pray.

So which is it? Should you leap out of bed and get to work, or take your time to connect with your inner depths?

But that’s the point –

If you spend all your time in meditation, the bliss of Being reveals Itself within your own awareness, but the world remains untouched. On the other hand, if your life is focused solely on the external, then you become lost in its dramas, disconnected from you inner Source, and the world suffers for it. But connect with the Eternal in order to bring it into the temporal – that’s the alchemy!

***Parshat BaMidbar***

מִבֶּ֨ן עֶשְׂרִ֤ים שָׁנָה֙ וָמַ֔עְלָה כָּל־יֹצֵ֥א צָבָ֖א בְּיִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל תִּפְקְד֥וּ אֹתָ֛ם לְצִבְאֹתָ֖ם אַתָּ֥ה וְאַהֲרֹֽן׃

*From the age of twenty years up, all who go out into the army in Israel, you shall count them by their legions, you and Aaron.*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 1:3, *Parshat BaMidbar*

In its plain meaning, this is an instruction to take a census of those qualitied to fight in battle. But “counting soldiers” is also a metaphor for our external lives. Each day we should arouse ourselves like soldiers to do battle with our inner inertia and make every moment “count” – *It is imperative for a person to be strong as a lion.*

But then, a bit later, it gives the other half of the equation:

וְהַלְוִיִּ֖ם לְמַטֵּ֣ה אֲבֹתָ֑ם לֹ֥א הָתְפָּקְד֖וּ בְּתוֹכָֽם׃

*The Levites, however, by their tribe of their ancestors, were not counted...*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 1:47, *Parshat BaMidbar*

The Levites weren’t soldiers, they were priests and musicians – caretakers of the *Mishkan* – the Sacred Space at the center of the camp. The soldiers went out to conquer the many, but the Levites connected to the One. And in the One, there’s nothing to count! There is only One!

The trick is for these two sides – the internal and the external – to be in balance, to express our inwardness *through* the external wilderness of life. But this takes practice – it’s no small thing staying connected to the holiness of this moment while running after the garbage truck!

This is the path of י *yod,* the “hand” that represents the world of action, but also the “tiny point” which represents the ultimate simplicity of pure awareness, simply perceiving what is.

**Think More, Think Less**

The message of י *yod* is, “Don’t think so much. Think less, perceive more.” And yet, we often hear the message that we *should* think more, that mistakes can be avoided if we thoroughly *think things through*.

So, which is it? Should we think more, or think less?

שְׂא֗וּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ֙ כָּל־עֲדַ֣ת בְּנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָ֖ם לְבֵ֣ית אֲבֹתָ֑ם בְּמִסְפַּ֣ר שֵׁמ֔וֹת כָּל־זָכָ֖ר לְגֻלְגְּלֹתָֽם׃

*Lift the head (take a head count) of the whole community of the Children of Israel, by the families of the houses of their fathers, counting the names of every male, head by head.*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 1:2, *Parshat BaMidbar*

Hidden within this narrative about taking a census of the soldiers, there is a wisdom for harmonizing the contradictory advice to *think more* and yet to *think less:*

שְׂא֗וּ אֶת־רֹאשׁ֙ – *S’u et rosh – lift the head…*

This phrase is an idiom for taking a census. But the deeper implication is that before going out to “do battle” with the challenges of life, we must “lift our head” – that is, elevate our perspective to see our situation as clearly as we can, which means transcending and getting free from whatever thoughts and feelings in which we might be entangled. This is *thinking less –* the path of י *yod,* of simple Presence and trust.

But from this elevated place of not-thinking, we can then enter into a process of conscious thinking, so that we may discern the right path of action to take.

How?

כָּל־עֲדַ֣ת בְּנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל – *kol adat b’nei Yisrael – all the assembly of the Children of Israel…*

*Yisrael* means *sarita El,* “striving” or “wrestling with the Divine.” It describes the spiritual path of acting with conscious intention: “What is my purpose in doing such-and-such? What am I trying to accomplish?”

Through questioning ourselves, we can avoid that unconscious tendency to act automatically, without really considering what we are trying to do. Self-inquiry cuts through that unconsciousness and brings forth our power of decision. It doesn’t guarantee that we will succeed, but if we *don’t* question ourselves, we are almost certain to fail.

Once we get clear on our *kavanah,* our intention, then we can choose to act in alignment with our intention, and move on to the next step:

לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָ֖ם – *l’mishp’khotam – by their families…*

“Family” consists of those close to us, those we for whom we are responsible, and those who are responsible for us. At this point, we can ask: “How will this action affect people?”

“People” doesn’t necessarily mean *other* people; we also need to consider how things will affect ourselves. For example, we might consider looking at the news or social media. We might determine that our intention is good, that we are trying to be informed and connected to the world. But then we ask, “How will this affect people?”

To a certain point, there may be no ill affect. But beyond that point, if exposing ourselves to news and social media creates negativity and anxiety, that would be a consideration. Plus, in that state of negativity, we might express or even project that negativity onto others. This brings us to the final question:

בְּמִסְפַּ֣ר שֵׁמ֔וֹת כָּל־זָכָ֖ר לְגֻלְגְּלֹתָֽם – *b’mispar shemot, kol zakhar l’gulg’lotam* – *by the number of names, every male, head by head…*

Once we “name” both what our *purpose* is and what the *effects* will be with regard to a particular decision, we have to “number” it – we have to ask, “Is it really worth it?”

In other words, if our intention is good but some of the consequences may not be so good, we need to ask which “counts” more; we need to evaluate and decide. Again, this is no guarantee that we will make the right choice, but if we don’t evaluate and decide, it is likely we will make the wrong choice. And if, after careful thinking the situation through, we do end up making the wrong choice, this too has goodness to it, because we will *learn* from it.

This two-part process of “lifting the head,” that is, the stripping away of thought, followed by the “numbering of names,” that is, careful evaluation of purpose and learning from experience, is represented by the path of י *yod,* which is simplicity and trust, and the path of ל*lamed,* which has to do with thought and learning. Both letters are the active expressions of the dual *sefirot* of the mind, *Hokhmah* (wisdom, awareness) and *Binah* (understanding, focused thought). Seen in this way, there is no contradiction in the advice to “think more” and “think less” – they are two parts of one process.

The ability to engage in this process of י *yod* andל *lamed* in real time, however, takes training and practice; we need to engage in meditation and contemplation in the space of regular *avodah,* daily practice, if we want the paths to be available to us in the flow of life.

**Yankel the Lazy**

Yankel wasn’t inclined to do physical exercise. But as he got older, he realized that he had better take care of his body, or he would be in trouble. So, he hired a personal trainer to motivate him out of his sloth and get him work out.

The personal trainer began by coming to his house every day. First, she taught him the exercises that would be best for him. But when it came to actually doing them, Yankel was so lazy, that the trainer would have to yell cheers to get him to exert himself. “Come on you can do it!” she would shout. “That’s seven, just three more to go! Do it!” Over time, Yankel’s resistance seemed to drop away, and it became easier and easier for the trainer to motivate him.

After several weeks, the trainer didn’t have to do anything except come over and make sure Yankel was working out, simply by witnessing him. Yankel even shouted out his own motivational cheers: “I can do it! One! Two! Just seven more to go! Getting stronger! Three!”

Eventually, the trainer didn’t even come inside, but just listened at the door. She would hear Yankel yelling to himself: “Getting stronger and stronger! I can do it! Five! Six! Four more to go!” When she would hear him yelling through the door, she would leave, satisfied that he had established his workout habit.

But, when they had a meeting after several months to evaluate and adjust his routine, she noticed that he didn’t look like he was exercising at all; he was just as unfit looking as he had been before they began. “How strange! I hear you working out every day, but it seems to not be working!”

“Oh, I haven’t been working out,” said Yankel.

“But I come by every day and hear you!” said the trainer.

“Oh, that’s just me yelling, not actually working out. I figured if you heard me yelling, you would think I was working out and leave me alone!”

Overcoming the difficulties of establishing a daily habit of *avodah,* (spiritual practice) is crucial, but it is not enough. Many are able to break through the initial inertia of establishing a habit, but their practice is just like Yankel’s – perhaps going through the motions, saying the words and so on, but nothing is really happening.

It’s not that the forms are irrelevant – the “cheers” and “counting of reps” can be a good *accompaniment* to practice, and even an *expression* of practice, but they’re not the practice itself. As long as the forms are helping you do the real inner activity of the practice, they are doing their job. But if they become a *substitute* for the inner reality, then you miss the mark.

It is understandable that the forms of practice – how many times per day, what texts to chant, and so on, could easily eclipse the inner reality of practice, because *form is quantifiable.* You can easily define how to fulfill a practice in form; it is not as easy to define connection with the Timeless, with the Un-Countable.

But again, this doesn’t mean that form is irrelevant; the form is vital, as long as we are relating to it properly, as long as we are using the quantifiable form as a portal into the Eternal. In fact, there are even some forms that we can take with us when the safety of our *avodah* is over, to help us stay connected even as we run after the garbage trucks of the world…

**The *Mitzvah* of *Tzitzit***

*“When I am meditating or chanting, I feel so deeply connected and I have no problem being my highest self. But, when stressful things in life push my buttons, all of that is out the window. How do I maintain my spiritual connection in those moments?”*

This is a question that often comes up after you have had some success with your practice. Before that success, you might be still looking for some experiential connection. But after you discover what you’re searching for, the problem is even deeper: How do you *keep* the connection?

The simple answer, of course, is practice. You have to practice keeping that connection in different life situations, and you will get better and better at it.

But that doesn’t help much, because when you are in stressful or triggering situations, two things happen:

First, you don’t care anymore about your spiritual connection, because you are triggered! You go into in a fight-or-flight mode. Second, even if you would care about practicing in that moment, you probably can’t remember to practice, because you are triggered! Your emotions have taken over.

So, if you are going to actually practice in those triggering situations, you need a strategy for those two problems. You need to first of all *remember* to practice (זָכוּר *zakhor)*, and second of all, you need to be *motivated* to practice (שָמור *shamor)*.

There are many *mitzvot* which function as a solution to this problem. Let’s look at one:

דַּבֵּ֞ר אֶל־בְּנֵ֤י יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ וְאָמַרְתָּ֣ אֲלֵהֶ֔ם וְעָשׂ֨וּ לָהֶ֥ם צִיצִ֛ת עַל־כַּנְפֵ֥י בִגְדֵיהֶ֖ם לְדֹרֹתָ֑ם וְנָֽתְנ֛וּ עַל־צִיצִ֥ת הַכָּנָ֖ף פְּתִ֥יל תְּכֵֽלֶת׃

*Speak to the Children of Israel and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner.*

וְהָיָ֣ה לָכֶם֮ לְצִיצִת֒ וּרְאִיתֶ֣ם אֹת֗וֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם֙ אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֺ֣ת יְהוָ֔ה וַעֲשִׂיתֶ֖ם אֹתָ֑ם וְלֹֽא־תָתֻ֜רוּ אַחֲרֵ֤י לְבַבְכֶם֙ וְאַחֲרֵ֣י עֵֽינֵיכֶ֔ם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּ֥ם זֹנִ֖ים אַחֲרֵיהֶֽם׃

*It shall be for you* tzitzit *– look at it and recall all the* mitzvot *of the Divine and do them, so that you do not wander after your heart and your eyes that become distracted.*

לְמַ֣עַן תִּזְכְּר֔וּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶ֖ם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֺתָ֑י וִהְיִיתֶ֥ם קְדֹשִׁ֖ים לֵֽאלֹהֵיכֶֽם׃

*So that you shall remember to do all My* mitzvot *and to be holy to your Divinity.*

אֲנִ֞י יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹֽהֵיכֶ֗ם אֲשֶׁ֨ר הוֹצֵ֤אתִי אֶתְכֶם֙ מֵאֶ֣רֶץ מִצְרַ֔יִם לִהְי֥וֹת לָכֶ֖ם לֵאלֹהִ֑ים אֲנִ֖י יְהוָ֥ה אֱלֹהֵיכֶֽם׃

*I am Existence, your Divinity, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am Being, your Divinity.*

* *BaMidbar* (Numbers) 15:38-41

The purpose of the *tzitzit,* the ritual fringes traditionally worn on the corners of one’s garment, is exactly what we are talking about – they are a physical reminder on your body to dedicate your actions to the Divine and avoid getting caught in distractions that take you away from that intention. Another purpose of the *tzitzit* is to remind you to do the other *mitzvot,* the particular spiritual practices of Judaism, both ritual and ethical, throughout your day.

This brings us to the second problem – how do you keep yourself motivated?

Let’s take a particular *mitzvah* and see how this can work. There is a daily *mitzvah* to chant these words as part of the *Sh’ma*:

וְאָ֣הַבְתָּ֔ אֵ֖ת יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֑יךָ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ֥ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ֖ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדֶֽךָ׃

*Ve’ahavtah Et Adonai Elohekha, b’khol l’vav’kha, uv’khol nafsh’kha, uv’khol me’odekha.*

*You shall love Existence, your Divinity, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

* *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 6:7

These words are an expression of commitment. For the sake of clarity, let’s rephrase this to express this commitment more explicitly. You might say, “I commit to serving the Divine in everything I do.”

If you say this commitment every day (or use the traditional words, but understand them and mean them as a commitment), then you are adding tremendous power to your intention to practice in difficult moments.

Why?

Because even when you don’t care about spirituality in a moment of being triggered, *you have made a commitment* and you can rely on that commitment*.* You don’t have to care; you just have to honor your commitment. The actual saying out loud of a commitment will give tremendous power to your intention, even in the most difficult moments.

But now you still have to *remember* your commitment. That’s where the *tzitzit* come in. You need to have some kind of reminder that works for you all day long, so that your chances of remembering in those difficult moments are increased thousand-fold. Of course, just wearing *tzitzit* is not enough; you have to train yourself to be reminded of your intention by them. For example, make it a practice to say your commitment over and over again, every time you look down and see them.

Of course, any reminder could work, though there is a power in using the traditional forms, in that they connect you to the support of the lineage. But whatever form you use, the key is to *verbally say your intention out loud every day,* and then have something to *remind you* *throughout the day.* This is the inner function of chanting *Sh’ma* and *ve’ahavtah* and wearing the *tzitzit.*

There are two other physical *mitzvot* mentioned in the *Ve’ahavtah* which have a similar function:

וּקְשַׁרְתָּ֥ם לְא֖וֹת עַל־יָדֶ֑ךָ וְהָי֥וּ לְטֹטָפֹ֖ת בֵּ֥ין עֵינֶֽיךָ׃

*Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol between your eyes.*

וּכְתַבְתָּ֛ם עַל־מְזוּזֹ֥ת בֵּיתֶ֖ךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶֽיךָ׃

*Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates…*

This is the practice of *tefillin* and *mezuzah –* binding tiny scrolls of Torah passages on the body during *avodah* so that you physically *feel* your intention on your body*,* and affixing a scroll on the doorposts in the home, so that you *see* and *touch* your intention as you move through different spaces.

**The Idol of Form**

The key with these ritual practices is, as always, is to use the outer forms to point to the inner reality; otherwise, there is the danger that the practices become a kind of idolatry, a means for the ego to prop up its self-image as being a “religious” person. Rather than the form pointing to the Eternal, beyond the world of the mind and counting, it simply points us back into the world of counting of status, of self-image.

There is a hint of this in the *haftorah* of our *parshah.* This portion from Hosea talks about how the Children of Israel have strayed from the Divine and run after idols, the *ba’alim.* Israel is compared to a harlot, an unfaithful wife, running after other lovers. Why does she do this?

*“I will go after my lovers, for they will give me my bread and water, my wool and linin, my oil and my drink.”*

In other words, the children of Israel aren’t satisfied; they *want to count more*. Rather than appreciate what is present, they run after that which is not present; they imagine they can achieve *more* gratification.

*Pursue her lovers as she will, she shall not overtake them; and seek them as she may, she shall never find them. Then she will say, “I will go and return to my First Husband, for then I fared better than now.”*

Eventually, Israel realizes that the obsession with counting, with *more,* also called idolatry, only causes her suffering, and so she comes to appreciate the gifts she had and thereby returns to true connection with the Divine.

*Then the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sands of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted; they shall be called “Children of the Living Presence…*

* Hosea, 2:1, *Haftora Parshat BaMidbar*

The hint here is that, on a deep and yet practical level, “idolatry” really means to fixate on that which is *not present;* it means to elevate the images we “engrave” in our minds above the actual Reality right in front of us. The “idol” is that which is not present; the true Divine is Presence.

**Return**

Of course, there is nothing wrong with imagining what we need or want in the future; that’s the job of the mind. We have to count and quantify; we have to make maps of the world in order to navigate life. The point is not to *elevate the map over the territory;* the point is not to live in your mind, but to live in the Living Present.

And fortunately, no matter how lost in our minds we become, and no matter how caught up in the external urgencies and “garbage trucks” of the world we become, the present moment has not gone anywhere. It’s always here, open to our return, to our *t’shuvah.*

There’s a story of the Chofetz Chayim, that he once had a student who was sunk in crushingly oppressive poverty. The student would often implore his master to pray on his behalf, and promised that if his prayers were answered and he were to become wealthy, he would give abundant *tzeddaka –* abundant charity to those in need. The Chofetz Chayim would just listen compassionately and nod.

Years later, after the student had moved away to the city, he had indeed become exceedingly wealthy. The Chofetz Chayim went to visit him and asked:

“So, how are things?”

“Very well thank God,” said the former student, “I’ve been blessed with many riches.”

“And how has your *tzeddaka* been going?”

The rich former student turned red, embarrassed that he had forgotten his promise. In fact, as his riches grew more and more, his stinginess had grown as well.

“You know,” said the Chofetz Chayim, “The more successful you are in your external battles, the stronger your *yetzer hara –* your lust for the external – also becomes.”

In that moment, his delusion was broken, and he returned fully to the inner path that his heart had abandoned. He dedicated his wealth to service and became a fountain of relief for many who suffered in poverty.

**The Ecstatic and the Still**

Rabbi Yisrael of Rizhyn said that when he was learning with the great Maggid, Rabbi Dov Bear of Mezrich, all the disciples learned the master’s teachings except one: Reb Zushia. This is because when the Maggid would begin to expound a verse of Torah, so many of the verses began like this: *Vay’daber Hashem – and the Divine spoke…*

Whenever Reb Zushia would hear these words, he would go into a fit of seizures: *“Hashem spoke!!! Hashem spoke!!!”* he would scream, and they would have to take him out into the shed until the teaching was over.

“But,” rabbi Yisrael would add, “that’s okay, because even one word spoken in truth and received in truth is enough…”

Right now, and always, the Divine is speaking. The words aren’t necessarily conveying a conceptual message – *even one word spoken in truth and received in truth is enough* – meaning, when we take the path of **י** *yod –* when we become simple and receive the fulness of this moment in simplicity and trust, then Reality Itself can be received as the Divine Speech. When we receive the present moment in this way, it is deeply liberating, shaking us from the dead maps of the mind into the Living Present. For some, realizing this may cause convulsions of ecstasy, but not for everyone.

A disciple asked Reb Pinhas of Koretz, “Why is it that you are so calm and still when you *daven*(pray)*,* unlike so many other *tzadikim* who thrash about in ecstatic convulsions?*”*

Reb Pinhas replied, “You know, the essence of prayer is *deveikut,* attachment to the Divine, and this involves the death of the separate self. There are two kinds of death: one kind is as difficult as pulling a rope through a mast, and the other is easy as removing an eyelash from a glass of milk. It is the second kind that I was granted…”

As we come to the end of the annual ritual of counting the 49 days of the Omer, may we use the quantifying mind wisely to express our praise, gratitude and ultimate unity with the Eternal within the world of time… *Good Shabbos*