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VOLUME 2

Leviticus • Numbers • Deuteronomy

Deepening Mindfulness,

Practicing Compassion and

Enriching Our Lives through the Wisdom of

R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev's *Kedushat Levi*

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from around the Maggid's Table*

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Nitzavim

“You stand this day, all of you, before YHVH your God [—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel]”
(Deut. 29:9).

In this lesson we will come to understand the passage in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 34b):

Our Rabbis taught: “On most fast days the omission of one blast (of the shofar) is no bar to another, and the omission of one blessing is no bar to another, but on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur the omission of one blast or one blessing is a bar to the others.” What is the reason? Rabbah said, “God proclaimed: ‘Recite before Me on New Year kingship, remembrance, and shofar verses; kingship verses to declare Me king over you; remembrance verses, that the remembrance of you may come before Me for good; and through what? Through the shofar.’”

This is the principle: the way of the blessed Creator is to do good, particularly to Israel. This is God’s desire: to pour out goodness and blessings on His people Israel. But if (heaven forbid) we are not worthy that God pour out goodness on us, this is not according to the desire of the blessed Creator. Rather, God’s will and delight is to bless us with goodness when we are worthy of this goodness and blessing (and heaven forbid if the opposite is true, for that is not God’s will).

Now, understand this principle: that which the divine will desires is called “face” (*panim*); that which the divine will does not desire is called “back” (*achor*). We can see this in the Talmud passage above: “Recite *before* Me kingship”—when you declare Me king over you, may it be in a relationship of “facing” (*panim*); “recite *before* Me remembrance verses”—the remembrance should come in a relationship of “facing” (*panim*) and not turned away (“back/*achor*”). Do this so that your remembrances will rise “before Me [*lephanai*] for good.” When I pour out goodness for you, My desire in doing so is so that you will “face”

Me, because that is how your remembrances rise up before Me—facing Me (*panim*)—for the good, since it is My will to pour out goodness.

This is the sense of our verse: “**You stand this day, all of you, before YHVH**” —today you appear before *YHVH* with the quality of “facing” (*panim*). This is the significance of what follows: “**your God**”—the aspect of God that pours out blessings to Israel is called “your God” (*eloheikhem*). So, because you are standing today before *YHVH* with the quality of “facing” (*panim*), goodness will be poured out for you, which is signified by the word “your God” (*eloheikhem*). Understand this: the word “face” (*panim*) is related to the word “turning” (*poneh*), which signifies God’s goodness. That is, God wishes to turn to His people Israel for the good; but, God does not desire the bad (which is called “back/*achor*”), for God does not turn (*poneh*) toward that.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

We might read the Rabbinic dictum from tractate Rosh Hashanah as a magical teaching. That is, everything must be done “just so” for the desired effect to come about. Reciting the verses of *Malkhuyot*, *Zikhronot*, and *Shofarot* on Rosh Hashanah are the means by which we induce God to favor us in the New Year. It is as if by reciting the prescribed verses we remind God of God’s intention to remain in relationship with us.

Levi Yitzhak transforms this completely. God doesn’t want the verses per se. Rather, the verses are the means by which we demonstrate our continuing, devoted relationship with God. We are not asking for anything. Instead, we turn to God, declaring our commitment by acknowledging God as sovereign; we affirm our awareness of God’s continuing interest and involvement in our lives. While what we say is important, more significant is how we recite these words: they must come without self-interest. We have to turn toward God for God’s sake, reaching out to touch the inner core of the divine will, to acknowledge our deep need one for the other, and to present ourselves wholeheartedly to God. God does not turn “His back” from us (as it were) but cannot effectuate the flow of goodness to us if we turn our back to God. Should we approach God solely petitioning for our own good, solely interested in what God can do for us, it will be as if we turn our back to God’s true self, closing ourselves off from our own deepest desires. Approaching God “face-

to-face," where our will is to do God's will, God's deepest desire and will respond in kind.

The conclusion of this lesson is built on the Zohar's identification of the combined name *YHVH elohim* as true completion. The two parts of that name are identified respectively as *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah*. It may be the former toward whom we turn in our prayers, but it is through the latter that all goodness flows from above into our realm. Thus, when we stand before—that is, facing—*YHVH (Tiferet)*, we energize the divine will, and goodness pours out to us through *elohim (eloheikhem)*—that is, through *Shekhinah*.



Taking It into Your Life

Levi Yitzhak surely would not discourage anyone from praying to God for help, support, sustenance, or health. Indeed, those are key motivations for prayer, and God is dependable to respond. Yet, we could learn from this lesson that turning to God with our personal needs in mind might actually be like turning our backs on God. The classical term for self-interest in Hasidic literature is *peniyah*—also a form of turning. It is expressed as the slight shift of the eyes away from direct contact, dissembling, shaving the truth, or seeking honor or personal advantage. It might also be experienced as turning away from God (or others) in looking after only our own needs.

Let us attend to the latter. That is, the divine will desires to flow forth with goodness and blessing. Yet, its free flow is dependent on direct access to its beneficiaries. We have to turn fully to God to effectuate that clear channel. In a sense, our turning to God—declaring God sovereign, acknowledging

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God's capacity and desire to remember us for good—is acting for God's sake. Still, we bring these declarations and remembrances before God so that God will indeed bless us in the coming year. So we need to be able to present our needs before God with the knowledge that our needs are not exclusive of all others; that God's need for us, indeed all of creation's need for us and our attention, exist along with our personal, selfish needs.

Our practice, then, is to pay attention to our own needs and concerns and then use that awareness to turn to others in need. When we honestly and clearly express our own needs, we can let go of our worry that our needs won't be known or that they won't be met. Freed of this inner fear—this *peniyah*—we can turn toward others, more fully recognizing their needs as well. And, perhaps, facing them fully in this way—secure that our needs are known and will be addressed—we can attempt to fulfill their needs. This is the movement of mindfulness practice: noting our own suffering, bringing compassion to our own pained hearts, in order to become free to notice the suffering of others and respond with compassion to them. This is the nexus of *teshuvah* (self-awareness), *tephillah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (acts of righteousness and charity) by which the negative valence of our circumstances is eased. Doing *tzedakah* at this time of year is not prophylactic (at least it should not be). Rather, it is an expression of our awareness of our own low estate, out of which we then turn to others to offer them succor. And that goes for God as well.

Practice. Reflect.

