

Week Four of the Omer: Netzach: With Endurance Comes Eternity

Rabbi Margaret Fisch Klein

Each of these words, these traits we are looking at between Passover and Shavuot can be translated in many ways. This week's word, Netzach, we know from prayers that include the phrase, "netzach netzachim" and is usually translated as eternity. Similar to L'olam va'ed. And we should not be surprised that there is more than one way to say something in Hebrew or that there is more than one meaning for a word. It is true in most languages. Think, for a minutes, about how many ways we can say green for example and all the shades of green. Emerald, Forest, Jade, Kelly, Lime, Olive, Teal, Turquoise to name just a few. The word itself in English, from the German is related to grass and grow. Language is nuanced. Hebrew is no exception.

Netzach means endurance, eternity, victory. Victory and vanquished have the same root in Hebrew. They are two sides of the same coin.

Simon Jacobson says, "During the fourth week of counting the Omer, we examine and refine the emotional attribute of endurance known as Netzach. Netzach means endurance, fortitude and ambition and is a combination of determination and tenacity. It is a balance of patience, persistence and guts. Endurance is also being reliable and accountable, which establishes security and commitment. Without endurance, any good endeavor or intention has no chance of success. Endurance means to be alive, to be driven by what counts. It is the readiness to fight for what you believe, to go all the way. This, of course, requires that endurance be closely examined to ensure that it is used in a healthy and productive manner."

As a long-distance runner, I think a lot about endurance. In fact, I am reading a book called Mental Strategies for Runners by one of my mentors and coaches, Jeff Galloway. The hope is that it will increase my endurance and make me mentally tougher.

Contemplating eternity is something that this week's mussar begs us to do.

Hod - Rabbi Lisa Goldstein - Executive Director IJS

Hod is the *sefirah* of opening, of taking in, of receiving. It is fully inhabiting the morning blessing which praises God for opening the eyes of the blind. *Hod* is raising the eyelids and letting the world pour in, just as it is, in all of its colors and shapes and shadows.

Sometimes the eye sees something that is ugly or distressing. It is easy, as Americans and Jews, to leap straight to action, to the desire to fix and set straight. We are more acculturated to find ourselves in *Hod's* brother *sefirah*, *Netzach*, who urges us on to do and correct and get involved. But sister *Hod* is also divine. She waits, knowing that wisdom and creativity can bubble up from the quiet opening to the fullness that is also in and surrounding the ugly or distressing thing. *Netzach* and *Hod's* third

sibling, *Yesod*, the grounding balance between action and receptivity, draws upon that wisdom and creativity to act in righteousness.

Hod is the *sefirah* of gratitude. It seeks out what Rabbi Nachman of Breslov called “the good points” that are in everything, even in the wicked person, even in ourselves. Good points are often so easy for our critical minds to overlook. *Hod* reminds us that when we turn a good eye towards them, we reveal the inherent majesty that otherwise might have stayed hidden..invites us to open to *Hod* this week. What echoes might we receive on our journey towards Sinai?

Netzach and Hod (Rabbi Lisa Goldstein)

The Omer Last week we celebrated a special anniversary: it has been one year since my husband and I became foster parents to a wonderful 18-year-old refugee from West Africa. It has been a year of great blessing and joy and also of tremendous learning, as you can imagine, given that this is our first time parenting and we jumped right into teenagerhood – not to mention all kinds of cultural differences.

And yet, a year in, I realize that so much of the learning is simply refining the work we are engaged in all the time anyway. For example, one way to frame it is to take the spectrum between Netzach (victory, engagement) and Hod (receptivity, gratitude). These two categories are sephirot, part of the mystical map of how Divinity moves from the infinite to the tangible in our lives. That may sound very esoteric, but the applications are actually practical and can be very helpful.

What are these two ways of being? Netzach is the quality that urges us to get involved, to fix things, to form and act and create. It is about drive and success and doing. Hod, on the other hand, which literally means “glory,” is the quality of giving space, letting it be, feeling thankful for the ways things are, not needing to change a thing. Interestingly, both of these are understood to be divine qualities that can manifest in us and both of them are worthy of cultivation as part of our spiritual repertoire. The question is when do we bring what to bear.

So: when do we push (encourage) our foster son to do certain things and when do we stand back? When do we ask questions and when do we just give him his space? When do we lead with feeling energized and active and when do we lead with simply feeling grateful for the miracle of our family coming together?

These are the questions in every relationship – with children, parents, partners, friends, co-workers and neighbors. These are the questions we can ask looking out at our country and our world. And these are the questions we can ask of our own sweet lives. How much action? How much acceptance? How do we find the wise balance? How do we respond to what is needed at this moment again and again?

Sometimes just having the framework of these two qualities can help us notice our habitual responses and make better decisions. We hope that this investigation of netzach and hod will support you in your practice.

Netzach, Hod, Yesod - Jay Michaelson (learnkabbalah.com)

These are the next triad of sefirot: netzach, hod, and yesod. Many sources say these are the hardest sefirot to understand, and I assure you that the explanation I give here, though grounded in Cordovero and in Hasidic thought, is not the only one. You'll easily find others which contradict it. Remember, there is no central authority patrolling the dogma of Kabbalah. It's a bit like Tibetan Buddhism, with multiple lineages, and respect among them, so long as the conduct and intention of teachers is known to be upright.

Netzach means "eternity;" it is the aspect of revelation which stretches horizontally for all time, and the attribute of endurance within the Divine — in the sense both of "God's mercy endures forever" and the more common usage of endurance through difficult times. Hod, its complement, means "splendor." It is the aspect of revelation which exists vertically, as a peak experience, or contact with that which is transcendence. It is the source of what Heschel called the experience of radical amazement: the shattering encounter with the numinous that engenders the birth of wonder.

On the more mundane planes, we can (borrowing from Thomas Edison) understand hod as inspiration, and netzach as perspiration. Hod are those moments of insight at which we sing and shout "awwww!" Netzach are the rest of the times. Hod are, in relationship, those perfect evenings on tropical islands, where the sun sets over the water and the night is filled with love. Netzach are the times you pick your lover up at the airport. To paraphrase Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, hod is like a Ferrari; netzach like a Jeep. To paraphrase Jack Kornfield, hod is the ecstasy; netzach is the laundry.

In our culture, there is often a tendency to flee from netzach and embrace only the hod. Ours is an escapist popular culture, grounded in an economic system which endures precisely by providing lots of moments of mini-hod to distract us from our netzach reality. Consequently, since netzach becomes seen as the boring day-to-day and hod (even in bastardized, miniaturized forms like aggressive pastimes or cheap thrills) is the fun part, netzach becomes that which is merely to be endured. Mysticism is about ecstasy, not laundry; love is about passion, not reliability. Even as most Americans live safe lives in the suburbs (netzach), their advertising-based cultural discourse tells them their car is born to be wild (hod).

As you know by now, if you have been reading this site linearly, this is not at all the Kabbalistic approach. We never want to value one sefirah over the other; we want to value the balance and dynamism between them. Sometimes netzach, sometimes hod; both are necessary to unite in yesod, which is the foundation of generativity and productivity. When you are working with netzach, know that you're working with netzach; be mindful of whether you might be out of balance, but do not denigrate one sefirah in favor of another. Likewise, when you are experiencing an expansive moment

of hod, know that you're experiencing hod; don't imagine it will last forever, but don't blow it off as merely a "high" either. Hod moments give us the juice to keep going on; netzach is the going on itself.

Again to draw a parallel from relationships, a partnership that lacks hod is a partnership without spice, without a spark. It will ultimately (one might even say hopefully) be unsatisfying. Likewise, a partnership without netzach is a partnership without stability. Great sex, sure; but where is s/he in the morning?

In the Kabbalistic schema, netzach and hod balance into yesod. If tiferet is the heart center, bringing together the various emotional energies to the core of inner balance, yesod is the sexual organ, bringing together the various productive energies to the place of generativity. Recall that all sefirot have anatomical correspondences: hesed, gevurah and tiferet are right arm, left arm and heart-center; netzach, hod, and yesod are right leg, left leg, and sex organ.

In some charts of the sefirot, yesod is simply the phallus, and in many Kabbalistic texts, it does function in this way. But the situation is actually more complicated. Sexually, yesod is the conduit between male and female energy, and as such includes both male and female genitalia. Think of it in terms of generation and procreation. Yesod is where the energies come together — the Kabbalists did not have an idea of "genetic material" as we do, though it maps on quite well — and are united into manifestation, which is malchut — the last sefirah which we'll get to next. For a man, this can be understood as bringing together all the energies and projecting them out into the world. For a woman, it might be understood as bringing together all the energies so that their manifestation can be birthed.

Hopefully, it is clear that this sexual imagery is both metaphorical and actual. We use generative language in our common speech all the time: "the idea is gestating," for example. And certainly, that applies to yesod as well. Yet microcosm reflects macrocosm; our experience of union reflects the structure of the universe.

Incidentally, this is true regardless of how we experience sexuality. Though the Kabbalistic system is obviously heteronormative, it also includes a variety of gender permutations: between two female sefirot, between a male figure who is gendered female and a Divine energy that is gendered male, and so on. In other places, I have gone into these aspects of the Kabbalah in greater detail. Still, for some, it may not be useful to see that which is produced as "female" and that which produces as "male," or, reflecting back on hesed and gevurah, to see that which expands as "male" and that which receives as "female." Some may see this sort of language as reinforcing hierarchies and stereotypes, and it would be unwise to try to shade or apologize for this aspect of the Kabbalah by pretending it is other than what it is. But it would be a shame to lose the experiential aspect of theosophical Kabbalah: the eroticization of experience itself, the deep knowing of all reality to be the Divine lovemaking.

Inspiration, determination, and action: the two condition the third, sustain it, and allow what was once merely a thought to manifest into actualization.