

Receiving the Torah of Being – Shavuot

ושבחת אגני את־המתים שפבר מתו מ־החיים אשר הקמה חיים עֲדָנָה: וטוב משניהם את אשר־עָדוּ לֹא הָיָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־
רָאָה אֶת־המעֲשֵׂה הָרָע אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשָׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ

I praised the those who have already died as better than those who are still alive; and better than either of them are those who have not yet lived and have never seen the evil doings that are done under the sun...

- Ecclesiastes 4:2, 3

...ועל פְּרִתָּה אַתָּה נולד, ועל פְּרִתָּה אַתָּה חַי, ועל פְּרִתָּה אַתָּה מֵת...
For against your will you were born, and against your will you will die...

- Pirkei Avot 4:29

These brutal verses from *Tanakh* and *Mishna* highlight a subtle distinction between different levels of desire. On one hand, the suffering of life is such that we shouldn't want to live; our natural hatred of the life's bitterness gives rise to the desire for death, the impulse to reject our own existence.

And yet, these verses are heard against the backdrop of a more fundamental impulse – the drive *to be* and *to become* that, (God willing) trumps all adversity. We may cry out again and again that we can't go on, and yet, (God willing) we *can* and *do* go on.

This points to a level of desire that is deeper than our experience of adversity, deeper than the ups and downs that happen in time.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלֶכֶּה הָעוֹלָם. עוֹטֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתִפְאָרָה
Blessed are You, Oneness of Being, our inner Divinity, Eternal Sovereign, Who crowns Israel with splendor...

There is a splendor, a radiance, a transcendent spirit that infuses our lives, that in fact *is* our very life force.

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

עוטר ישראל בתפארה – *Oter Yisrael b'Tifarah – crowns Israel with splendor...*

“Splendor” is called *Tiferet*, the central *sefirah* (Divine emanation) on the Tree of Life. It is the radiant Presence of awareness itself, our innermost life-energy. But this Presence derives from *Keter*, the “crown,” because it transcends our own natural will; it comes to us as from “above,” because it is stronger than all adversity. It is stronger because, on the deepest level, it knows there is nothing to lose; it incarnates *within* and *as* every being and eventually returns to Itself.

Why? Why is coming into existence worth the immense suffering of life?

כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו, לא בראו אלא לכבודו, שנאמר :

כל הנקרא בשמי ולכבודי בראתיו יצרתיו אף עשיתיו

All that the Holy Blessed One creates in Its world, It creates only for Its Presence, as it says: “All who are called in My Name, for My Presence I created, I formed, I made...”

- Pirkei Avot 6:11

Presence Itself, Existence Itself, is Its own good, Its reason for being:

לכבודו אלא – *elah likh'vodi* – *only for Its Presence...*

Reality “wishes” to *know Itself*; Existence “desires” to *know* that It Exists.

This can only happen through us, through our conscious receiving of this sacred mission: to make ourselves into sanctuaries for the Divine Presence. To receive this mission is to receive Torah. The receiving of Torah must be done consciously again and again so that the primary impulse of Being becomes our own conscious intention; we must recognize that, on the deepest level, *to simply exist* actually means that we are “chosen” for this sacred task.

This is the deepest message of Sinai: that when we transcend the *Mitzrayim* of the various human drives and forces that propel human life, when we “ascend the mountain” of the Eternal Present, we come face to face with the Divine impulse that needs us for Its fulfillment:

אתה יהנה אלהינו מלך העולם אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים ונתן לנו את תורתו: ברוך אתה יהנה נותן התורה ברוך
Blessed are You, Oneness of Being, our inner Divinity, Eternal Sovereign, Who chooses us among the peoples and gives to us the Teaching. Blessed are You, Oneness of Being, Giver of Torah...

Hag Samayakh, Good Yom Tov!

More on Shavuot...

Burning Down the House – Parshat Naso, Shavuot

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.

Today this trend gets extended with social media – Facebook posts in which people look like all is wonderful and everyone is having a great time are very common. Often, I've heard people say, "How are you?" and then, before an answer comes, "I know you are great because I see your posts on Facebook!"

Happiness is a wonderful thing, but what about honesty? Psalm 15 says:

מיִי־יִשְׁכֹּן בְּהַר קֹדֶשׁ – *Who can dwell on Your holy mountain?*
זֹכֵר אֱמֶת בְּלִבּוֹ – *One who speaks Truth from their heart...*

Truth is a basic *middah*, a basic spiritual quality, necessary for transcending the mundane and realizing the sacred, for “dwelling” on the “holy mountain.”

And yet, in Pirkei Avot, Shamai says:

וְהָיִי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסָבֵר פְּנִים יְפוּת – *Receive every person with a cheerful face.*

And later in the text, Rabbi Yishmael takes it even further:

וְהָיִי 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

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

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, without getting caught by the negativity.

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. If our happiness is based on gratification alone, then we are slaves to our experience.

But there is a deeper joy that arises from the depths of who we are, beneath our temporary experience, beneath the “house” of our thoughts and feelings. That 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 a home for the Divine during this brief life we are given.

This deep openness of consciousness to whatever arises is very simple, but it's not easy, because the complexities of life can easily distract. That's why we have spiritual teachings and practices – to develop our ability to remain awake and free in the midst of life.

דְּבַר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִוְ-אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֵא לְנַדֵּר נָדָר נָזִיר לְהִזְיֹר לַיהוָה:
מִיָּיִן וְשִׁכְרֵי נִזְיֹר...

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?

www.TorahOfAwakening.com

Torah Teachings on Awakening by Reb Brian Yosef Schachter-Brooks

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. By abstaining from both, one can get in touch with that deeper level of awareness that simply receives the moment as it is, that “lets the house burn down,” so to speak. This level of awareness experientially 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.

Last week was the festival of *Shavuot*, during which the biblical Book of Ruth is traditionally read. 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:

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶלְיָהוּן אֶל־תִּקְרָאנִי לִי נְעָמִי קָרְאֵן לִי מָרָא כִּי־הָמַר שָׂדֵי לִי מָאֵד:
“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, and they have a son who ends up being an ancestor of King David, who is 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 the 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 can arise.

And so, for us – may we open to the truth of our experience with simplicity and without resistance, receiving everything from the hands of the Divine, and may we merit to feel the deeper joy that arises from that openness. May we share that joy with everyone we encounter: וְנָהוּי מִקְבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּשִׂמְחָה – *Receive every person with joy* – and may true peace and salvation sprout for this world, speedily in our day!