

Alone with the Tree – Parshat Shelakh L'kha

בְּשֵׁלוֹם יִתְדוּ אִשְׁכְּבָה וְאִישָׁן כִּי־אַתָּה יי לְבַדְּךָ לְבִטָּח תּוֹשִׁיבֵנִי:

In peaceful unity I lie down and sleep, for You, Hashem, cause me to dwell in solitude and security.

(Psalm 4:9)

There is an inner peace and unity of being that is found in the Eternal – that is, in the continuous is-ness of the present moment. In this unity, there is no other, no sense of “me” and “not me.” To dwell in this unity, then, is to be truly alone, because there is nothing that arises in our field of awareness that is separate from awareness; this is the supreme security in which we can constantly trust.

...l'vadad lavetakh toshivieni – to dwell in solitude and security.

In fact, the word for security, *vetakh*, is the same root as “trust” – בטח. As is says in *Tehilim*:

וְאֶנִּי בְחַסְדֶּךָ בָטַחְתִּי – *As for me, in Your kindness I trust (vatakhti)...*

(Psalm 13:6)

But this inner peace, this “dwelling” in “solitude and security” is not something solid, not an experience that persists permanently in time. It is, in fact, nothing but the open space within which everything is constantly changing; therefore, if we want this ultimate peace and security, we must stop resisting the fact that *there is no permanent peace and security in time.*

So then why strive for it if it can never be permanently established?

On an inner level, this was the argument of the spies who were sent by Moses to go investigate the land and bring back reports.

שְׁלַח לְךָ אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

Shelakh l'kha – Send for yourselves people who will spy out the land...

(Numbers 13:2)

In the plain meaning, the spies brought back reports that the land was good, but that it was also inhabited by giants, thus discouraging the Israelites from attempting to “conquer the land.”

But on a deeper level, “conquering the land” represents “Dwelling” – “בְּשֵׁלוֹם יִתְדוּ אִשְׁכְּבָה וְאִישָׁן” – “Dwelling

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with the Divine in solitude and security.”

The spies are saying that yes, peace and security are real, but we won't be able to have them as a permanent state; the “giants” of thoughts and feelings are too powerful. So, why even bother?

But there is a hint:

וְהִתְחַזְּקוּתְּכֶם וּלְקַחְתֶּם מִפְּרֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהַיְמִים יָמֵי בְּבוּרֵי עֲנָבִים

“...strengthen yourselves to take from the fruit of the land.” And those days were the days of the first grapes...

(Numbers 13:20)

“Fruit” is a metaphor for the experience we seek. Here the fruit is the grape, and the word for grape is עֲנָב – *anav*. These three letters, *ayin*, *nun* and *bet*, have meanings:

ע *Ayin* – means “eye,” and so represents “seeing.”

נ *Nun* is associated with *niflah* which means “fallen,” and refers to the fact that Israel would eventually “fall” to her enemies. נ *Nun*, then, represents impermanence.

ב *Bet* means “house,” the archetype of which is the ancient Temple in Jerusalem which would eventually “fall” to the Babylonians.

Together, then, עֲנָב *anav* means “seeing the impermanence of sacred structure” – that is, the impermanence of higher states of consciousness. The “grapes” that the spies bring back are plump and good – meaning, the “fruit” of experiencing unity and peace is possible – but states of consciousness are not permanent.

So, on this level, the spies are embodying a self-defeating attitude that can thwart our practice:

“I can't seem to hold on to the states I experience in meditation, so maybe I shouldn't even bother.”

But, there is another word which shares letters and sounds with עֲנָב *anav* (grape):

עֲנוּהָ – *anavah* – “humility.”

In this word, the ב *bet* is replaced with a נ *vav* (which has the same “v” sound). When the נ *vav* comes as a prefix to a word, it means “and,” implying movement into the future, the

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embrace of change, the opening to something new.

This is the key:

The true בטח *vetakh*, the true security, comes not from holding on to a particular state or moment; it comes not from trying to preserve the “fruits” of our practice, the עֲנָבִים *anavim* which are destined to die and decay. It comes instead from ענוה *anavah*, humility, which is openness and surrender to the impermanence of all forms and experiences. Because in this openness, there is the ever-renewing ו *vav*, the ever-saying “yes” to the newness that the moment brings.

And this is the paradox: when we say “yes and” to the moment as it is becoming, when we embody the openness of ענוה *anavah* and let go of the עֲנָבִים *anavim*, the “fruits,” we discover the שְׁלוֹם יְהוָה *shalom yakhdav*, the true peace and unity of all being, beyond yet including all experiences, the space of Reality Itself, supremely Alone in all Its resplendence.

The Baal Shem Tov told:

“Once I ascended to Paradise and many people went with me. The closer I came to the Garden, the more of them disappeared, and when I walked through Paradise, there were only a few of them left. But when I stood by the Tree of Life and looked around, I seemed to be alone...”

More on Parshat Shelakh L'kha

The Juice - Parshat Shelakh L'kha

שְׁלַח לְךָ אֲנָשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

Send for yourselves people who will spy out the land...

In our family, one of the things we have to watch out for on Shabbat is how to distribute the grape juice in such a way so that our seven-year-old daughter doesn't feel ripped off, though we usually fail. This past Shabbat was no exception. “He got more than me!” she screamed after *Kiddush*.

There is a famous teaching of Reb Menachem Mendel (the Kotzker Rebbe) about

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comparing yourself to others, that has an unusually Ernie and Bert-esque quality to it. I quoted it to her in an attempt to arrest the nearly inevitable cascade of fighting and crying that would surely ensue: “You know what the Kotzker Rebbe said about that?”

“What?” she asked. I had her hooked!

“He said, ‘If I am I because I am I and you are you because you are you, then I am I, and you are you. But if I am I because you are you, and you and you because I am I, then I am not I, and you are not you!’ So, don’t worry how much grape juice your brother has!”

She laughed a little. It worked – sort of.

Not all the other people at the table were convinced. “That doesn’t mean anything!” someone said.

And it’s true, this riddle-like quote eluded me for many years. I knew it sounded interesting, but I didn’t understand the point until I saw the context in a book. Apparently, the quote was in response to someone comparing one person to another – “So-and-so is so much greater than so-and-so...” and the Kotzker responded with that quote. So, apparently what he is saying is: don’t base your identity on your idea of how you see others – or put more simply, don’t compare yourself to others.

It may seem silly to see how a child compares herself with her brother and feels cheated out of grape juice, but comparing ourselves with others and feeling inferior or superior as a result is an all-pervasive psychological reality for most adults as well. We may feel uncertain about whether we are really worthy of what we have, or whether our abilities are good enough to maintain what we have, or to acquire what we lack. We may worry about losing our abilities as we age, or any number of other things. And it’s understandable – we really don’t know the answer to what will be. Uncertainty is the Truth.

Some deal with uncertainty by trying to pretend it’s not there. We may try to convince ourselves that we are great, that we’re better than others. We all know people who have this kind of insecurity-based arrogance. Or, we may affirm the worst so that we don’t get disappointed. The problem with both these approaches is they’re not based on Truth;

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they're based on a reaction to our discomfort with Truth.

רבן גמליאל הנה אומר, עשה לך רב, והסתלק מן הספק

Rabban Gamaliel used to say: "Make for yourself a teacher, and remove yourself from uncertainty..." – Pirkei Avot 1:16

On the surface, this *mishna* seems to be saying that a teacher can take away your uncertainty. But the Hebrew implies a deeper message: *Aseh l'kha rav – make for/to yourself a teacher* – in other words, make that which is *to yourself* – whatever is arising in this moment – into your teacher. Pay attention to the fullness of this moment, which is the only thing you truly know, rather than dwelling on what you *don't* know in your mind. In this way, "remove yourself from uncertainty" – that is, remove your consciousness from dwelling in thinking mode, and bring it into Being mode, into connection with the Truth of this moment.

But, you might say, what if there is fear in this moment? What if there is anxiety? What if there is great resistance to uncertainty? The Israelites were also afraid of the uncertainty of confronting the "giants" in the land, but Joshua and Caleb said to them:

אל-תיראו את-עם הארץ כי לחמנו הם ... כיהנה אתנו...

Do not fear the people of the land, for they are our bread... the Divine is with us!

-Bamidbar 14:9

Ki lakhmeinu – they are our bread! "Bread" means nourishment. When we fully confront our difficult emotions and open to the fear or anger or whatever, it literally becomes "food" for consciousness. Whatever we tend to resist can actually help us become *more awake* – if we decide not to be fearful of our fear, and instead open to the fullness of whatever arises in the field of awareness, without getting seduced by it. Because actually, all emotions are literally *made out of awareness* – and furthermore, it's not *our* awareness, but the awareness of Reality, of the Divine, incarnating *as us*...and that is infinite power, infinite freedom, if we are willing to recognize it and stand firmly in the Presence of Truth...

כי עמנו אל ... אל תירא מפחד

Al Tira MiPakhad – Ki Imanu El!

Don't be Afraid of Fear, For the Divine is With Us!

Bold in Holiness – Parshat Shelakh L'kha

Once, Reb Zushia commented on the saying of the sages, "the bold-faced will go to hell, and the shame-faced to paradise."

"The bold-faced will go to hell," said Reb Zushia, "this means that if you are bold in holiness, you don't have to fear descending into hell. You can engage in all kinds of worldly things, and you will receive the light hidden within them. But if you're shame-faced in your holiness, you'd better stick to the paradise of prayer and meditation and stay away from the world..."

There is a taste of this idea in this week's reading, *Parshat Sh'lakh L'kha*, in which Moses send out spies to check out the Land and bring back a report:

שְׁלַח לְךָ אֲנֹשִׁים וַיִּתְּרוּ אֶת-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן

Send for yourselves people who will spy out the land...

Most of the spies come back and say that the land is wonderful, but that there are “giants,” and they discourage the Israelites from entering the land on account of the giants. They are being “shame-faced” in a sense, lacking courage and confidence.

There are times for withdrawing from the world and from people, in order to heal or gain perspective. But when it's time to move back into the world, it is good to be “bold-faced” with your holiness. Meaning, have confidence that there is a task you can do – that only you can do. It might be something you need to learn. It might be serving others in a particular way. Or, it might just be an opportunity to surrender on a deeper level.

To be “bold” doesn't mean you have to have confidence in yourself. The spies in the story lacked self-confidence, but the remedy would not have been to bolster their self-confidence. Rather, the remedy would be for them to have had *Divine-confidence*. *Hashem* told them not to be afraid; if they had *Divine-confidence*, their lack of self-confidence wouldn't have been a problem.

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Similarly, if you don't have self-confidence, don't worry! You don't need it. It's often better not to have self-confidence. As Hillel says in *Pirkei Avot*, “Don't believe in yourself until the day you die.” (2:5)

But trust: here you are, in such-and-such situation, and this is the situation you *should* be in; you have some unique role to fulfill. Trust that the Divine “put” you here for a reason. Trust, trust, trust! *That's liberation!*

6.12.17

Hashem ro'i v'lo ekhsar- the Divine is my shepherd, I shall not lack. Binot deshe yarbitzeini- in lush meadows the Divine lays me down- al mei menukhot y'nahaleini- beside tranquil waters the Divine leads me. Nafshi yeshovev- my soul is revived.

These words from Psalm 23 reflect a common attitude about spirituality, that realization of the Divine leads to pure bliss and freedom from all suffering- from anger, fear, judgment, and so on. But if we go a little further down, it says:

Ta'arokh l'fanai shulkhan neged tzorerai- You prepare before me a table in front of my tormentors...

In front of my tormentors? I thought we were just lounging in the grass beside the tranquil waters- how did my tormentors get into the picture?

These images hint at an important distinction that will help you navigate your practice and avoid a very common pitfall. This is the distinction between the idea of getting rid of negativity all together, which is misleading, versus shifting the context within which the negativity arises, which is actually what the practice is all about.

One reason this can be confusing is because the practice of Presence *will* of course decrease negativity and suffering. It decreases stress, it decreases repetitive and unhelpful thinking, and definitely opens you to more joy and bliss. *Al mei menukhot y'nahaleini- beside tranquil waters the Divine leads me.* And at some point, you're likely to experience all

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negativity dropping away completely.

However, this does not mean that the *possibility* of negativity has been eliminated, and that's where you can get into trouble. Because once you've had some deep success with your practice, once you're "lying down by the tranquil waters" so to speak and the Eternal dimension of Being has become a direct and palpable experience for you, there can be a tendency to think that negativity shouldn't bother you at all anymore; that your feelings should never get hurt, that you should never feel insulted, that nothing should make you angry and so on.

Then, when some negativity does arise, you can mistakenly conclude that you've somehow lost it, that the power of Presence isn't working for you anymore, when really you've just been given a tremendous gift, and you just need to shift the way you're looking at it to see the gift. Why?

Gam ki elekh b'gei tzalmavet- even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death- lo ira ra ki atah imadi- I will fear no evil, for You are with me.

The real power of Presence is not that it destroys the possibility of negativity arising. After all, we're all in the *gei tzalmavet- the valley of the shadow of death*. But rather the power of Presence is that it changes the context in which *everything* arises, including negativity. But, you can't know this and prove it to yourself unless you have a chance to practice it, which is why the arising of negativity is a gift.

So when negativity arises, use it as an opportunity to realize that you are not trapped by the negativity- *ki atah imadi*- know that the Divine is with you, because the Divine is the eternal dimension of Being, and this eternal dimension is not separate from the space of your own awareness, within which the negativity as well as everything else comes and goes. And, you can use the Three Portals of IJM to realize this in any moment. First is the Portal of the Heart. A feeling has arisen that needs to be felt, so be generous. Offer your awareness to it- *l'kha*.

Second is the Portal of the Body. Now that you've offered your Presence, sustain it by anchoring it in your body and your breathing. This keeps you with your present moment

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experience and calms the tendency to spin off into unhelpful thinking. *Na'aseh*-returning again and again to sustaining presence in your body.

Third is the Portal of Awareness itself. This is where the shift in context happens most fully. Bring to mind that whatever you're feeling is happening within awareness, is made out of awareness, and that the awareness itself is a vast field without border or limit, while whatever particular experience you're having is something that comes and goes- *v'nishma*- you are the space of perception. There's a hint of this in the Torah story of the spies who are sent to investigate the promised land.

In *Parshat Shelakh Lekha*, God speaks to Moses and says, "*Shelakh lekha anashim v'yaturu et eretz Canaan- send for yourself men to spy out the land of Canaan...*"

The spies go out and climb a mountain to check out the land, and they return with giant grapes, pomegranates and figs. They report back, "Yes! This land flows with milk and honey and here are some of the amazing fruits growing there. But, the inhabitants of the land are giants; they would destroy us. *Van'hi v'eineinu kakhagavim- we were like grasshoppers in our own eyes- v'khein hayinu b'eineihem- and so we were in their eyes.*"

When a person ascends the mountain of transcendence and eats the fruit of joy and bliss that comes from such an awakening, there can sometimes be a tremendous frustration and resignation when you come down from the mountain into the *gei tzalmavet- the valley of the shadow of death-* the place of ordinary, sometimes negative emotions such as anger, fear, sadness, and so on. That's when we need the words of *Yehoshua-* the words of encouragement that Joshua speaks to them: *Hashem itanu- al tira'um- the Divine is with us- don't be afraid of them!*

Meaning that just because you came down from a high experience of joy and bliss into the valley of negativity, in fact nothing has changed. The spacious freedom you experienced on the mountain, so to speak, is still the open space of your own awareness within which the experience of negativity arises. You can conquer any negativity not by fighting against it directly, but by simply seeing that it comes and goes within the space of this moment, and you are that space. *Hashem itanu-* your very nature is Divine, meaning that you are space of this moment.

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But of course, that's not what happens in the story. Instead, the Israelites are afraid. They say, "Forget it! Let's go back to Egypt." Meaning, let's go back to the ordinary and familiar way of being, before we experienced the radical freedom of awakening. Then, they change their minds out of fear of punishment, and try to go fight the enemy after all. But Moses says to them, "*Lo yiyeh Hashem imakhem- God will not be with you!*" They go anyway, and get pounded.

So how can this be? If your nature is the Eternal space of this moment, how can that change? Of course, it doesn't change, it's our awareness of this fact that changes. We get seduced by our feelings and believe them into giants. Rather than know our own vastness, "*van'hi v'eineinu kakhagavim- we were like grasshoppers in our own eyes*" and grasshoppers don't want to get smooshed, so we try and fight our feelings, try to push them away, or deny them, and that just creates inner conflict so that- *v'khein hayinu b'eineihem- so we were grasshoppers in their eyes-* meaning, the very thing that we're fighting gets bigger and bigger because negativity is empowered by more negativity.

On the other hand, if you know *Hashem itanu-* the Divine is literally your own nature- then *al tira'um-* there's never anything to be afraid of in your experience. You're on top of the world? No big deal it's a passing experience. You're in the depths of hell? No problem, it will pass. Rather than get caught up in your experience which is always changing, realize the space within which your experience is arising. You can do that through the practice of Presence in general, and through daily meditation in particular.

Then you'll know the truth of the words of *Yehoshua-* "*Al tir'u et ha'am ha'aretz- don't be afraid of the people of the land,*" meaning, don't be afraid of any particular experiences that arise, "*Ki lakhmeinu hem- for they are our bread,*" meaning, when you stand courageously in the midst of difficult experiences, they become food for your awakening, deepening your grounded-ness in the reality of Presence. Then you'll know directly, *Hashem itanu- the Divine is with us- al tira'um"-* there's nothing to be afraid of.

(So on this *Shabbat Shelakh*, the Sabbath of Sending, let us send forth our full attentiveness with courage and confidence into the depths of whatever arises in our experience, thereby eating the feast of whatever *avodah-* whatever practice is put before us. And through this,

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may the consciousness of our species continue to evolve and bring us speedily to a time of freedom from the horrors of ego and violence that continue to plague our species. Kein y'hi ratzon, so may it be, Good Shabbos.)

So see if you can really take this in, that you need not be afraid of any particular experience. Of course this doesn't mean that you should go and do things that are unsafe or that create negative experiences, there's no reason for that either, but once a negative experience has already arisen, you can use it to deepen your awaken-ness- to know, as the psalm says, "*Shavti b'veit Hashem- I dwell in the house of the Divine*" meaning, you are constantly dwelling in and as the space of this moment- "*l'orekh yamim- for long days*"- meaning, for the borderless and timeless Present. Let's sing.

Beyond and Back- Parshat Shelakh'Lkha

In the seventies, when I was in second or third grade, there was a movie I loved called "Beyond and Back."

"Beyond and Back" was about the near death experiences of several different people. As their stories were told, almost all of them described hovering above their dead bodies and grieving loved ones, rushing through a tunnel of light, feeling immense love and oneness, then having the sense that it "wasn't yet their time" and returning back to their bodies.

I loved this movie, of course, because the people claimed to have direct experience of something that most consider to be an impenetrable mystery- the mystery of death. Death is the one journey all of us will take, or so it seems, and so to find information on what happens when you die can be tremendously reassuring to those who "don't like surprises" (as both of my children tell me they don't).

As I got older, I had a similar experience with regard to spirituality- I was much more attracted to those who seemed to have direct experience of enlightenment than those who merely quoted scriptures. In a sense, authentic spiritual teachers are like those who have died and come back to tell about it. Only with enlightenment, it's not about physical death, but a totally different kind of death.

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In this week's reading, God tells Moses,

“Shelakh l'kha anashim vayaturu et Eretz Canaan-”

“Send for yourself people to spy out the land of Canaan...”

Canaan is the “Promised Land.” It is the aim of the liberation from Egypt (*Mitzrayim*- the place of constriction- *tzarim*- narrows) and the ultimate home of *b'nei Yisrael*- those who see through “straight to God” (*Yishar*- straight- *El*- God).

In other words, the Land is a metaphor, pointing to the aim of *spiritual* liberation. What is that aim? It is described as flowing with *halav ud'vash*- with milk and honey.

What is milk? Milk is pure nourishment. What is honey? Honey is sweetness.

There's a sweetness and nourishment that flows from Reality, but to receive it there has to be a relaxing of all contraction (*mitzrayim*) and an openness to simply Being with this moment as it is.

But most of those spies came back with bad reports, telling of insurmountable “giants in the land.”

You too might be skeptical about Liberation, and there might be fear. That's because you know on some level that if you truly open to Reality as it is, there will be pain- Reality is sometimes painful. With resistance, at least you can hold back some of that pain. That's the advice of the “spies” who reported back about the “giants” in the land.

“We are like grasshoppers in their eyes...”

You might think- “I'm not a super human. I'm just human. How can I possibly accept everything? How can I surrender? How can I become present?”

In that fear, there's the tendency to turn spiritual awakening into just an idea, into something to talk about, but not something you can really be. When that happens, the spies

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with the bad reports have won. Like the Israelites who were condemned to wander another forty years in the desert, the intellectualizing of spiritual awakening keeps the searching and wandering going on and on, and puts off the Arriving for another time.

But you don't have to be superhuman; you don't have to be anything in particular, because openness is not a special thing; it is Nothing. It is just a willingness to allow everything to be as it is.

It is told about Rabbi Leib, one of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, that when he heard rabbis expound on the Torah, he would remark-

“What does all this intellectual expounding amount to? A person should totally *be* a Torah, so that you can learn from their smallest movements as well as their motionless cleaving to the Oneness. They must become empty and spacious like heaven itself, of which it is said-

“Ayn omer v'ayn devarim- There is no speech and there are no words...”

This is the spaciousness of Presence- the “heaven” that is born within when resistance dies, but *you* do not.

On this *Shabbat Shelakh*, the Sabbath of Sending, may we open to the energy of liberation that is being sent our way, constantly, always in this moment. And when we do, may any pain that Reality throws our way be brief, and may we drink deeply from the milk and honey of Being.

Good Shabbos!