

"Woke" and "Awakening" – Parshat Beha'alotkha

My wife Lisa tells a story that back in the nineties, she 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 *hareidim* (ultra-Orthodox Jews).

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 continued with louder yells and harsher cursing.

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 the black and white traditional male dress 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

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time.”

Today is June 8, 2020, the 16th of *Sivan*, 5780 by the Jewish date. When the world started to radically change in March due to the Corona pandemic, I heard many people talking about how this was the beginning of a fundamental shift in the world, that this would be the end of the old paradigm and the beginning of a new one. I was skeptical; I thought that for sure there would be profound effects from the virus, but that for the most part, the virus would eventually go away and things would return to a state similar to before the virus.

But now we are in a different time; I know longer think that way.

Rather, it seems we are at a point of turning after a "long long time" of building pressure. There appears to be an extreme shift in consciousness taking place all over the world, catalyzed by the murder of George Floyd. The reality of racism was never a secret, but the degree to which it is being unflinchingly faced and actively condemned through world-wide protests is unprecedented.

This profound recognition of injustice is described by some as the state of being “woke,” and indeed there is kind of awakening happening on a global scale. Does this awakening have anything in common with what we call spiritual awakening? Is there a relationship between being “woke” and being “spiritually awake?” Being “woke” seems to point to outer reality, to issues of the world, while spiritual awakening seems to point to inner reality, to issues of consciousness. Is there a relationship between the two?

On a recent episode of the Majority Report, an African American guest made an interesting distinction between “racism” and “bigotry” that I think sheds light on the distinction between the inner and outer realities to which being “woke” and being “spiritually awake” point. The guest told a story of when he was a kid in grade school, and a white kid made a nasty remark about his skin color. This white kid, he said, was prejudiced, but he wasn’t *racist*, because the kid wasn’t in a position of power. Racism, this guest explained, is a question of power and authority. While *bigotry* is an inner belief or attitude, *racism* describes an economic and legal system that favors one race over another, according to this guest.

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There was also a woman on the show who followed his remarks by expressing what she thought the goal of the protests should be. “We can’t get rid of bigotry,” she said, “but we can and should push for changing the societal structures that express bigotry.”

Well said. We cannot force people to change inwardly, but we do have the possibility of forcing change in laws and systems externally.

And yet, the global will to force outer change seems to have arisen from a profound inner change in millions of individuals. There seems to have been an “awakening” of sorts, catalyzed by outer events, to the reality of racial injustice. This “waking up” has not been the result of individuals working on themselves to become more aware, but rather it is the result of the “straw that broke the camel’s back” – a critical mass of perceived injustice has brought the issue to the forefront of collective awareness.

And, as part of this awakening, many have reported the self- recognition of bigotry in their own thoughts and feelings. On an un-precedented scale, white people are beginning to say, “Yes, I have been racist too.”

Here we have the meeting point between being “woke” and being “spiritually awake,” because spiritual awakening, at its core, means taking a fundamentally objective view of our own thoughts. Ordinarily, when our thoughts tell us that something is true, we tend not to question its truth. We identify with our thoughts, so much so that when people have different opinions, there is a tendency to actually feel threatened.

Why?

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, for one to recognize racist thoughts within oneself, 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:

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הלל אומר ... ואל תאמין בעצמך עד יום מותך

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, here is a feeling. My mind is judging this person because they look such-and-such. A feeling of fear is arising in my body. Okay, does that mean this is a bad person? The bigot doesn't ask the question, but just mechanically accepts whatever the mind generates. But the "woke" person, and the spiritually awake person as well, will question these thoughts.

To be "woke" is, at its best, to participate in the evolution of consciousness, to break free of cultural denial and be a vessel for positive change, to be an emissary of the Divine impulse toward justice and peace.

But it need not stop there; the deeper potential of being "woke" is to continue on to spiritual awakening – to push on toward questioning not only our assumptions about race and class and economy, but to question the very structure thought itself. Because, just as we long for freedom for all people on the external level, so too there is the longing for freedom on the inner level, for knowing the Divine essence that we are beyond ego. Our essence is not only beyond race, but *beyond all limited identity*, because it is the vast and formless space of awareness itself.

And in this respect, there is an aspect of spiritual wakefulness that might be instructive to "woke"-fulness.

There can be a tendency on the part of one who has recognized bigotry in oneself to identify with the bigotry and, as a result, to cultivate a sense of guilt and shame. In the short run, this is a good thing; we must admit our mistakes, apologize and make restitution when possible to create a space for healing. But then we must recognize: we are *not* our thoughts, we are *not* defined by our conditioning.

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אל תהי רשע בפני עצמך... רבי שמעון אומר

Rabbi Shimon said... "Don't judge yourself to be a wicked person."

– Pirkei Avot 2:18

Nowadays I often hear white people say, “I realize that I too am a racist.”

Yes, you have 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 you are beyond the body, beyond thoughts, beyond feelings. You are that field, that vast spaciousness, beyond all form. But to really know this for yourself, you must be the witness to not just your racist thoughts, but to *all your thoughts*.

There is a hint in the *parshah*:

בְּהַעֲלֹתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מִוֶּלֶךְ פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יֵאָרְרוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת

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

- Numbers 8:2

This verse describes how the flames of the *menorah*, that ancient seven-armed, sacred lamp of the *mishkan*, should shine their light back upon their base. It is a strange verse; we know that the light of fire cannot be directed. The light of fire simply shines outward in all directions.

But that is the point: light is a metaphor for awareness. Awareness also “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 at 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.”

B'ezrat Hashem, today's revolutionary movement will bear the fruit of a much higher degree of racial justice in the world. People are demanding it; I pray that this moment does not fade into distraction, but that we stay intent enough to bring about that change, *amein*.

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But, we must also press on past the immediate issues of the day, to overcome and transcend the *source* of all violence and aggression – the human ego. Because if we do not, its thirst for power and control will simply take on new forms, giving rise to yet unheard-of injustice and suffering.

Yes, of course we must work for external change to *b'ezrat Hashem* fix and heal the horrors of racism and injustice. But also, we must go to their root cause, and we can only do that by taking our own spiritual awakening seriously and *practicing*. Because in doing so, we fulfill our responsibility toward the awakening of all consciousness from the nightmare of ego that has burdened humanity for so long...

More on Beha'alotkha...

Integral Vision – Parshat Behalotkha

This week one of our community members sent me an article criticizing the “mindfulness industry” and asked for my thoughts on the topic. The article claims that today’s mindfulness marketing 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.

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The real trick is, how can we be truly integral in our view and not bypass?

One thing that can be 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 reason 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: the more awake 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. So, it is good to remember: meditation can have a profoundly positive effect, but that doesn't mean that 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 (or mindfulness) 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.

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

Nowadays, many of us are experiencing such extreme distress about our larger political and social realities, that it can be overwhelming. Combine that with the fact that no matter what we do, we are not *guaranteed* any positive outcome, and we can become tempted to give up on that arena. We can be tempted to 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 our society – so why should we drive ourselves crazy trying? Resignation is seductive, and to avoid the pain of despair, we may 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. In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Tarfon says:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ תִּמְלָאָה לְגַמֵּר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּנָה

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

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, we *should* act, from where we are and from what we see and with what is available to us, to participate in *tikun*, 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.

There is a hint of this in the *parshah*, where Aaron is instructed to kindle the *menorah*:

בְּהִעָלְתְּךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מוֹלֵפְנֵי הַמִּבְרָה יֵאָרוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת

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

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glyph that represents an integral vision. Each branch expresses its own unique “light” – its own expression of consciousness – and the trick 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.

How do we do that?

By constantly working to bring our awareness into connection with the Divine Presence as it manifests in and as this moment, not merely as a technique to bring about a certain effect such as less stress or more happiness, but to be really open to how the Presence is *calling upon us to respond*, so that we may shine from all “seven branches” – in all dimensions of our lives and at all levels of responsibility, without bypassing even one...

Who is Seeing? Parshat Beha'alotkha

Once, when Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev was traveling, he stopped to spend the night in the town of Lwow. He knocked on the door of a very wealthy man and asked for lodging.

“I have no use for vagrants like you! Why don’t you stay at the inn?” said the man.

“I am not able to afford the inn,” replied Reb Levi Yitzhak. “Please, I won’t be any trouble, let me stay in one of your rooms just for the night.”

“Well then, if you can’t afford the inn,” said the miserly rich man, “go around the corner to the schoolteacher. He likes to take in vagrants, and he will offer you a room, food and drink.”

So, Reb Levi Yitzhak went around the corner to the schoolteacher and was offered lodging. But on his way there, someone in the town recognized him, and began to spread the word that the great Rabbi Levi Yitzhak was at the schoolteacher’s house. Before long, there were throngs of people crowding the house, trying to get a blessing from the master.

Among the crowd was the miserly rich man, who pushed his way to the front. “Master! Master! Forgive me! I didn’t know who you were! Please come and stay with me. All the

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great rabbis who come through town stay with me!”

“Do you know,” replied Reb Levi Yitzhak, “why such a fuss is made over Avraham and Sarah for their hospitality when they opened their home to the visiting angels and gave them food and drink? Didn’t Lot also invite them in and give them food?”

“But in the Torah’s description about Lot, it says, *‘vayovo’u shnei hamalakhim s’domah – two angels came to Sodom,’* but with Avraham it says, *‘shloshah anashim nitzavim alav – three men were standing over him.’* Lot saw majestic angels, whereas Avraham saw only dusty wayfarers...”

It is easy to see the value of helping others out of love, without ulterior motive. But the “dusty wayfarers” are not just people in need; they can be any undesirable experiences that come to us. When was the last time you were annoyed with something or someone? Were you able to open yourself fully? Did you give your attention generously to the situation or were you like the miserly fellow: *“don’t bother me!”*

Every experience is an opportunity to remember: “this, now, is the Divine, appearing to me in this form. This, now, is the moment to live my destiny, to step up to the task the Divine is now giving.”

But to do that, you have to be aware not only of what is happening around you, but of what is happening within you. This week’s reading describes the lighting of the menorah:

בְּהִעָלֶתְךָ אֶת־הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל־מוּל־פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה יֵאָדְרוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת

When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the menorah shall the seven lamps shine.

How can the lamps shine their light “toward the face of the menorah?”

Light is awareness; the menorah is your own body. Ordinarily, our “light” tends to shine mostly “outward,” so that there’s a sense of “me” in the body, looking out. But shine your “light” back into your body, and you will be able to sense your own impulses, your own feelings. And as you sense them, you also transcend them; you are not your thoughts and feelings alone. *You are the light.* You are here now to be a light in the world, to be a beacon

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of hospitality toward everything that appears to you.

To realize your own being as the "Light" of awareness, try inquiring: "Who is seeing?"

"Shine!" Seven Affirmations for Liberation – Parshat Beha'alotkha

Psalm 91 talks about a person *yosheiv b'seiter Elyon- who sits in the refuge of the Most High*. Such a person, it says, is protected from all danger. *Rak b'einekha tabit- all they have to do is peer with their eyes- v'shilumat r'shayim tir'eh- and the retribution of the wicked they will see.*

So it sounds like it's saying that when you take refuge in the Divine, then you'll see anyone who does you harm be punished. But the words for retribution of the wicked, *v'shilumat r'shayim*, imply something much deeper. The root of retribution is *shin-lamed-mem-* the same as *shalom- peace*, as well as *shalem- wholeness*. In other words, it's not talking about punishing your tormentors, but coming into harmony with them.

And how do you do that? *Rak b'einekha tabit- only peer with your eyes*. In other words, when you only "see," meaning when you stick to just being aware of the *r'shayim-* meaning the things that disturb you- rather than reacting, rather than judging, rather than trying to push or pull anything in any direction, then *shilumat r'shayim tir'eh-* the "seeing" meaning the perceiving itself creates a sense of *shalem-* a sense of wholeness and peace. This is because the more you simply perceive, the more you can sense yourself as the perceiving, rather than the reacting and the judging. And that perceiving, that deeper awareness, is always already at peace, always already whole, because perception is nothing but an open space, simply knowing and connecting with the experience of this moment.

So how to you cultivate this kind of simple awareness? There's a wonderful hint in this week's Torah reading.

In *Parshat Beha'alotkha*, it says, *beha'alotkha et haneirot- when you kindle the flames- el mul p'nei hamenorah ya'iru shiv'at haneirot- toward the face of the menorah the seven fires shall cast their light.*

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Now when the *Kohanim* would kindle the flames of the menorah, most likely they didn't create the fire by rubbing sticks together. Rather, they had some fire already from which they would light the lamps, so that the act of lighting would be almost effortless. Once you have some flame, it's not difficult to ignite another flame.

Similarly, if you want to become present, it's almost effortless because your awareness that connects with the simple reality of this moment is already here. All you need is the intention of becoming present, and miraculously it happens almost by itself. *Beha'alotkha et haneirot*- to light the fire of awareness- just ask yourself, what is present? And then you can notice- are there sounds that you're perceiving? Are there sensations? Are there feelings? Emotions? Thoughts? It's very simple because with Presence, you're not doing anything about anything, you're just staying in the noticing.

And when you do that, there's this wonderful paradox. On one hand, this temple of your own body comes into the foreground. Your own breathing, ordinarily taken for granted, becomes the central event. Your body is like the menorah- just as the menorah supports the fire, so your body is the basis for your consciousness, and when you become present, the lamps of awareness are all facing into your body.

On the other hand, just as the light that shines on the menorah isn't confined to the menorah but shines without limit or border, so too your awareness isn't confined to your body at all, but rather is an open field, vast, spacious and without border or limit. So as you notice what is present right now, see if you can also notice the vastness that notices, the light of awareness *el mul p'nei hamenorah ya'iru*- shining on the menorah of your body, and also beyond.

And yet simple as Presence is, the forces that pull us away from Presence can be very powerful. Thankfully, we have not one but seven lamps- *shiv'at haneirot*- to help us. These are, of course, the seven *sefirot* of the Kabbalah, which correspond to the seven weeks of the Omer period that just ended with *Shavuot*- *Hesed*- Loving-kindness, *Gevurah*- Strength, *Tiferet*- Beauty or Harmony, *Netzach*- Persistence, *Hod*- Gratitude and Humility, *Yesod*- Foundation and *Malkhut*- Kingdom.

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CHANT AND MEDITATION

We can use each of these *sefirot* as *kavanot*, or affirmations of Presence, and when you do all of them together in sequence, their effect together is very very deep. Let's try it now:

Bringing your right hand to your heart for *Hesed*- Loving-Kindness, and please repeat after me:

“I offer my awareness”

Now left hand on your belly for *Gevurah*- Strength- and say,

“to the temple of this body”

Now touch your right hand to your forehead for *Tiferet*, Harmony, and say,

“arising in the open space of awareness”

And bringing right hand palm up to your right thigh for *Netzakh*, Persistence, and say,

“Returning again and again to Presence”

Now bring your left hand, palm up, to your left thigh for *Hod*, Gratitude, and say,

“Giving thanks for this constant opportunity to Return”

And bring your palms together over your heart for *Yesod*, the Foundation of living Presence, and say,

“Expressing this Presence in loving words and actions”

And finally opening your hands, palms up, for *Malkhut*- the Kingdom of Reality, and say,

“Trusting the way everything is unfolding.”

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Amein. And chanting from the parshah, *ya'iru*- which means, they shine, referring to the seven sefirot. So as we chant *ya'iru*, perceptualizing the seven lights shining in your body.

Ya'iru, Ya'iru

And coming to silence, chanting *Ya'iru* ___ silently in your mind for about seven minutes. When your mind wanders, you simply return to the chant- "*Ya'iru*" letting it vibrate in your mind...

Chopped- Parshat Beha'alotkha

During my son's tenth year, he started getting really into gourmet cooking. He was inspired mostly by the competitive cooking show, "Chopped."

On Chopped, four contestants would cook under pressure, limited by time and strange ingredients. The challenge was to come up with something delicious and original under the constraints they were given.

I've watched Chopped many times with him. One thing I've found interesting is that in the interview clips with the contestants, they would all boast about how great they were and how they would beat everyone.

As the show unfolds, three courses are prepared- an appetizer, a main course and a dessert. After each course, the contestants are critiqued and one is "chopped" by the judges, until one winner is left at the end.

As each contestant loses, we see some post-losing interview clips. Almost invariably, the contestants express a little sadness for losing. But then they express gratitude for having been given the opportunity to compete, and say they look forward to improving their skills and continuing to serve people with their cooking.

It seems to me that the contestants must be coached by the producers on what to say in the interviews, because it just doesn't make sense- people who boast generally don't turn

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around and express gratitude and humility when they lose, and people who are humble generally don't boast about how great they are. It's as if when they are "chopped," their egos get chopped as well!

On the other hand, tremendous self-confidence can paradoxically live side-by-side with tremendous humility and gratitude.

In this week's reading, The Torah says of Moses-

*"V'ha'ish Moshe anav me'od-
"And the man Moses was very humble..."*

Moses was humble?

He was the tireless and sometimes ruthless leader of the Children of Israel, delivering laws from God and leading them in numerous victorious battles with their enemies. How could he have been humble?

But humility doesn't have to 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 Reality in all Its different forms. That's why Moses was humble- he was great, but he wasn't 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's humbling... and empowering at the same time.

Which brings us to a second paradox:

In order to keep your attention on the greatness of Reality, rather than on your own self-image in relation to others, you have to keep your awareness rooted in your own body. Your fragile, material, temporary, flawed, physical body is actually the gateway to Eternity,

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when your attention is rooted there.

As the parshah opens:

*“Beha’alotkha et haneirot, el mul p’nei hamenorah ya’iru shivat haneirot-
“When you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the menorah shall the seven lamps cast
light.”*

The light is your awareness, the menorah is your body.

Keep the “light” of your awareness rooted in your body, and you become present. Become present, and the vastness of Eternity is open to you- not as some heaven or afterlife to be earned and enjoyed later, but as the living experience of this moment- free and open to all.

And yet, this gift is not completely free. To receive it, you have to “chop” the idea that it must be earned, by you or anyone else. Otherwise you will judge yourself and others, and in that judgment, the present moment is lost.

Instead, let the truth of this moment be as it is. Let the truth of your own talents and flaws be as it is. Let others be as they are. That’s humility- and greatness- honoring the truth without judgment, being present to Reality.

Then, the separate ego-self that demands and judges naturally gets “chopped,” and the vastness of heaven is available.

Reb Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, a disciple of the Maggid and brother of Reb Zushia, used to say that he was assured a place in *Olam Haba*- the World to Come. He explained that when he dies 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?”

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“No.”

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

“No.”

“Well then come on in! We can see that you honor the truth, and for that you are ready for all the rewards of heaven!”

On this *Shabbat Beha'alotkha*, the Sabbath of Light, may the light of awareness shine in our bodies with great depth and presence, opening the vastness of heaven that's ever available. May we serve the Greatness in whatever way it calls to us, and may that service bring benefit to all.

Good Shabbos!

Can't You Do Anything Right? Parshat Baha'alotkha

Reb Elimelekh of Lyzhansk, a disciple of the Maggid and brother of Reb Zushia, used to express his immense gratitude 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.”

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“Well then come right on in! We can see you are telling the truth, and for that you deserve all the rewards of the World to Come!”

The “World to Come” is actually free, and it is not even in the future, but is present now- thank God! The wholeness of your innermost being cannot get anymore whole than it already is!

But, it is easy to get blocked from feeling and knowing this truth for yourself, simply by craving validation and defending yourself. 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 he is open to receive the spiritual gift that is ever-flowing.

Why does defensiveness cut you off from your inherent bliss?

Because defensiveness actually *creates* your “self” as something separate, as something incomplete. That’s the paradox- if you claim to 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 you relax the tense contraction of self concern, and 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 need to defend yourself that’s the burden! Let go of that, and gratitude naturally follows.

In this week’s reading, The Torah says of Moses, “*v’ha’ish Moshe anav me’od*- and the man Moses was very humble...”

Moses was humble??

He was the tireless and sometimes ruthless leader of the Children of Israel. How could he

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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.

What Greatness is calling to you?

At this moment, what are you being asked to step up to and serve?

When your attention is on That, rather than your own image or desire to be validated or seen in a positive light, it's humbling... and liberating.

Which brings us to a second paradox: In order to keep your attention on Being, rather than on your identity, you have to keep your awareness rooted in your body. That's right- your own fragile, material, temporary, flawed, physical body is actually the gateway to Eternity, when your attention is rooted there.

As the parshah opens: "...*beha'alotkha et haneirov, el mul p'nei hamenorah ya'iru shivat haneirov*- when you kindle the lamps, toward the face of the menorah shall the seven lamps cast light."

The light is your awareness. The menorah is your body, with its seven centers of consciousness and seven basic "*middot*"- spiritual qualities that express your inner Divinity, beyond ego.

Of these qualities, "humility" and "gratitude" are often coupled together as the fifth *middah* (if you are counting from the top down, or the third if you count from the bottom up).

On this *Shabbos Beha'a lotkha*, I bless you that you should ignite the fire of your awareness to greater depth and presence in your body, that you more deeply taste the freedom and bliss of your inner Divinity, and that you recommit to serve the Greatness in

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whatever way you are being called to serve.

Be good to one another, Good Shabbos!