**Waking Up Alone – כ KAF and *Parshat Naso***

**Loneliness**

One night, when our daughter was two years old, we were woken up around 1:00 in the morning when she wandered into our bedroom and cried, “Why did I wake up lonely?”

I think she meant to ask why she woke up *alone*, not *lonely*. But her words reminded me of a real fear that can arise on the path of spiritual awakening – the fear of being alone:

*“If I awaken, will I still be able to relate to other people? Will I feel all alone if I let go of the games and dramas that I used to engage in?”*

It’s true, there can be some awkwardness at first in relating to others as you transform, but this is only an adjustment period. However, there is an aspect of waking up that does require a certain aloneness, though not necessarily *loneliness.*

On the most basic level, there has to be a willingness to let go of one’s addiction to thinking. As long as the mind is constantly generating a stream of thought, the world will appear to be a projection of that thought. Let go of your stream of thinking, and you begin to awaken – meaning, you begin to feel who you are beneath and beyond your thoughts – a vast, radiant field of consciousness, utterly alone with yourself, because you are no longer keeping company with the endless narrations of your mind.

Stepping into this aloneness can be challenging because it triggers the fears of the ego. After all, the ego is literally made out of thoughts and feelings; step into aloneness, and the ego dissolves. The ego doesn’t want to dissolve, it wants to survive – so it generates fear. Awakening, then, requires transcending that fear; it requires a special kind of courage. This spiritual courage necessary to awaken from the dream of ego is represented by the letter כ *kaf.*

The meaning of כ *kaf* is “palm of the hand,” which both represents the place of action, as well as the transmission of blessing, as when a person is blessed by one placing their palms on the head of the one being blessed. The letter כ *kaf* also begins the word *keter,* “crown” – representing the royal quality of courage that “crowns” a true leader. Bringing these different images together, כ *kaf* is our inner royalty, courageously “building” our inner “sanctuary of blessing” within which our essence can dwell, alone and sovereign.

The courage of כ *kaf* isn’t something we have to acquire or create. It is inherent in our being; we only need remember it and bring it forth. But to do that we have to *want to do it.* This can be the biggest challenge, because when we are possessed by other concerns, our power of intention can become focused elsewhere; it takes a special effort to refocus ourselves on our *deepest desire –* the desire to awaken.

So, if we wish to bring forth the courage we need to truly stand alone from our thoughts, we need to not be so seduced by our other concerns; we need to somehow put them aside...

**Parshat Nasso**

צַ֚ו אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל וִֽישַׁלְּחוּ֙ מִן־הַֽמַּחֲנֶ֔ה כׇּל־צָר֖וּעַ וְכׇל־זָ֑ב וְכֹ֖ל טָמֵ֥א לָנָֽפֶשׁ׃

*Command the Israelites to send out from camp anyone with a skin affliction, anyone with a bodily discharge and anyone who has been defiled by a corpse.*

* *Bamidbar* (Numbers) 5:2, *Parshat Naso*

This versedescribes the final preparations for completing the *Mishkan,* the Holy Sanctuary in the middle of the Israelite camp. In order for it to become activated, they are instructed to separate anyone who is a *tzaru’a,* a *zav,*or who is *tamei lanafesh.* All three of these terms have to do with bodily phenomena, but metaphorically, they are related to ways that our thoughts, speech and actions can block us from the courage we need to awaken.

The first isצָרוּעַ *tzaru’a,* whichmeans 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.

The second is זָב *zav,*which means some kind of bodily emission and is associated with sexuality. Metaphorically, this outward emission represents the way thoughts of sexuality can be a kind of “reaching” or “grasping” for gratification, and a loss of vital energy and Presence.

These two represent the basic polarity of unconsciousness – the *tzaru’a*is negativity, and the *zav*is wanting, grasping, neediness. Both of these lead to an absence of Presence in the body, which brings us to the third one: טָמֵ֥א לָנָֽפֶשׁ *tamei lanefesh,* which is someone who has become“spiritually contaminated” by a corpse.

To the degree that we become seduced by the energies of “I hate” and “I want,” our bodies become temporarily “dead” to our deeper desire for awakening. We must “separate them from the camp” in a sense, so that we can access that deepest desire. But how do we do that?

**Burning Down the House**

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?

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.

Happiness is a wonderful thing, but what about honesty?

וְדֹבֵ֥ר אֱ֝מֶ֗ת בִּלְבָבֽוֹ׃ …מִי־יָג֣וּר בְּאׇהֳלֶ֑ךָ מִֽי־יִ֝שְׁכֹּ֗ן בְּהַ֣ר קׇדְשֶֽׁךָ׃

*Who may sojourn in Your tent, Who can dwell on Your holy mountain? …one who speaks Truth from their heart…*

* Psalm 15:1,2

Truth is a basic *middah*, a basic spiritual quality, necessary for realizing the sacred in the ordinary (“sojourning in Your tent”) and knowing the transcendent spaciousness of our essence (“dwelling on Your holy mountain”).

And yet, in *Pirkei Avot*, the sage Shamai says:

וֶהֱוֵי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסֵבֶר פָּנִים יָפוֹת – *Receive every person with a cheerful face.*
And later in the text, Rabbi Yishmael takes it even further:

 וֶהֱוֵי מְקַבֵּל 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?

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.

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; it takes a special courage, the energy of כ *kaf,* to face this and “rejoice over each and every brick.”

We can do this because that deeper joy arises from the depths of who we are, beneath our temporary experience, beneath the “house” of our thoughts and feelings. This 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 the sanctuary” – making a home for the Divine out of this brief life we are given.

This, then, is the secret of freeing ourselves from our wants and hates – it is not a matter of literally “expelling them from the camp,” but rather feeling them fully and going to their root, because behind our ordinary wants and hates is that deeper desire for awakening itself.

**The Nazarite**

This deep openness to the truth of whatever feelings are present is very simple, but it can be challenging in the flow of ordinary life. That’s why daily practice is so important – to take time away from the ordinary distractions to cultivate the awareness necessary.

דַּבֵּר֙ אֶל־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל וְאָמַרְתָּ֖ אֲלֵהֶ֑ם אִ֣ישׁ אֽוֹ־אִשָּׁ֗ה כִּ֤י יַפְלִא֙ לִנְדֹּר֙ נֶ֣דֶר נָזִ֔יר לְהַזִּ֖יר לַֽיהוָֽה׃
…מִיַּ֤יִן וְשֵׁכָר֙ יַזִּ֔יר

*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…*
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. Consciously abstaining from manipulating our experience for a period can help us get in touch with our deepest level of awareness that simply receives the moment as it is, that “lets the house burn down,” so to speak. This level of awareness already 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. For us, a periodic withdrawal from acting on the world is actualized through daily meditation, as well as the traditional practices of Shabbat and the festivals.

The weekly reading of *Parshat Naso* usually happens around the festival of *Shavuot,* during which the Book of Ruth is traditionally chanted. 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:

וַתֹּ֣אמֶר אֲלֵיהֶ֔ן אַל־תִּקְרֶ֥אנָה לִ֖י נָעֳמִ֑י קְרֶ֤אןָ לִי֙ מָרָ֔א כִּי־הֵמַ֥ר שַׁדַּ֛י לִ֖י מְאֹֽד׃

*“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. They have a son, and through his line comes King David, who is himself 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 her heart – 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 arises.*

This is the blessing behind the curse; it is the discovery of the transcendent blessing that comes through embracing the moment as it is…

**The Blessing**

יְבָרֶכְךָ֥ יְהוָ֖ה וְיִשְׁמְרֶֽךָ׃כֹּ֥ה תְבָרְכ֖וּ אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֑ל אָמ֖וֹר לָהֶֽם׃

*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 priests 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 essence 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 too must we *become aware* of the blessing that we are 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”

בּכָל יום אֲבָרְכֶךָּ וַאֲהַלְלָה שִׁמְךָ לְעולָם וָעֶד

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

שׁומֵר ה' אֶת כָּל אהֲבָיו וְאֵת כָּל הָרְשָׁעִים יַשְׁמִיד

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

* *Ashrei,* Psalm 145

Together, these two letters form שב *shev,* “sit” – hinting, sit and meditate!

Furthermore, the letter ו *vav* means “and.” If we add the ו *vav* to say: ש *shin* AND ב *bet,* we get שוב *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 שוב *shuv,* to return; even a person who is thoroughly wicked and emmeshed in creating suffering and destruction has this power to do *teshuvah*. This is hinted by the word רשע, “wicked person.”

וְאֵת כָּל הָרְשָׁעִים יַשְׁמִיד…

*…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:

 *Rasha,* a“wicked person,” is:רשעA

ר *Reish,* which means“beginning,” ש *Shin,* as in *shanah,* which means“change,” and ע *Ayin –* which means “eye,” as in “seeing.”

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 *teshuvah,* 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. And that is our charge and our mission – not to succumb to the momentum of the ordinary and the expected, but to bring forth the כ *kaf,* the inner courage that we need to return and awaken to the Mystery of our Essence, again and again…