

YOU-SHPIZIN: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO PERSONAL GROWTH

AVRAHAM

YITZCHAK

YAAKOV

YOSEF

MOSHE

AHARON

DAVID

SHLOMO

Dear Friends,

With great excitement, we are pleased to present YouShpizin, a practical guide to personal growth. Sukkot is a Yom Tov which has become synonymous with *hachnasas orchim*, inviting guests into our “home.” Welcoming people into our Sukkah- whether they are eating or “hopping”- is an important part of the Yom Tov experience. This year, it is difficult to do this safely or easily- but that does not mean we have to do without. We have the ability to host guests in our Sukkah who are Covid-friendly; you don’t need to physically distance from them or wear a mask around them; they do not take up any real estate at all. We refer, of course, to the Ushpizin, the seven spiritual guests the Zohar describes, who grace our Sukkah on each night of the festival.

There are different traditions as to the order in which these appear in our Sukkah. One tradition suggests that they appear in biblical chronological order- Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef, Moshe, Aharon and David. Another tradition links these guests to the kabbalistic *sefira*, or ascending mystical attribute, to which they correspond; the order, according to this tradition, is Avraham (Chesed), Yitzchak (Gevura), Yaakov (Tiferet/Emet), Moshe (Netzach), Aharon (Hod), Yosef (Yesod) and David (Malchut). For ease of memory, we are/am presenting them according to the first, chronological tradition. And while we will relate occasionally to the kabbalistic *sefira*, we believe that the personality and narrative arc of the life of each character can serve as a more relatable and instructive tool for personal growth.

Often we are so focused on our live guests that we neglect these Ushpizin, making mention of them as an afterthought, or mumbling about them before the meal begins. This year, let us focus on each of our special *orchim* and how they can enhance our lives. In lieu of classic sermons, we are pleased to share with you, in lieu of classic sermons, a lesson for each day of Yom Tov. Each night, take the opportunity to share the thoughts here in your Sukkah, as a means of spurring reflection, conversation and elevation. May we all gather next year together in our Sukkot as we all make *aliyah leregel* in the rebuilt Jerusalem!

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First Night- Avraham

The first guest to appear in our Sukkah is Avraham. Avraham is described as the *Ivri* (Bereishit 14:13), whose defining feature, as described in the book of Joshua (24:3) was that he dwelled *be'ever hanahar*- literally, the other side of the river. Our Sages interpret this to mean that Avraham was unique- he lived on one side of the divide and the rest of the world on the other. In a world in which idolatry ran rampant, Avraham was unafraid to assert his monotheism even if it cost him friends, business contacts and even life itself. In the end, his bravery as an iconoclast paid off and he earned a new name Avraham, and thus a new moniker, the *av hamon goyim*, a progenitor of new nations. The courage to defy the masses surely comes at a price, which can include social isolation, ridicule and loneliness. When done with purpose, however, it yields its own blessings. If you have ever struggled to find your place within a clique, fraternity, yeshiva, seminary, community or political party, perhaps you can gain encouragement to learn that the blood of Avraham runs deeply within us. What was the secret to Avraham's remarkable fortitude? It was his unshakable belief that he was not alone.

On this first day of Sukkos let us contemplate how we can muster the courage to dwell *m'ever lanahar*. We possess the capacity to resist negative peer pressure. Don't be afraid to shut down a conversation as it veers toward lashon hara, negativity or cynicism. Don't be afraid to embark on a spiritual journey that requires greater commitment, observance, or study even if your neighbors don't have a growth mindset. Have the courage to be the first person to donate to a cause or befriend someone who does not confer social status.

Second Night- Yitzchak

Yitzchak is the prime example of a *ben zekunim*. His mother Sarah was 90, and she was the younger of his two parents. One can imagine that such a dramatic age gap would come with its own challenges. He was likely burdened with expectations, considering how desperately wanted he was, and how long he took to arrive, not to mention the prominent role his father played. In what was the defining event of his life, he was a survivor of the Akeidah, in which death, in the form of his father's outstretched, knife-wielding arm, stared him in the face. One can't help but wonder whether it would have been simpler to not have to descend the mountain afterward. Yitzchak is associated with the attribute of ***Gevurah***, a word generally translated as "strength," but perhaps is more accurately rendered as triumph or resilience.

Rishonim and later commentators have often pointed out the shocking absence of narrative material involving Yitzchak after the Akeidah. Indeed, the Netziv of Volozhin suggests that Yitzchak had a profound inability to communicate openly with the people around who loved him and whom he loved. Yet, despite all of that, he builds a family and functions as a vital link in the chain of tradition that is the triumvirate of our forefathers.

Often we consider survivors of trauma and adversity as being scarred and emotionally stunted; trauma can and does leave lasting effects emotional and psychological on its sufferers. Nonetheless, we ought to admire them as we examine what they have achieved in spite of and sometimes because of their trauma. Consider the Holocaust survivors who rebuilt Judaism from scratch, as they founded and funded day schools, shuls, yeshivas, and thousands of institutions of kindness and charity. At one point a well known Israeli politician described a group of first generation immigrants into Israel as "human dust," yet those immigrants created the start-up nation. Survivors have guilt, they can be rough around the edges, they are complex- but they have transmuted their trauma into triumph.

On the second day of Sukkos, let us consider the ways in which we have endured hardship. Where does our strength come from in those moments? What is it that we tap into to continue and how can we make that survival meaningful? The next time you feel broken, consider not just what happened but you yesterday, but how you can use to create a better version of yourself tomorrow.

Third Night- Yaakov

Emet/Tiferet

There is a famous story told about Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky zt"l. When he was a student in the Slobodka yeshiva, he was invited for a Pesach Seder to a family whose kashrut he trusted year round, but not on Pesach. In order to avoid the invitation but save face for the family, he told the host that he could not eat there, as his practice was not to eat *gebroktz* (matzah that has gotten wet in any way) on Pesach. As a staunch *Litvak*, it was not his custom to refrain from eating *gebroktz*, but he did for the rest of his life, so that he would not have been retroactively lying. Rav Yaakov was known for his scrupulous honesty and integrity, or *Emet*- an attribute associated with his biblical namesake, our forefather Yaakov, the guest who visits us on the third night of Sukkot.

Let us recall that when Yaakov was informed by his sons that Yosef had been devoured by a wild beast, he refused to be comforted, because he refused to give up on his beloved son. The language used by the Torah (Bereishit 37:35)- וַיִּמְאַן לֵהֲנַחֵם, *vyema' ein lehinachem*, is hinted at in two future events; Yosef who finds himself tempted by the wife of Potiphar, refuses her advances (*vayama' ein*, Bereishit 39:8) and Rachel, who is depicted as praying for her children (Yirmiyahu 31:14), the Children of Israel (*mei'ana le'hinachem*). It was Yaakov's steadfast commitment to integrity that not only allows him to maintain faith during those dark years but also inspires Yosef to stay true to his values and Rachel to "remain" by her descendents' side.

What does it mean to be a person of Emet? It means keeping promises once they are made, even (or especially) if it is inconvenient to do so. Recently, a post went viral describing the Shopping Cart Theory. The premise of this theory is that the decision to return a cart after concluding a shopping trip is a litmus test of character and integrity. There is no downside to refraining from doing this, even though everyone knows it is the right thing to do. Being a person of integrity means acting with honesty even when there is no penalty for doing otherwise, and even if no one will know you are not being truthful. It means standing up for what is right, and not giving up when in the pursuit of a worthy cause;

Fourth Night- Yosef

Yosef is the only person in the literature of our sages who is identified as a “tzaddik,” yet a simple reading of the key incidents in his life paints a different picture. A callow and vain youth, he incurred the wrath of his brothers due to his tattling and vainglorious dream sharing, and then toyed with their emotions later when, as viceroy, as he concealed his identity and subjected them to a series of humiliations. Why is he called a “righteous” person?

The answer can be found in a formative episode (Bereishit 39:7-20) in his life, the one that landed him in an Egyptian jail. Yosef found himself the subject of the repeated advances of Potiphar’s wife, which he resisted. Yet one day (ibid 11), he returned home לעשות מלאכתו , literally “to do his business,” and Potiphar’s wife attempted to force him into a sexual encounter. Instead of succumbing, he left his clothes in her hands, whereupon she used them to frame him for sexual assault. Our sages debate whether the term “doing his business” refers to carrying out domestic tasks, or is a euphemism for his intent to yield to her advances. Following this second interpretive pathway, our sages want to know what stopped him, and suggest that at that moment, the face of his father Yaakov appeared to him. It was then that he realized what kind of tragic rejection of his father’s values he was about to demonstrate.

Yosef is called a righteous person because he did not yield to temptation in the end. It is never too late to walk back from the abyss, and never too late *not* to make a mistake. It isn’t Yosef’s integrity, his winning personality or his unflinching commitment that make him great. In fact, like many of us Yosef flirts with sin; it is, rather, his ability to back down from acting in ways he would come to regret that makes him great. Yosef models for us how to deal with the many forms of temptation that surround us, and the decision points that face us before we yield to them. Whether it is a delicious item of questionable kosher standards (or unquestionable lack of them) or health benefits, a form of entertainment or a relationship that is less than wholesome, or an argument we have a burning desire to start, or perpetuate, yet we know will go nowhere good- backing up from the abyss before it is too late is the legacy of Yosef for us. As we channel the traits of Yosef in our lives, let us work on strategies to avoid temptations and triggers of our baser instincts, ways to bolster our willpower so that we may exhibit self control, delay gratification, and dial down the temperature in a heated moment.

Fifth Night- Moshe

What is that separates Moshe from all other Jewish leaders, earning him the title of “Rabeinu” - *our master*? Sure, he was chosen by God, but so was every prophet!

In a collection of sermons of Rabbeinu Nissim ben Reuven of Girona (1320-1376) known as *Derashot HaRan*, he makes the case for Moshe as the anti-leader. Moshe was inarticulate, possessing either a speech impediment or lack of familiarity with the Egyptian language that hampered his ability to communicate with kings and commoners alike. It was precisely because of this that God chose him for the task. In a world in which a heavy emphasis is placed on “leadership skills” and “leadership culture,” in which people can be swayed by silver-tongued orators, populist rhetoric, false promises and flashy promotional materials, Moshe stood out because he lacked any of these. He was entirely about authentic devotion to God and a substantive message. At the end of his life, the Torah eulogizes him with two of the simplest yet most profound words: *Ish ha'Elokim*, or man of God- there can be no description more honorable than that.

In 2012, Susan Cain published a book called “Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking.” In it, she contrasts the leadership models of two civil rights icons- Rosa Parks and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. The latter was tall and formidable, blessed with unsurpassed oratorical skills and an impressive stage presence. The former was a meek, unprepossessing woman whose greatest contribution was a silent protest- one that took place after she had ridden that route many times and relocated seats. Yet it was her protest that changed the course of history.

Moshe’s example teaches us that it is often the people who are not stereotypical leaders- introverts, quiet people- who have the most to offer us. choosing whom to follow, and who to learn from, let us privilege substance over style, authenticity over amiability. And let us try and identify the potential “quiet leaders” of tomorrow who, in a Godless world, will go unnoticed. They may be our children, our friends, our seatmates in shul. If we listen to their quiet message, our lives will be all the better for it.

Sixth Night- Aharon

It is perhaps the most famous statement about Aharon- the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (1:12) describes him as someone who loved peace, pursued peace, loved people and brought them close to the Torah. Everyone talks about the first clause in this phrase- *that he loved peace*. But it is the second clause that is operative: he *pursued* it. If you have ever found yourself in the middle of a conflict between former friends, mediating between warring business partners, healing a fractured marriage or in the middle of siblings who aren't speaking, you know that making peace between people takes work- often a lot of it. Aharon even lied to achieve peace between people, one of the few instances in which Chazal say lying is permitted. It is always easier to lament the sad state of affairs yet remain neutral, to scream about *machaloket* (strife) and ask why we can't all just get along. It is certainly easier to take a neutral position when you have two friends who both like you but despise one another. This was the posture of most of the Rabbis in the famed incident involving *Kamtza* and *Bar Kamtza* (Gittin 56b). Aharon's example tells us that this is certainly not enough. If we love peace, we must discomfort ourselves and violate societal and social norms to achieve it, or else our "love" is nothing more than lip service.

This brings us to a fundamental question: what are practical steps we can take to bring peace? Are we brave enough to say "you have to stop being angry and holding a grudge"? Can we remind people who are fighting of the good times they once shared? The objective of a Beis Din, a Jewish court, is to pursue peace through means of *peshara* - compromise. We have often seen parties who prefer to litigate financial disputes within the messy secular court system rather than Beit Din, because they prefer to be right than to compromise, even though promoting compromise is the best possible avenue for reconciliation and peacemaking. To normalize the spirit of compromise in our litigious world, we ought to begin by accepting it for ourselves: Rabbi YY Jacobson is fond of quoting a thought from Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson the first, known as The Tzemach Tzedek, the third Rebbe of the Chabad movement. The Tzemach Tzedek asked a deceptively simple question. "What's the difference between adults and children?" He answered, "Children don't keep grudges; adults keep grudges. If a child tells you, 'I hate you Abba, you're the worst Abba in the world!' that child means it at the time. Ten minutes later, they've calmed down, you've hugged them, maybe they've have some ice cream, and they've forgotten about it completely. If an adult tells you, 'I hate you, you are the worst person in the world!' they mean it. Ten or fifteen years later, you're still not on speaking terms." The Tzemach Tzedek continued, "Children are immature, and adults are mature. So why do adults keep grudges, while children forget right away? Because children choose being happy over being right, while adults choose being right over being happy." Let us commit to choosing, and fostering, happiness now, in this *zman simchateinu*, and beyond.

Seventh Night- Leil Hoshana Rabba- King David

From the beginning, David is an unlikely selection to ascend to the throne. He defied categorization- he was the youngest son of a prominent citizen in a culture that favored the eldest and the tallest. He stood out for his flaming red hair and ruddy complexion, and he spent most of his time in solitude as a shepherd. He was a skilled musician, a gifted poet, a Torah scholar, a brilliant tactician and ruthless warrior and a deeply honest person who readily woned up to his own mistakes and character failings.

Walt Whitman wrote of himself, in his “Sing of Myself,”

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

King David models for us the importance of living with nuance and even contradictions- and of having a multifaceted personality. In our two-party world, where you either agree with me or are my enemy, it is especially important not to box ourselves in, or be boxed in by others. We should not refuse to engage in activities because “I don’t dance at weddings,” “I’m not the learning type” or “leave tzedaka to the millionaires!” We should not fear trying new experiences and changing our mind about older ones. Each one of us is a complex human being that contains multitudes, and possesses the capacity to shift from one mode to another in ways that defy logic and expectations. Like David, we are dynamic, and when we channel his multifaceted attributes, we emulate the attribute of Malchut that is associated with him.

Bonus Guest: King Shlomo - Shemini Atzeret

Chassidic tradition teaches us that on Shemini Atzeret, the additional day to Sukkot, another guest visits us- King Shlomo.

It is Shlomo's wisdom that is his defining feature. The first book of Kings (4:33) tells us that Shlomo was able to converse in the language of animals, trees, birds, reptiles and fish. Rather than a description of Shlomo as a walking National Geographic or a member of MENSA, this description may also indicate his broader facility with all kinds of creatures. Indeed, it is his keen psychological insight, rather than his innate intelligence, that earns him plaudits. We are familiar with the famous story of the two women who came to him fighting over the parentage of a baby, and Shlomo's ingenious and iconic solution of proposing to cut the baby in half to determine the identity of the true parent. Shlomo understood that there are times when compromise is not a viable solution- hence the absurdity of his suggestion. Yet suggesting it was a wonderful tool for deciphering the motives of the claimants. It takes wisdom to understand what makes other people tick, and to speak in a language they can understand.

How can we employ or attain this kind of wisdom? When speaking with children, it is important to know what they need to hear, and when they need to hear it. Mr. Rogers, when speaking with children, employed extreme precision in selecting the words he used. In describing measuring blood pressure, he said "I'm going to puff this up with some air" rather than "blow it up," because the latter expression might imply that an explosion was about to take place, and he didn't want the children to experience even a moment of confusion and unnecessary fear. There may be discussions that are important to have with a spouse, but within the first 15 minutes after they walk in the door is probably not that time. *Chochma* involves being in touch with that which drives us to act and think in a certain way, and a truly wise person can gain insight even into themselves. If we can appreciate why we feel passionately about something or indifferent about another matter