


**Parashat Acharei
Mot**

English version

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THE ART OF BEING UNIQUE

This weeks Haftarah, calls us all כּוּשִׁים, black people, in the literal sense of the word. R Eliezer Ben Hurkenus gives it a twist though. He says that when the Torah refers to a Jew as black, it means metaphorically. Just as the black are different in their skin from the rest of humanity, so too, those that are referred to as black in the Torah, are not necessarily black, but unique, with good deeds, and good character. הַלּוֹא כְּבָנֵי כְּשֵׁיִם אָתָּם לִי, וְכִי כּוּשִׁים הֵיוּ, אֲלֵא מָה הַכְּשִׁי הֵזָה גּוֹפּוֹ מִשְׁנֵה מְכַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת, כִּף יִשְׂרָאֵל מִשְׁנֵים בְּדַרְכֵיהֶם וּבְמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הַטּוֹבִים מְכַל אַמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם, לְכִף נִקְרָאוּ כּוּשִׁים. R' Eliezer Ben Hurkenus brings proof of this, from Tzipporah. Tzipporah is called black in the Torah, although she was not. She was called black because she was unique. Unique in character and in beauty. וְהַדָּבָר מְרִים וְאֶהְרֹן בְּמִנְשָׁה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכְּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח וְכִי כְּשִׁית הִיְתָה, אֲלֵא מָה הַכְּשִׁי הֵזָה מִשְׁנֵה בְּעוֹרוֹ, כִּף הִיְתָה צְפוּרָה מִשְׁנֵה בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהָ הַטּוֹבִים, לְכִיכָּה נִקְרָאת כּוּשִׁית שְׁנַאמַר כִּי אִשָּׁה כּוּשִׁית לָקַח (Pirkei DrE 53) R' Eliezer B. H. continues to explain, that King Shaul was referred to as כּוּשִׁי, black, by King David in Tehillim. That also means that Shaul was unique in how tall and handsome he was, and how good and kind he was.

Unique is a good thing. Being unique, is what makes us irreplaceable. It is not easy to be

unique as a nation. Throughout the history of exile, the Jewish people have been told, to go back to where we came from. Now that we returned to our homeland, we are being told, to go someplace else. But people don't get it. This is the price tag of being different and unique, and it is what makes us so resilient. It makes our military stronger, it unifies us, and more importantly, it brings us closer to G-d, our Superpower.

Recently, one of my virtual students how learns in NYU, asked me something that I can't get out of my head. He had just watched the latest Moses movie in Netflix, and wanted to know if Moshe's wife Tzipporah was a black woman, as seen on Netflix. Well, at first I answered that Rashi says Tzipporah was *not* black, although the simple meaning of the aforementioned passuk says that she was. Instead, Rashi says, she was beautiful, and the numerical value of the word יפת מראה is כּוּשִׁית.

Netflix makes Tzipporah black, because the Christian Bible translates the words literally, so the gentiles believe that Tzipporah was a black woman. Hollywood makes money riding the hype of the times, so they prefer giving the acting position of Tzipporah to a black woman. At the most, Tzipporah was very tan, as she



was from Midian, a people who live in tents, in sunny places. (Ibn Ezra)

But as I researched the sources, I was shocked to find that there is another opinion than Rashi, an opinion that is much less known. That Moshe's wife *was* actually black! Not Tziporah, but Moshe's second wife, a black queen, the queen of Kush! When Moshe ran away from Pharaoh, and ruled over Kush for 40 years, he was married to the Queen! Moshe never had any physical relationship with this black queen from Kush. (Keter Yonatan, Rashbam, Hizkuni, Daat Zekenim)

According to Rama Mipano, there is a connection between the soul of Moshe, who is the pillar of the Written Torah, and the soul of R' Akiva, who is the pillar of the Oral Torah. In the Sefer Gilgulei Neshamot, everything that happened to Moshe, happened to R' Akiva in some sort of parallel. Moshe had two wives, the black queen of Kush, and Tziporah. R' Akiva also had two wives, Rachel the daughter of the wealthy Kalba Sabua, and the convert, the wife of Tornosofus. (Avodah Zara 20b)

What was the story, of Moshe, marrying this black queen from Kush?

Moshe, the Egyptian prince of Batya, was looking out for his Jewish brothers. Moshe killed the Egyptian who slept with Shlomit Bat Dibri, while the Egyptian was trying to kill Shlomit's husband, who learned what the Egyptian had done to his wife. Pharaoh chased Moshe to kill him. When Pharaoh tried chopping off Moshe's neck, Moshe's neck turned into marble, and Pharaoh's sword didn't hurt him in the slightest. Pharaoh became mute, and his executioners became blind... Moshe fled.

In Sefer Hayashar and in Yalkut Shimoni (168) it tells us what happened after Moshe ran away from Egypt. At the time, there was a war

between the Kingdom of Kush and the people of the East. Kukonus the king of Kush went out to war, and left Kingdom Kush in the hands of his advisor of the time, Bilaam, and Bliam's two sons, Yanus and Yambrus. After Kukonus left, Bilaam decided to rebel, and rule in the place of Kukonus. The people of Kush listened to Bilaam, and Bilaam appointed his sons as generals of a new Kush army.

In order to protect themselves from Kokonus and the Kush army, Bilaam and his sons, used witchcraft to raise the height of the walls of Kush to great heights on the two sides of the city. On the third side of the city, they dug big wells, and they diverted the river of Kush to fill the trenches with raging rapids, and on the fourth side, they brought many snakes with their witchcraft. All this was to stop Kokonus and his army from returning home, after they won the war.

After King Kokonas was victorious over the enemy from the East, he tried returning with his whole army, and they saw the high walls, not realizing what had happened. They tried coming to the main gates of Kush, but the gates were locked and the guards would not open for them. They tried fighting, but they lost 130 soldiers in combat. On the second day they tried to fight from the side of the river, but 30 chariots drowned in the whirlpools. King Kokonus tried to come in on rafts, but all ten rafts flipped over and killed over 200 soldiers. On the third day, they tried coming in from the side of the snakes, but 170 soldiers died. So, they made a siege on the city, hoping that somehow, someday, they can capture it.

Moshe who fled from the most powerful man on Earth, Pharaoh, joined the men of Kokonus who were in middle of the siege. The king and all the people loved Moshe, for he was tall, handsome, and strong. The king appointed Moshe as his advisor. After 9 years of siege,

King Kokanus died. The army of Kush was afraid that without a leader, they were vulnerable to their enemies, who they won recently. They decided to appoint Moshe as their leader. They swore to Moshe that if he would help them, he would be their king and he would marry the queen, the wife of Kokanus. This was 157 years into the 210 years of the Jews living in Egypt.

The day after Moshe was appointed, the army of Kush came to Moshe for advice how to capture Kush. After all, they have not been with their families for nine years now. Moshe told them to go to forest and that each one should capture a young stork. They needed to train their storks to fly and capture prey, and to follow orders. Moshe then told them to starve their storks for two days. On the third day, Moshe commanded them to battle Bilaam and his army from the side of the city that was filled with snakes. The starved storks flew over the snakes and snatched them all up, eating all the snakes. 1,100 people of Kush, from inside the city, died in battle, and not one of Moshe's soldiers died! Bilaam and his sons fled to Egypt, where Bilaam again became close to Pharaoh.

Moshe entered the city, and captured it, and the Queen of Kush, became his wife. He was never with her, he never even looked at her. It was only externally, that he acted as if they were married.

Moshe was 27 years old when he became the king of Kush. Not long after Moshe took over Kush, the people of the East rebelled, when they heard that the King of Kush, Kokanus, died. Moshe fought them with an army of 30,000 soldiers, and he killed from the enemy 300 people. This made Moshe even more popular in Kush Kingdom.

After 40 years, the queen publicized that Moshe never really married her, and that

Moshe does not serve the gods of Kush. She wanted that her son Munham should be the next king. The people of Kush decided to listen to her, and they put Munham, son of Kokanus, as their king. With that, they sent Moshe from the Kingdom of Kush on his way, with many gifts.

That is when Moshe came to Midian at the age of 67. Yitro thought that Moshe was fleeing from Kush, and that the people of Kush wanted to kill Moshe for not serving their gods, so Yitro locked up Moshe in a cellar for ten years, thinking that this way, he would satisfy the people of Kush. Yitro forgot about Moshe, while Tziporah brought food and water to Moshe for ten years, without her father Yitro knowing. Ten years later, Yitro checked the cellar, and saw that Moshe was miraculously still alive, so he freed him, and Moshe married Tziporah. (See Meam Loetz in Shemot)

I always wondered what Moshe felt was the purpose of his unique life, until he was over 80 years old, and faced Pharaoh. He was so different, he was so unrelatable. I always wondered why G-d makes us Jews so unique and different, so unrelatable to the gentiles. Our Rabbis teach, that when you are unique and different, and you don't know why, it means that something special is in store. The Mishna in Avot teaches, *אין לך אדם שאין לו שעה*. *There is no person that does not have his time.* (Avot 4 3)

This is the Afikoman lesson. On the Seder night, we split the middle Matza, and the part that is called Afikoman, we put in a bag, which we keep away from the table. If the Afikoman had a mouth, it would probably say when you put the Afikoman bag away, "Why am I different than the rest of the items of the night of the Seder? Why did you put me away?"

Quite the contrary! Precisely because the Afikoman is so precious, we put it away, *צפון*,

and the one who finds it, gets a present! Only at the end of the Seder, we understand so many things, that at the beginning of the Seder made no sense! The night of the Seder, has in it much deeper meaning than what we see on the surface. The letters סוד, דרש, רמז, סדר stand for, the deeper meaning and explanation of things, while there is no פ, there is no פשט, no simple meaning in the things of the night of the Seder.

For example. The deeper reason why we bless on the Karpas, and not the Maror, has a deeper lesson than the simple reason. Halachically, we bless Boreh Pri Hadamah on the Karpas, and we cover the blessing of Ha'adama on the Maror, because Maror is in middle of the meal, and we don't bless on vegetables in middle of the meal. But there is a much deeper meaning.

THE ART OF BUILDING SPIRITUAL SAND CASTLES

After Pesach break, it's hard to get back into learning and onto the spiritual Sefirah-sail to Shavuot, to the upcoming Matan Torah. Especially when I have to go back to juggling being a husband, father and breadwinner, not to mention my post-holiday diet.

One of my favorite Sefarim, one that I learned from cover to cover in Mussar Seder when learning in R Tzvi Kaplan's Yeshivas Kodshim, is R' Chaim Volozhin's Ruach HaChaim on Avot. He writes that the major ploy of the Yetzer Hara is to blind the eyes of man, telling him constantly, "How can you find time to learn Torah? You need to be busy with your Parnassah!! You need to support the wife and kids!"

Of course, we need to toil for our bread, and we need to be responsible for our finances. But it is only G-d who decides exactly how rich you will be, which efforts will bear fruit, and how much. All the extra effort will not help

If you can learn to bless and praise G-d for the bitter things in life, for the Karpas, you are covering yourself for the bitterness of much more bitter things in life, like the Maror, that may be in store for you.

Moshe was living the life of an Afikoman! Only after the Seder, does it all make sense, why he was separated from his people for so long, learning how to deal with adversity, to not fear anyone, to rely on G-d, and build that muscle of resilience and leadership.

This week's Haftara, G-d is telling us that we are all כושיים, we are all unique! We are different, and that we will always be different. All that we are going through is what empowers us, and makes us the great people that we are meant to be.

you, nor will the efforts "help" G-d give you more, if it is not what He wants to give you.

According to Judaism, people who become rich don't become rich *because* they are in real estate, nursing homes, medical supplies, stocks, selling insurance, or brands. They became rich *while* they were in those fields of business. *From before a child is even created, it is decreed if he is to be rich or poor.* (Niddah 16b) This ruling determines one's whole financial life. And, at the beginning of each year, on Rosh Hashana, it is decreed exactly how much money you will have in your bank account, for that year. (Beitzah 16a) Of course, it is important that you try to work smart, to do your Hishtadlut, for the Beracha to take place... But no matter how much harder you try, you will not make one dollar more than what has been decided! And, G-d could have given you that same money, with just a *little* work on your part! This is a fundamental pillar of Jewish Emunah.

In stark contrast, in spirituality, regarding fighting your Yetzer Hara, Torah study and connection through prayer, it is not at all like that. As long as you live, till your very last breath, it is undetermined, and up to you, and only you, if you will be a Tzaddik or Rasha. That is the only thing that is left undetermined, according to Judaism! In spirituality, your success is dependent on three things: 1. How much effort and time you invest in your learning Torah. Torah study melts the Yetzer Hara away. (For women, who do not have Torah study, it is their modesty that is their Yetzer Hara repellent. Vilna Gaon.) 2. What and who you associate yourself with, and what and who you disassociate from. How far you distance yourself from the things and people that are distractions to your learning, prayer, and service of G-d. Keeping your phone out of Shul and study hall, getting the best internet and phone filters, connecting yourself to a rabbi who can clarify any doubts of what G-d wants from you. 3. How much time and effort you invest in praying. Even if a person makes all the effort to fight his Yetzer Hara, he still can't do it alone. G-d made the Yetzer Hara, an angel, much stronger than Man, who is merely flesh and blood. But when a person puts in the effort to fight, G-d helps.

This is the meaning, of the words, אדם אין אני לי מי לי. If I am not for myself, if I will not start to fight my spiritual battle setting up proper times to learn and proper study partners, if I will not choose who and what to associate with, if I will not pray for my own good and my needs, who is to me? When it comes to spirituality, in contrast to things of a physical or a material nature, if I don't put in the effort, if I do not initiate and try to make spiritual "moves", I will lose the battle for spirituality in my life. I can't wait for G-d to save me, spiritually, if I am not trying, myself. If I keep waiting for just the right thing to motivate me spiritually, in order to win my spiritual battle -

a good class, a Rabbi or friend who is a good influence, being back in yeshiva, having all my life's finances under control right now, etc., it will never really come! G-d is waiting for *me* to be the one pushing ahead, to make spirituality happen, to prepare for it, to take the initiative, to make the moves!

Now, just because you fight hard for your spirituality and you reach your spiritual goals, don't become haughty over your achievements: וכשאני לעצמי מה אני *And when I try to battle for spirituality on my own, what am I?* If G-d does not help me, I can never reach my spiritual goals on my own, because the Yetzer Hara is much stronger than I am! And still, when G-d helps a person overpower his Yetzer Hara, G-d gives the person total credit, as if he has won the spiritual battle against this Evil Angel alone, without G-d's help.

The problem is that most of us know we are not tzaddikim, we know what we have to improve, but we think we have a "time bank". I'll get to fighting my spiritual battle later in life! The day before I die, I will do Teshuva! I am still midlife, I am still young, *I still look young!* When it comes to material concerns, if you did not make the money today, no worries! You will make it tomorrow, for it is all predestined. If you missed out on the investment, during Covid, you will get another investment opportunity tomorrow, because no one can take from you the amount of money you are supposed to have! But if you missed a day of learning, if you missed a day of good prayer, a day with tzitzit, a day of teshuva, **that day is dead!** You can never get that day back! This is what it means when it says ואם לא עכשיו אימתי. And if not now, when?

There are two seemingly similar words. מושיע savior. עוזר helper. What is the difference between the two? מושיע, Savior, means, that He

saves you when you can't help yourself. עוזר Helper, means, that he helps you when you help yourself. When G-d saved the Jews at Yam Suf, it says ויִשַׁע. The Jews did not need to do anything on their own, for G-d fought the final battle against the Egyptians; He saved them, on His own. But when it comes to fighting the Yetzer Hara, G-d won't save you, He will only help you if you get up again and try to help yourself. ואלמלא הקדוש ברוך הוא שיעור לו - אינו יכול לו (Succah 52b) G-d won't save you spiritually, He will only help you save yourself.

The Talmud tells us that a person's shidduch and his Parnassah are as difficult as Kriyat Yam Suf. (Sotah 2b) Of course, nothing is hard for G-d, not even Kriyat Yam Suf! If He created the Sea, He can definitely split it! But your shidduch, your parnassah, is compared to Kriyat Yam Suf: whatever Hishtadlut you do, and you should do all the Hishtadlut you can - *but that Hishtadlut is not what is going to bring you your parnassah and your soulmate.* Just as it was *hard* for the Jews to see how G-d would bring them a salvation at Yam Suf, it is hard for us to understand how we will be able to find our soulmate and figure out our finances, for the rest of our lives. But G-d will show you. Just like in regard to the splitting of the Sea, G-d was ויִשַׁע, in regard to your Parnassah and soulmate, as well, He is ויִשַׁע. He did not need your Hishtadlut at all to help you, He did not need your help to help you. He saved you, and did it all by Himself.

Selfie Steps for building Spiritual Sand Castles:

1. It's me, or no one. No one can light up my spiritual spark for me.
2. It's now, or never. Today will never come again.

Another explanation about the common difficulty in Kriyat Yam Suf, shidduch, and parnassah. It was hard for G-d to split the Sea, because the Jews had sin and lacked merit; but still, G-d found a way to give them what they did not deserve. The only thing that makes it hard for G-d to give you your soul mate, to give you your parnassah, is the sins that we have and our lack of merit. And still, G-d finds a way to give us what we do not deserve. (See Alshich Shemot 13;11)

Why is it so hard for us to loosen up in our physical efforts, and to take more action on our spiritual goals? We invest in what we believe has significance, and we are impressed by financial wins, wealth and strength, and not impressed by a spiritual win, by someone with a connection to G-d. Why?

Because we think of spirituality as not being real, of something that is just an ideal... and we think of fancy cars and homes, physical, material success as real! How foolish! It is the exact opposite! In Olam Haba, all the luxury of this world will be washed away, just as one wave takes down the biggest sand castles! You can't take Upstairs even your socks with you! Everything you toiled to acquire will be left to others. וְעִזְבוּ לְאֲחֵרִים הַיָּקָרִים: (Tehillim 49;11) The only sand castles that will last forever, the only ones that no wave can take down, are the spiritual sand castles that we build while we are here in this world: our Torah learning, and our victories over the Yetzer Hara! עשה תורתך קבע. It is called YOUR Torah.

3. All I have to do is start. I can never do it all on my own. G-d will help me.
4. Get rid of distractions. Anything that prevents you from becoming a Tzaddik is a distraction.
5. Know where your efforts make a difference. When it comes to finding

your shidduch, when it comes to your parnassah, you don't need to try hard; you just need to keep trying. When it

comes to your spiritual fight, you need to try much harder.

Love vs. Respect

Sefirat Haomer is a time of character refinement. 12,000 pairs, 24,000 students of R Akiva, all died at this time for not honoring each other. (Yevamot 62b) The main Avodah during the Omer is to correct that Middah of respect.

There are three questions one can ask. R' Akiva taught that the main rule of the entire Torah is to love your friend as you love yourself. (Sifra Kedoshim, Yerushalmi 9 Nedarim) How could R Akiva's own students transgress the main teaching of their mentor? And why did this happen, specifically, between Pesach and Shavuoth? Also, isn't it strange that R Akiva's students are referred to as 12,000 "pairs", and not 24,000 disciples?

The Shem Mishmuel answers with a beautiful twist. But first, he writes a lesson about respect. Respecting another is only possible if you recognize that the other person has a strength that you, yourself, don't have, or if he is superior to you in some way. Respect usually stems from recognizing that the other person is greater than oneself in a certain aspect of his personality.

However, in your own body, your right hand will not show respect to your left hand. Your toe will not show respect for your ear, for both are part of one body. Respect is not applicable here; no one part is greater than another, for they are all part of the same "one". The students of R' Akiva learned the importance of loving one another, *but they took their Rabbi's teaching of love to the extreme*. Each one felt that the others were a part of himself. They

failed to accord to one another individual identity. As if they were all one. And this was their mistake. Love has no boundaries. But respect does. They loved each other with boundless love, in a way that they all felt one. That is why they are referred to as "pairs", for no one had an identity or a boundary.

Heimish is a good thing, as long as it is not too heimish. Because when there are no boundaries, there is no respect. Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, died because of this. They got too close to G-d. Their sin was *ה' בקרבם לפני ה'*. They did not realize their boundaries. And this is the reason why R Akiva's students died during the Sefirah. The Sefirah is a time where we count days and we count weeks. Where we give value to both: collectivity for weeks and individuality for days. The students of R' Akiva were on such a high level that they were expected to notice this lesson of balancing individuality with unity and learn from it.

This is a lesson for all areas of life. The best way to treat your wife is how you treated her before she became your wife. The best way to treat your children is as if they are guests, even though they are your guests for 20+ years. Treat them with no less respect than you would treat your neighbor's children. Once you perceive the kids as part of a family, part of a whole, and with no individuality, identities become blurred. The formula to the successful family is found in the balance between individuality and collectiveness. As the Haggadah mentions *אחד חכם אחד רשע וכו'* One

the wise, one the wicked, one the simpleton, one that doesn't know how to ask. Why one, one, one, one? Because in order for your family to function with harmony, you have to respect each child for what he is, with his own individuality and identity.

The Mishna teaches, רבי אומר, איזוהי דרך ישרה, שיבור לו האדם, כל שהיא תפארת לעושיה ותפארת לו מן האדם. (Avot 2;1) A successful relationship, a lifelong relationship, is a balanced one. I once saw a refrigerator magnet that said, "Love is not looking into each other's eyes. Love is looking in the same direction". I would like to take the theory that love is about going in the "same direction" a step further. Love and relationships are like driving a car. A good driver, a smooth driver, knows how to efficiently balance two crucial elements in his car: the gas pedal and the brakes. If you overuse or underuse either of these, no one will want to be your passenger.

In the journey of relationships, there are also two pedals. There is the pedal of love. You push that pedal each time you give of your time, money, effort or soul. Saying yes. No boundaries. What is mine is yours. That is the pedal of love.

And then, there is the brake pedal. Knowing when to say no. How to say no. How to stand up for yourself. How to respect yourself and your boundaries, so that you can also respect others and their boundaries. Although the gas pedal is very important to get you where you want to go, if there are no brakes, do not get into that car!

All relationships have two main factors. Dos and Don'ts. The do's of a relationship do not carry as much weight as the don'ts. You can give all your money, all your time, your whole Neshama, all the "do's", but if you are not careful to refrain from the things that you are not supposed to do, the "don'ts", the whole relationship can come crashing down.

A common misinterpretation many Orthodox Jews have is that a Mitzvah means a good deed. A mitzvah is a commandment. The root of the word is, צוה which means command. Or, on a deeper level, a Mitzvah is a way of building a bond between the Jew and His Creator, from the word, צוותא, together.

There are positive commandments and there are negative commandments. And, just as the negative commandments are much more severe than the positive commandments, relationship issues are usually problems with Don'ts more than they are with Do's. My experience in helping people improve socially tells me the following. Those who are doing great with the do's but not with the don'ts have much rockier relationships than those who are good with the don'ts, but not with the do's.

Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player said something I can't forget. "I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me... All I ask is that you respect me as a human being". Respect is not earned through achievement. It is insignificant what another person has accomplished. Respect is because the other person is a human being, and because he is created in the image of G-d.

A seven-week journey to spiritual refinement

Introduction to the Sefirot of Sefirat Haomer

From the second night of Pesach until Shavuot, we count the Omer as a preparation to accept the Torah. It is a purification process, a ladder of holiness. R Chaim Volozhin (NH 4;7) writes that in order to connect with G-d through the learning of Torah, it is extremely important to meditate on purifying one's heart, before beginning learning. And the way to do this is through the ladder of self-refinement.

The Arizal writes that when we left Egypt, we emerged from the 49th Level of Impurity. And through the power of the Omer, we entered the 49th level of Holiness. The Rashash writes that these days are the source of holiness for all the days of the year. And the way one goes through these days will affect how one behaves all year long. Each day has its Middah, and there is a Divine assistance to improve precisely the Middah of that day. Therefore, we cite the prayer that in the merit of the Omer, we refine the Middah of that day.

The numerical value of the Hebrew word Middah is 49. What are these 49 Middot? What are the steps involved in rectification?

Allow me to start from the basics. The Ten Sefirot are broken down, primarily, into two groups. The first three, Chochma (Wisdom), Binah (Understanding) and Daat (Knowledge).

The next seven, also referred to as Middot, are read every day in the Siddur in Shacharit, in the Pesukei D'zimrah, לך ה' הגדולה הגבורה והתפארת והנצח וההוד כי כל בשמים ובארץ לך ה' הממלכה. To you, Hashem, is the 1. Gedulah (Chessed), 2. Gevurah, 3. Tifferet, 4. Netzach, and 5. Hod 6. Yesod, ... Ki chol bashamyim uvaAretz, for everything, in the Heavens and the Earth, to you, Hashem, is the kingdom 7. Malchut.

There are aspects of the Sefirot that we can learn, even if we are not learning Kabbalah; these are things that can help one learn how to become the best Jew he can be.

If you do not understand the basics of the Sefirot, you will not be able to understand the significance of the Sefirot and the guidance they offer.

The root of the word Sefirah has a few meanings, each built on the same three letters. ט.פ.ר. The first meaning is the Sapphire stone. When the sky opened up at Har Sinai, the Jews looked up to the Heavens and saw that there was a clear sapphire stone, resembling a prism, under G-d's throne (Shemot 24;10). What does this mean?

The Sapphire the Jews saw hints to the Sefirot they perceived, the way we can perceive G-d's character. The Sefirot relay to us how G-d interacts with the world.

It is of utmost importance to accept the fact that we cannot understand G-d, Himself. When Moshe asked G-d, הֲרֹאִי נָא אֶת כְּבוֹדְךָ. Please, show me Your Honor. G-d answered "You will not be able to see my face, for no man can see Me and live ... You will only be able to see Me from behind ... (Shemot 33)". What does this mean, that we cannot see the front of G-d, but that we can only see Him from behind?

G-d does not reveal Himself, not even to the Angels. Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Hashem Tzvakot, means that G-d is above the understanding of the angels. Rather, G-d told Moshe, human beings can understand G-d's personality only from His actions. From His ways in the world. We can never even begin to contemplate G-d, Himself. G-d is One G-d, אֶהְיֶה וְיִהְיֶה, and the way we perceive how He

interacts with His World, is through the Ten Sefirot. Similar to how white light is separated into its component colors – red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet - when it passes through a prism. We can perceive G-d's reflection from His actions and ways, from the other side of the prism. But the Sefirot do not describe G-d, Himself, for G-d is completely beyond human comprehension. Once someone asked a wise man, What is G-d? And the wise man answered, אילו ידעתיו הייתי, If I would know Him, I would be Him. (Derashot HaRan, דרוש ד) In Judaism, we believe that G-d did not create the Universe only once upon a time, long ago, but that He is constantly creating the world. In the present. יוצר אור ובורא חושך... בורא את הכל. G-d is creating in the present. עושה מעשה בראשית. The sapphire stone that the Jews saw at Har Sinai is suggestive of the Sefirot, through which we can perceive G-d by observing how He manages His world.

Now we can understand the other meanings of the word Sefirah. The word סיפור, or story. We can understand the story, how G-d is telling the world about Himself. מספר, number, although the Ten Sefirot are philosophical, they have, also, a mathematical dimension. There are only ten. That is it. Not one more and not one less. (Sefer Yetzirah) The ten Sefirot are correspondent to the ten Maamarot, Ten Utterances, with which Hashem created the world. (Avot 5;1) Also, the word ספר means boundary. Each one of these ten Sefirot has a boundary; they exist separately, even though they must also work together in order to give even a basic insight into G-d's character, or for one to bring G-dliness to the world.

When we understand the Ten Sefirot even on a basic level, we understand ourselves, as well. G-d made Man in His Image, a Tzelem Elokim. (Breshit 1;27 See Devarim 21; 22)

מבשרי אחזה אלוהים. From my flesh I will perceive G-d. (Iyov 19; 26) R' Akiva taught הכיב אדם שנברא בצלם (Avot 3;14) Beloved is Man, for he is created in G-d's Image. This, of course, is not referring to a physical image of G-d. Instead, it refers to a similarity in the sense of potential character. Man has in him G-dly potential. We gain tremendous insight into our own character, when we understand the Sefirot.

We are expected to go in G-d's ways. והלכת בדרכיו. (Devarim 28;9) This is how we can connect to G-d. ובו תדבק. (Devarim 10;20) G-d wants us to be holy, because "I, Hashem, your G-d, am Holy". (Vayikra 19; 2) The key for us to understand what it means to be holy, to be created in G-d's image, is learning each of the ten Sefirot.

The ten Sefirot can be divided into three groups, just as Man has with in him three distinct divisions. The first group is Thoughts, ideas and beliefs. The second group is Character, and the third group is Behavior. The first three, Hochma, Binah and Daat, are from the group of thoughts, ideas and beliefs. The group of the next seven Sefirot are the "Middot". They reflect character and behavior, something more "tangible", making it easier for us to relate to these Sefirot. The list of seven Sefirot that are also Middot, mentioned in our Shacharit prayers, develops into a Sefirat Haomer time-table, a schedule outlining what we have to work on each day of the Omer. Seven times seven. And this is part of our growth in preparing to accept the Torah on Shavuoth. To work on perfecting those traits in our own character on those allotted days.



We start the first night of the Omer with Chessed of Chessed, the ultimate in selflessness. And we work through the 49 days, each day combining one of the Attributes to the main Attribute being focused upon that week, [Chesed of Chesed, Gevura of Chesed, and so on] until we reach Malchut of Malchut. The highest level of majesty.

Before explaining the Middot though, we must know that each Middah has a few components.

1-The definition of the Middah.

2-The Tzaddik, that merited to personify this Middah, and serve G-d mostly through this specific Middah.

3-The part of the human body that expresses this Middah.

4-What was created on that day of the seven days of Creation.

It is important to understand this and to be accurate about the Middah refinement of the day. That is where there is special Divine Assistance.

Learn the Sefirot. You will then have a better understanding of your own life's story, and the

stories of those in your life. (סיפור, story root). You will also learn how to control and bring boundaries to your own behavior. (ספר, boundary root.) And you will begin an organized, step by step journey, counting, each day, to reach your purpose. (מספר Number root.)

The Orach Chaim writes that our souls are like the Luchot, the tablets that were made from Sapphire. Through the refinement of the Sefirah, we polish our souls so they will sparkle like Sapphire. And the shine of our souls, your personal spark, will be eternally remembered by G-d through the Sapphire that is under His Throne.

This is a special opportunity to become a more refined vessel to reveal G-dliness in the world. During the days of Sefirat HaOmer, the energy is in the air waiting for you soul to connect to it. This is an opportune time for character development, to rectify the lack of respect of the students of R' Akivah, and make your inner essence shine. Don't miss these Sefirot forces, that linger within, waiting for you to tap into your potential, and live the life you are meant to live! The G-dly person you are destined to be!

A CONNECTION TO G-D

One of the amazing things that happened to me in Miami was a conversation I had on the way to the airport with the Uber driver, an African American.

“Are you a Rabbi?” I try to be. I try to help people get closer to their Creator, through words of Torah. “You can call me Rabbi.” “Can I ask you a question?” “Sure.”

“Did G-d give the whole Five Books of Moses to Moses at Mt. Sinai? Or did G-d give just the Ten Commandments? I keep the commandments, because that is what G-d gave the whole world. Not just the Jews. So, I keep that. The rest of the Five Books, was that also given to Moses at Mt. Sinai?”

I replied that it is not clear what extent of detail Moses received at Mt. Sinai and what he

accepted in the Tabernacle, in the Tent of Meeting (See Sotah 37b). But, one thing for sure is that the Ten Commandments were not given to the Gentiles. They were given to the Jews, as the beginning words start off saying, *I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.* Gentiles never went through Egyptian slavery. All the gentiles need to keep, according to Judaism, are the 7 Noachide laws.

“What? How do you say that? You call yourself a Rabbi? You discriminate? Don’t you think that G-d wants the gentiles to live a life of morality with an ethical code?” I never had someone so angry with me in my entire life! He would have thrown me out of the car, if he could have. But, I tried to gently explain that we have 613 laws that we connect to G-d with, and he has only the 7 Noachide laws that he can connect with. He would not accept that. I tried to explain that we are to be G-d’s Knights, bringing G-dliness to the world, to be a light unto the nations. Nothing doing. He would not accept that G-d would let the gentiles alone without ever speaking to them, never telling them how to behave, bar the 7 Noachide laws.

This was right before Purim, when I was thinking of the words of the Vilna Gaon, explaining the words of the Megilla. לְהַדִּיק אֶת הַיָּם לְהַדִּיק אֶת הַיָּם *For the Jews, there was light,...* The Talmud says that the light that the Jews merited was Torah. (Megillah 16b) The Vilna Gaon explains this to mean that on Purim, the Jews realized that Torah is the light of their lives. This gentile wanted to feel that he had some light in the darkness, some ethical code, in an immoral world. Torah means: a light guiding you, showing you how to live. I never realized how lucky we are to

have a connection to G-d, to have direction in life, until I met that Uber Driver in Miami.

Shavuot is not a holiday meant to just celebrate our accepting the Torah, our standing at Mt. Sinai. Shavuot is to celebrate the beginning of a relationship. Every day we accept the Torah, and every day G-d gives it to us, as we say in the blessing, נֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה. The One who **gives** Torah. נֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה, the One who **gave** us Torah 3000 years ago. Every day, every word of Torah we learn, G-d is giving us that Torah. Every generation has its leaders, and the leaders of each generation are as great as Moshe and Aharon (Rosh Hashana 25b). For in each generation, G-d **is giving** the Torah, and it is the duty of each generation to look to their Torah leaders to direct the people, guiding them how to live, according to what G-d is teaching that generation, keeping to the Jewish Code of Law.

What does a person need to do, to feel closeness to G-d, and to see how the Torah is the light of his life? How does a person connect in a way that G-d is talking to him, now, in the present?

First and foremost, in order to connect, Torah needs to be sweet to you. Ever notice the uniqueness of the Birkot Hatorah in Birkot Hashachar? It is the only blessing of a Mitzvah that we pray for it to be sweet, וְהָעֵרֵב נָא. This is because the sweetness of Torah is fundamental for connecting to G-d and knowing what He wants from us. How does Torah become sweet? By taking each word and thinking about it. By chewing it, slowly. No matter how expensive the steak you are eating, if you swallow it all at once, you will not taste its quality. You need to savor each bite.

There is a Midrash that gives us the secret code to connecting, and the prerequisite for savoring



the sweetness of Torah. The Torah is compared to water, fire, and desert. הוי כל צמא לכו למים ; כי נר מצווה ותורה אור ; וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני באוהל מועד (Bamidbar Rabbah 1; 17) Why these three?

Water- Uniqueness of water is that it flows only to a lower place. Torah will go only to one who becomes humble. Only a humble person is not bashful to ask what he does not know. (אין הבישן למד.) Avot 2;5) Only a humble person is willing to review again, and again and again, and....And only a humble person will listen when wise people speak.

Why not compare Torah to a sweeter, tastier, drink? Why is Torah not compared to orange juice? Why water? The Chafetz Chaim would explain that this is because there is a uniqueness in water, that it is a drink that we do not make a blessing on unless we are thirsty. Unlike orange juice, you can enjoy water only when you are thirsty (See Sh"A-OH 204;7). Torah is sweet only if you realize how much your survival is dependent on it (See Midrash Shir Hashirim 1;3).

Fire – Uniqueness of fire is that it lights up darkness. If you want Torah to speak to you, you need to look at the world around you as darkness, a world of fantasy, delusion,

imaginings. Only Torah is reality. Only Torah can shed light on what is right and what is wrong)See Or Hachaim Behukotay 26;27).

Desert – Uniqueness of desert is that the place you are in is not the destination. And the more possessions that you have with you, the more difficult it is for you to get out of the desert, to move around, to enjoy your journey. The lighter the better. For you to realize what G-d is saying to you, for you to connect to the Torah He is giving you, you need to travel light. Not to look for more than you have, not to let your eyes search the world around you for more material possessions than you already have, but to keep going in the direction of your destination. From the person's first day in this world, he is walking towards death, toward Olam Haba. Life is a journey. And only when you accept that, can you taste the sweetness of Torah and really connect.

So, here are the Selfie Steps. The self-help steps to Sweetness of Torah.

Water – Humility, Thirst. **Fire** – Recognizing that the Torah we learn is our flashlight, a beacon of clarity in a confusing world. **Desert** – Not taking this world seriously. But taking the destination seriously.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

King Solomon's famous life mantra seems a little strange. *במים הפנים לפנים כן לב-האדם* *As water reflects one's face, so too, the heart of one man reflects the heart of another.* (Mishlei 27; 19) If someone is not being nice to you, he is reflecting you in some

way. Try to be nice to him, and you will see a change in his heart as well.

Why did King Solomon use water in his parable of reflection? Were there no mirrors in his time? Didn't the women of the desert give



their copper that they used as mirrors in Egypt for making the basin in the Mishkan?

The Baal Shem Tov gave a brilliant answer, one that can change your whole social life. The uniqueness of the reflection of water is that you need to bend over to see it clearly. If King Solomon had used a mirror on the wall as the parallel, you would not have to lower yourself to see the relationship reflection. Only the reflection of water requires you to kneel and bring down your inflated ego to a healthy place. And this is the secret of *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*. *And you shall love to your friend as you love yourself*. Why does the Torah add the letter ל, “to” your friend? Just say, “And you shall love your friend, like yourself”? The answer is if you want to begin to love your friend, you must come closer to him. What does this mean?

There is another uniqueness in the reflection of water that is paralleled in relationships. This reflection parallel is mindboggling. When you are far from the water, your reflection is bigger than life, out of proportion. When you bend over, when you get close, your reflection gets smaller; it becomes more real. What is the lesson of size dependent on distance in the reflection of water? And what is its relevance to relationships?

When you are far from people, it is because you are arrogant in some way, shape or form. When you are close to people, it is because you are humble with those people. If you find that other people are being haughty, it might be because you, yourself, are too far from them. If only you would humble yourself, if only you would get closer, you would see their humble side as well. As your reflection gets smaller, so does theirs. If you wish to improve a certain

relationship, find the humility you need to fix it. It takes soul searching, but it really works.

Arrogant people aren't well-liked. After fifty years of corporate experience, Aldo Papone, senior advisor to American Express, wrote the following: *Arrogance, at its worst, creates a momentum that insists on your downfall and cannot be appeased. We've all seen the bloodlust that occurs when the public senses a weakness in the high and mighty – a corporation, a candidate, or a multimillion-dollar athlete. Arrogance must be punished, and only a display of remorse and humility will get you off the hook.* (Aldo Papone)

Arrogant people are arrogant because they do not realize that they are arrogant. Arrogance is not having your nose in the air. It is much more subtle. It's a false perception of G-d's blessings. If you were blessed with amazing parents. If you were gifted with a great mind. If you were lucky to find a Rebbi/ mentor/ coach. If G-d granted you wealth and its perks/ looks/ voice/ height/ wit/focus/ patience/ self-discipline/optimism/ sensitivity/ social savvy/ etc., it does not mean you are better. It means G-d holds you more responsible. *With great strength comes great responsibility.*

The question everyone wants an answer to during Sefirat Haomer is, how could 24,000 students be sentenced to paying with their lives for a sin so commonly transgressed, for failing to show one another mutual respect?

R Boruch Mordechai Ezrachi explains that being the students of R Akiva, they were held responsible to emulate him. Being R Akiva's student was not a matter of social status. It was not just about getting in to his Yeshiva. If you were his student, you had a certain strength, and therefore, you were held



responsible for living his values. R Akiva's students were unable to pass his Torah on to the next generation, because they were missing the pivotal trait of their great teacher.

Why specifically was this idea of respect, of humility, the essence of R Akiva's greatness?

Rachel gave up everything she had to marry Akiva the shepherd. After 24 years of learning, R' Akiva returned with 24-thousand students. Rachel came out to greet her husband in ragged clothing; she came and kissed his toes. Not knowing who she was and thinking that she was not mentally balanced, R Akiva's students started to push her away. R Akiva told them, "All of my Torah learning and yours is in her merit". Real Torah learning follows humility. This was R' Akiva's message to his students, but they just did not get it. R Akiva's humility was his greatest strength. That is how he surpassed, with a 40-year late start, all the great Rabbis of history. Because the Torah, which is similar to water, goes into the low places. Just like it only fits into an Ark that had all "half-measurements".

THE SIGN OF BELIEF

In order for a coach to be a good coach, a Rabbi to be a good Rabbi, a parent to be a good parent, and a boss to be a good boss, he needs to look at his client, student, child, employee, as if they are wearing an invisible sign around their neck. The sign reads, in big, red, bold letters, "Please! Believe in me!"

Our Rabbis teach, לעולם יאכל אדם וישתה, פחות ממה שיש לו; וילבש ויתכסה, במה שיש לו; ויכבד אשתו ובניו יותר ממה שיש לו. *A person should eat and drink on a lower standard than what is within his means, dress in accordance with what he has, and honor his wife and children with food and clothing even beyond his ability.* R' Chaim

With great strength comes great responsibility. If you have something great about you, you are held responsible to use your greatness for great things. The reason why G-d allowed Isabel, the wife of Achab, to kill Navot for not giving them his family-inheritance vineyard (as found in Melachim) was that Navot sinned by not using his beautiful voice, the gift that G-d gave him, to sing on the Holiday in the Bet Hamikdash. כבד ה' מהונך We read this to mean that if G-d blessed you with a beautiful voice, you should use it to honor G-d. (Rashi Mishlei 3;9) Yalkut Shimoni Ki Tisa 404) It is your responsibility to serve G-d with the gifts He gives you. Not to be haughty because of your strengths.

As we get ready to accept the Torah, achieving humility is the first step. ונפשי כעפר לכל תהיה G-d, Make my soul like the dust of the earth before all. *And then* open my heart in Your Torah. To accept the Torah we need to become one, a united people. ויהן שם ישראל נגד ההר. And there is no greater way than becoming one nation than by using your greatness to make others great.

Shmuelevitz explains this. When Daddy provides Mom and the kids with their needs on a higher standard than he is technically able to, this is not wasting money, but making a great investment. For, when the family gets a respectable standard of food and clothing from their father, they believe in him – they are confident that he is capable. They say to themselves, *Papa, we believe in you!* And that is one of the greatest resources a person can have. That the people in your life believe in you.

Unfortunately, though, this works two ways. In this week's Parasha, we learn how badly negative beliefs can affect us.

איש איש אל כל שאר בשרו לא תקרבו לגלות ערוה אני ה'
No man shall come near to any of his relatives for marital relations; I am G-d. (Vayikra 18 6).

What is the boundary that the Torah made for this statement? A man shall not come near?... From here, we learn that Yichud, remaining together alone in a secluded area, is forbidden. Even with one's sister, one's daughter and mother-in-law (under certain circumstances). Why? Because people who see the two in seclusion and do not know that they are related may get the wrong idea. A person shall not "shmooze" with a woman in the marketplace, even if she is his wife. And certainly, not with another woman, for people may interpret this negatively. A man should not walk behind his wife in the marketplace, and surely not behind another woman – for people may misinterpret it. (See Avot dR' Natan Perek B)

I always thought yichud is forbidden as a boundary, a prevention. I always thought that the problem with shmoozing with the opposite gender is that you might get too close. But R' Natan taught me that I have the wrong p'shat; I totally misunderstood. *It's because of what other people might think.*

Isn't this a little extreme or somewhat fanatic, to care so much what other people think? Whatever they say is not my problem!?! Good question. Even though scientifically, this doesn't make sense, mathematically, it does not add up, this belief stuff somehow greatly impacts our lives.

R' Yochanan said, Better to walk behind a lion, than to walk behind a woman. (Rashi – A forbidden woman.) Better to walk behind a woman than to walk behind idolatry. (Rashi – one might stray after the idolatry and become an Apikoros). Better to walk behind idolatry than to walk behind the town's only synagogue where the townspeople are praying, and not enter. (Rashi – For then, he looks like a kofer, a nonbeliever, for he stands outside the shul and does not enter.) (See Eiruvim 18b)

Why are we to take greater caution not to give a wrong impression than to risk straying after idolatry?

What people believe about you, and what you believe in yourself, are actually predictions of your performance. *What you expect is what you get!* To take control of your life, you need to believe in yourself, to expect from yourself the best. A famous study proves this point: A teacher informed her successor that two actually mediocre pupils were, in fact, outstanding. Instead of getting B- marks, the two finished the year with A+. Because humans are "wired" to live up to expectations!

One of the greatest secrets behind self discipline is belief in yourself. How you perceive yourself can change the position you are in towards sin. If you are too haughty, you need some reminders to humble yourself. If your self esteem or self worth is low, you need to build yourself back up.

The Mishna in Avot says, הסתכל בשלשה דברים ואי אתה בא לידי עבירה – דע מאין באת ולאן אתה הולך ולפני מי את עתיד ליתן דין וחשבון. מטפה סרוחה... למקום עפר רמה ותולעה... לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה. *Focus on three things, and you will not come to sin. Know where you came from, from a putrid drop (of seed). Know where you going, to a place of worms (the grave). And*

know in front of Whom you are going to give accounting, in front of the King of Kings, Blessed be He. (Avot 3; 1)

This is the secret recipe for humility, so that you won't get anywhere near sin. R' Chaim Volozhin, gives us the alternate route to stay away from sin. R Chaim points to a 'mantra' of R' Akiva, later in the chapter.(3 14) חביב אדם שנברא בצלם , חביבין ישראל שנקראו בנים למקום . Beloved is man, for he is created in G-d's Image. Beloved are Yisrael, for they are called Sons of G-d. Beloved are Yisrael, that they were given a Kli Hemdah, the Torah, G-d's precious treasure.

This is the secret ingredient to internalize the belief in one's self, and to rebuild one's self perspective, so that he won't find himself in the position of sin.

Look at yourself as part of G-d's Image. You are irreversibly good; just take yourself seriously. You were given the Torah, G-d's treasure. You are a Ben Torah. You learn, or learnt, in Yeshiva. And G-d loves you with a special, fatherly love. Even if no one else believes in you, He does. א-ל אמונה. (Devarim 32 4) For if G-d did not believe in you, he would not keep you around.(See Yalkut Shimoni 942)

EGGY RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are like eggs. You have to know how to handle them. Held too loosely, the egg can fall and break. Held too tightly, it can be crushed, and then you are left with the white and yellow gook all over your fingers. It is a delicate balance. Relationships are the same. If you hold your relationship loosely, without expending time, thought, effort and money into it, the relationship will drop and break. If you hold your relationship too tightly, over-involved and over dependent on the other person, then the relationship gets messy.

At times we say the nastiest things to the people with whom we are the closest. The worst curses are showered upon those in whom we have invested our trust, emotions and money, and they turned on us or ignored us .You remember the saying "Don't put all your eggs in one basket". Don't invest all your emotions in one person, you might be holding on too tight, having a strangle hold in a relationship, not allowing the other person to breathe.

"The sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, each took his fire pan. They put fire in them and placed incense upon it, and they brought before God an alien fire that He had not commanded them. A fire came forth from before God and consumed them, and they died before God." (Vayikra 10:1-2) Moshe consoled his brother Aharon. "G-d said that He will be sanctified by those who are close to Him. I thought He was referring to either you or me. Now, I see that He was referring to your two sons, Nadav and Avihu."

The Sages present us with various explanations as to what transgression Nadav and Avihu committed, for which they incurred the punishment of being consumed by the heavenly fire. They entered the Tabernacle either drunk, or without properly cutting their hair, or without the proper priestly garments. They did not defer the honor of bringing this fire to their father, Aharon. They did not consult with Moshe, or with one another, prior to bringing the fire. They did not marry. "With

such a great father and uncle, which woman could be worthy to marry me?” And , they remarked, “When will these two old men die, so that we can lead the generation?” At Mt. Sinai, they got too close and they looked at G-d, while they were eating and drinking. ואל אצילי בני ישראל לא שלה ידו ויחזו את האלוקים ויאכלו וישתו (Shemot 24)

This is all they ever did wrong. All the things they did wrong have one common denominator. בקרובי אקדש. *I will be sanctified by My holy ones.* They were too holy. No direction. No Rabbi. Just so close to G-d that they felt comfortable. Too holy to get married. Too holy to ask Moshe, to have a Rabbi. So close to G-d that they can eat and drink while standing at Mt. Sinai gazing at G-d, or just come in to the Tabernacle whenever they want, with whatever they want. G-d said, “Nope, too close. I am Holy, not Heimishe.” (Heimishe : home-like, friendly)

We are so distant from their spiritual level, that these concepts are difficult to grasp. Still, our Rabbis wanted us to take lesson from their lives to ours. I believe the lesson is that even the relationships with G-d are egg like. Some people sin just because they feel that they are very far from G-d. They do not pray, make blessings, because G-d is not in their life. And some people get too close, too comfortable with G-d. They get into a habit of chatting in His House of Worship, and at times they utter blessings without giving any thoughts to the words that part their lips. In this week’s Parasha, Aharon is instructed about entering the Holy of Holies. “You can enter this place

only once a year”. Holiness is that. Boundaries. Till here. Once a year. One Kohen. One place. G-d warned Aharon, that if he enters the Holy of Holies in any other fashion, he will die.

Proper balance, boundaries, is the only way for any relationship to have a chance of surviving. Healthy relationships are not built on breaking boundaries, agreeing on everything, being dependent on approval. They are built on respect for opinions, respect that you are you, and I am me. One of the greatest things a person can do to improve a relationship is to learn how to say no, with an emphasis on how. I got a phone call on Purim, from a person who complained that his friend was ruining his Purim. “He’s hanging on me – I can’t get rid of him. He won’t let me go anywhere “. No one can ruin your Purim except for you. Learn how to tell him no.

Eggs can be strong when they are held up straight, not when they are rolling all over the place. Try cracking an upright egg when your thumb is on the wide bottom of the egg and the index finger is at the point. No, not in my house. In your house, over the sink. It is even difficult to crack the egg like that, when it is upright. You can even put four eggs upright under the legs of your chair and sit on it, (not in my house) and the eggs won’t crack. (see Rashi Beitzah 3b כרעי המטה) When a relationship is upright, it won’t crack. When people respect each other, give each other room, then the relationships stands much, much, longer.

THE ART OF BECOMING THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

Parashat Acharei Mot, opens with the discussion of how Nadab and Avihu died while

inappropriately entering the Mishkan, and how Aharon and all future Kohanim Gedolim are to



serve on Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies and remain alive. Acharei Mot is also the Torah portion read on Yom Kippur. The Be'er Heitev, mentions the Zohar and Arizal, that someone who cries with tears because of the loss and death of Aharon's sons on Yom Kippur, is promised that G-D WILL FORGIVE ALL OF THEIR SINS, AND THEIR SONS WILL NOT DIE IN THEIR LIFETIME. (O"H 621a)

R Chaim Shmulevitz asks, how are we expected to cry for the loss of Aharon's sons, no matter how great they were. Even for very close relatives, people eventually stop crying, ten years, 20 years, 50 years later. גזירה על המת (שישתכח מן הלב) See Moed K. 19a) So how are we supposed to feel bad for the loss of Nadab and Avihu? Also, one can ask, how are we supposed to feel bad over the loss of the 24,000 students of R' Akiva during the days of Sefirat HaOmer?

R. C. Shmulevitz brings the part of Talmud that brings shivers down my spine. When R' Eliezer ben Hurkenus got sick, R' Akiva and his friends came to visit him. (R' Eliezer B. H. was originally R' Akiva's teacher and one of the greatest Rabbis ever. He was initially a student of R' Yochanan Ben Zakai, a student of Hillel, but later became a Shamai school student. He argued with all the other Rabbis and proved them his halachic position by bringing G-d on his side by showing how nature will reverse as proof of his opinion. Still, R' Yehoshua and the other Rabbis outnumbered R. Eliezer. Under the guidance of R' Gamliel, head of the Rabbis of the day, R' Akiva was sent to inform R' Eliezer, in the gentlest way possible, that from that moment on, R' Eliezer is to be excommunicated. See B. Metziah 59a-b). Now, as R' Eliezer's life was ending, he told the rabbis who came to visit him about the torturous deaths they would endure. R' Akiva asked, "What type of death is

waiting for me?" R' Eliezer said in his Ruach Hakodesh, "Yours will be the worst death of all." Rashi explains, "Because since your heart is the most open heart to learn Torah, and you could have learned so much more Torah from me." And alas, R' Akiva, at the age of 119, had one of the most brutal deaths of mankind, his flesh pulled off his body with metal rakes and weighed in the marketplace. (Sanhedrin 68a)

How could R' Akiva be punished for not learning more Torah!?! Wasn't R Akiva the greatest rabbi we ever had? Didn't Moshe Rabbenu ask G-d that R' Akiva is more appropriate to receive the Torah than himself? (See Menachot 29b) Nonetheless, R' Akiva is punished for not learning the Torah he could have learned from R' Eliezer B. H. R' Akiva was the conduit to pass the Oral Torah on to future generations. He was held accountable for not learning the Torah of R' Eliezer, being the level he was on.

Even if you are a shepherd and the best shepherd you could be, maybe you can be a R' Akiva? And even if you are a R' Akiva, maybe there is more you could be? Even Shmuel the prophet, who was equal to Moshe and Aharon put together, (מִשֵּׁה וְאַהֲרֹן בְּכִהְנֵוֹ וְשְׂמוּאֵל בְּקִרְאָיו,) but Shmuel started off as an average, B, student, "not smart and not dumb." (See Berachot 31b) To show that no matter how average and below you might be, you are held accountable to learn your best, to be your best, because you never know how great you can become.

This is how a person can cry and feel bad for the loss of the sons of Aharon, and for the loss of the 24,000 students. Nadab and Avihu, were in some ways, closer to G-d than Moshe and Aharon. (See Rashi Vayikra 10:3) Imagine if we would not have lost Nadab and Avihu, how much they could have impacted us until today,

just like we are still affected by Moshe Rabbeinu till today! Crying over the loss of these great men is, in essence, crying over how great WE could have been. And if we regret and cry over not becoming the greatest we could be on Yom Kippur, G-d will forgive all of our sins, and our sons will learn the value of life!

All of the Oral Torah we have today is what we have from the remaining five students of R' Akiva, R. Meir, R. Shimon Bar Yochai, R' Yehuda Bar Ilay, and others. Imagine how much greater we could have been if the other 24,000 would have remained! We are not feeling bad about the people we lost. We are to feel bad for the people WE could have become.

Judaism teaches that there are two types of regret. דין וחשבון. Judgment and accounting. There is a regret over things that we've done wrong. דין. And there is regret for who we could have been. חשבון. Our Rabbis teach that the greatest rebuke at the end of days is that G-d shows each person how great they could have become. יוסף קטנן של שבטים היה ולא היו יכולים לעמוד בתוכחתו, הה"ד ולא יכלו אחיו לענות אותו כי נבהלו מפניו, לכשיבא הקדוש ברוך הוא ויוכיח כל אחד ואחד לפי מה שהוא, שנאמר (תהלים ג) אוכיחך ואערכה (Breshit R. Vayigash) When the brothers saw how great Yosef, who was the smallest of them, became, the Tribes could not answer that rebuke of how they did not reach how great *they* could have become.

Selfie Steps to becoming the best version of yourself:

1. Get yourself the best education, read and learn the best sefarim and books, and surround yourself with the best Rabbis and mentors. Ignorance is bliss, only regarding materialistic pleasures. If you don't know, you are not missing out. But when it comes to spirituality, personal development, and anything else important, ignorance is **not** bliss. As Chafetz Chaim teaches in the introduction to Mishna Berura 3, if you do not constantly learn the laws of Shabbat, you are most probably desecrating the Shabbat. If you do not constantly learn the laws of Lashon Hara, you are most probably speaking Lashon Hara. Coronavirus has taught us the hard way that ignorance creates diseases and pandemics. Ignorance destroys cities. Ignorance of nutritional facts of what you eat and what a healthy lifestyle is dependent on will shorten your life. Ignorance makes it impossible for you to retire or for you to help set up your children to succeed in life. Ignorance is NOT bliss. What you don't know will not only hurt you. It will tragically affect your life. What you don't know will leave your life empty. We are affected by whatever we know and more affected by what we don't know.
2. Leaders in personal development teach that we are affected by our dreams and pulled by our vision of the future. The best version of you, the you that lives a life that is full of inspiration and motivation, is the you that lives by design and not by default. The greatest you "happens" when you live according to your greatest imagination, most significant goals and values and thrive, and not just manage to survive. Imagination is the human resource that helps us build, invent, develop, cure, and anything else you can imagine. This is one explanation of what it means that man is created in G-d's Image. G-d does not have an image, for He is limitless and endless. But He imagines and creates, סוף דבר במחשבה תחילה, and in that way, we are similar to Him. Most successful people usually have a "long-term perspective." They think 5 – 10 years in advance, and they are not skimpy on their dreams; they live with their most significant purpose and are therefore ready to adapt to any change thrown at them, as they are magnetized to their goals. As King David tells us in Tehillim, וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שְׁתוּל עַל-פְּלִי מַיִם אֲשֶׁר פְּרִיּוֹ וְיָמֵן בְּעֵמֹתָו וְעָלָהּוּ לֹא-יִבֹּל וְכָל

אֲשֶׁר-יִצְעָקָה יִצְלִיחַ: They are likened to an oak tree, with a firm foundation, they know where they are going, they know how to get there, and no storm or winter can take them down.

3. Unfortunately, most people believe that becoming the greatest you can be, depends on hard work alone. *This is far from the truth.* It is true that whatever we practice most in life, we will be the best in that thing. But if you don't love what you are doing, you will become the best at what you hate. Most people live their lives with the rush, rush, rush, busy being busy, not being ruthlessly honest enough to ask themselves, "Busy doing what? Rushing for what purpose?" Most people get stuck in the wheel of life: Seek work to eat, seek to eat to have energy, and seek energy to work more, and around we go again.
4. To become the best you can be, you need enough courage and optimism to live with the uncertainty that you will reach your "high steaks" goals. You need to be able to overcome the fears of "What if I can't make it and fail? What if I waste my time?" Studies say that we should have dreams that we think we have only a 60% chance of success, not 100%. The fear that if I fail, everything I ever worked for will be for nothing is precisely the thing that you need to keep you motivated!

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For the success of Yaakov Mordechai ben Rachel Malka and Rachel Malka bas Liba

