



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Anavah: Cultivating a Balanced Self with Rabbi Marc Margolius

As we enter the third week of the Omer, we enter into the stream of *Tiferet* (“Beauty”), the third aspect of the first triad of Kabbalistic *sephirot*, *Chesed-Gevurah-Tiferet*. *Tiferet* represents the dialectical synthesis of the antithesis represented by *Chesed*’s unbounded, infinite flow, and *Gevurah*’s establishment of essential boundaries and limitations. Situated in the middle of the sefirotic diagram, below and between *Chesed* and *Gevurah*, *Tiferet* represents the “beauty” of the balance and harmony present in all things.

This week of the Omer, we seek to grow in awareness both of the imbalance in ourselves and our world, and of the inclination to restore a proper balance. For purposes of our practice during this Omer season, we will focus on the sacred energy of *Tiferet* as manifest in the *middah* (soul/ethical trait) of *Anavah*, usually translated as “humility” but more accurately connoting “balanced self.”

We practice *anavah* not, as often thought, by denigrating ourselves or obliterating our ego. Rather, we seek proper inner balance, setting wise boundaries between self and other, occupying the time and place allotted to us while respecting others’ time and space. We practice *Anavah* by wisely holding both *Chesed* and *Gevurah*, discerning the boundary between self and other, determining the extent to which we are “right-sized,” understanding ourselves as a finite vessel (*Gevurah*) infused with that which is infinite (*Chesed*).

We know well how human beings can compensate for a deflated sense of worth through egotism, a hyperbolic sense of self-importance. We know how anxiety about our human limitations and temporality can lead us to grandiosity, seeking immortality through achievements and the works of our hands. We know, as well, how shame can swamp and obliterate any valid sense of self or self-worth.

In our mindfulness practice, we always begin by cultivating curious, non-judgmental attention to the truth of our experience. Step one in accessing and practicing *Anavah* involves simply bringing kind attention to the state of our ego. We still ourselves enough to observe the process by which our mind constructs our distinctive “self,” generating thoughts and narratives which justify, exalt, denigrate, and/or protect our identity.

We notice any underlying emotional state which may be impacting our sense of self: fear, guilt, shame, pain, passion, and/or excitement. We bring kind attention to all of

these thoughts, feelings, and associated sensations in our bodies. We notice how and when, over the course of a day, we tend to inflate and deflate our own sense of self. We become aware of the degree to which our inner sense of self is puffed-up or diminished, out of proportion to what we perceive as its “right size”; we notice when and how we overstep physical or emotional boundaries, as well as when we shy away from encounters with others.

With greater awareness, we see more clearly our options for responding wisely in situations to which we habitually react by taking up too much or too little space. When do I tend to shrink or disappear? When do I overstep my place? What thoughts and emotions do these situations generate in me? To what extent do these instincts reveal unfounded assumptions (i.e. “I’ll disappear if I don’t say anything,” “No one is interested in what I have to say,” “I’m better/worse than this person?”)?

Rav Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook taught that our quest for external affirmation usually stems from “a state of deficient spirit,” and that that *Anavah* requires embracing one’s “inner wholeness.”¹ Likewise, Bachya ibn Pakuda, author of the classic medieval ethical treatise *Chovot HaLevavot* (“Duties of the Heart”) considers *Anavah* consistent with healthy pride. We should take pleasure in our actions or wisdom, insofar as we consider them gifts bestowed upon us. Staying connected to awareness of the source of our gifts “causes [us] to be humble with [our] near ones and enjoy [our] friends, to be considerate of their honor, to conceal their folly, and speak their praise.”²

We are guided in applying the *middah* of *Anavah* by a focus phrase popularized by Mussar teacher Alan Morinis: “No more than my place, no less than my space.” In understanding our individual selves as essential, infinitely worthy parts of a larger whole, in seeking out and respecting the sacred boundaries which delineate the parts while supporting the whole, we become vessels through which Godliness can flow into our world.

This week, may we model the change we wish to see in our society by neither reaching beyond ourselves nor shrinking from our sacred role in Creation. May we respond to arrogance within and around us by occupying fully the space and task apportioned to us – no more, no less. May we discern and preserve the boundaries which define us as individuals and as a species, which connect us with others and with the Divine: the strong yet permeable boundaries by which we can recognize and embrace the sacred diversity of nature and humankind.

Kein y’hi ratzon: may it be so for us, and for all beings, in this third week of the Omer.

¹ Rav Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook (1865-1935), *Igrot HaRa’ayah*, Section 4.

² Bachya ibn Pakuda, *Chovot ha-Levavot*, The Gate of Humility: 9 (Vol. II, Feldheim: 1996), p. 591.