



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

The Omer Project: 5781



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Introduction to the Omer with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

The period of the “Counting of the Omer” extends from the eve of the second day of Passover, up to the holiday of Shavuot, the “Feast of Weeks”. In total, there are fifty days, but the intermediate days – between the first day of Passover and Shavuot – are forty-nine (see Deut. 16:9-12 and Lev. 23:15-18). The number forty-nine is significant, as indicated in these biblical passages, as it is the square of seven; it is made up of seven days of the week over seven weeks.

The Torah links Passover and Shavuot, as well as the time between them, to the seasons of the year and their implication for crops growing then. The Sages, much later, linked the Exodus from Egypt to the Giving of Torah to the beginning and end of this period of time. Especially in our diaspora, when many (most) Jews no longer were farmers, the agricultural significance diminished before the “historical”.

In the mind of the Sages, the night of the Passover – the eve of the Exodus – was one of miracles and wonders. It was the night of the Tenth Plague, a night of watching, of anticipation, of danger, and of hope. That plague, in contrast with all the others, was brought about through God’s direct action: “For that night I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I *YHVH*” (Ex. 12:12). That it was God alone who enacted this plague is given a finer point in the Passover Haggadah: “I will go through the land of Egypt’: I, and not an angel; I, and not a *seraph*; I, and not an emissary; I am the One, alone, and no other”.

The people in Egypt, even sequestered in their houses, had a direct experience of God’s presence that night. Again, the Haggadah teaches that the “great wonders” of Deut. 26:8 were “a revelation of Shekhinah/God’s Presence”. What an amazing experience it must have been! But, how confusing, as well. The people were slow to believe Moses, and were not very trusting to the end. Yet, despite their doubts, and despite how deeply mired in the ways of Egypt the people were, God offered them a glimpse, a direct perception of Divinity.

And, by the time they reached the Sea, it was all gone: “Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” (Ex. 14:12). It was not really their fault. They were hardly prepared to trust God – or Moses – and needed time and preparation to do so willingly, and properly.

This is the work that they did in the seven weeks journey from Egypt to Sinai. Each of the days was necessary for them to climb from the depths of doubt and uncertainty about what they had witnessed in Egypt, so that they would be able to stand before God to receive Torah. This period of preparation, of intense spiritual work, led our mystics to give each day a particular valence, a way in to experiencing God in our lives, and expressing our desire to live in godly ways.

These mystics sensed that in God’s desire to become manifest in the world, and for the world to be sustainable, various qualities needed to be expressed. In a general sense, they identified seven particular qualities – what are called the seven lower sephirot, or *middot*. In Hebrew they are called: *Chesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Netzach, Hod, Yesod* and *Malkhut*; we might call them loving connection, delimiting wise boundaries, balanced self, energetic response/persistence, gratitude, righteousness, and mindful speech). When we investigate how God is present in the world – and in US – in these ways, we are more able to enact those divine qualities in our daily behavior. Doing so also shapes our consciousness, so that we perceive God even more powerfully in our lives.

The mystics understood, as well, that these *middot* are not completely separate from one another. All are present in one another. They make this clear through the seven weeks of the Omer by associating each week with one *middah*, and each day of the week with each one of the *middot*. You can think of it as a grid, like this:



	<i>Chesed</i>	<i>Gevurah</i>	<i>Tiferet</i>	<i>Netzach</i>	<i>Hod</i>	<i>Yesod</i>	<i>Malkhut</i>
1. <i>Chesed</i>							
2. <i>Gevurah</i>							
3. <i>Tiferet</i>							
4. <i>Netzach</i>							
5. <i>Hod</i>							
6. <i>Yesod</i>							
7. <i>Malkhut</i>							

Each row is one week; the second night of Passover begins the week of *Chesed*. Each day, in turn connects *Chesed* to one of the other seven *middot*: *Chesed* and *Chesed*; *Chesed* and *Gevurah*; *Chesed* and *Tiferet*, etc. Each day, then, we can consider how God manifests in our lives, in our connections with others, in our behavior and our thoughts, and in the world with these admixtures of qualities. The *middah* of each week is the predominant quality, the other modifying it slightly. You might think of it this way: the dominant quality is where we direct our intention, and the sub-quality is how we enact it in different situations. So, during the first week, our intention is to cultivate loving connection: each day during that week, we enact that love in different ways: through deep love, wise boundaries, inner balance, etc. In this manner, even though all of the *middot* will be associated with each other, the particular “flavor” of combination will be different from day to day, and from week to week.



In our practice together during this Omer period, we will offer a weekly introduction to each predominant *middah*, and invite you to practice with it. Consider how you understand it yourself; how you experience it in your body, your emotions, your thoughts, and your soul. Reflect on how it shows up in different ways, and how the recombination each day offers a new insight, and a new opportunity for practice.

The Counting of the Omer begins on Sunday night, March 28 with our focus on the first *middah* of *Chesed*, loving connection, this time modified by the *middah* of *Chesed*! So, you can begin practicing with the question: What is the quality of love that I love the most? How does this love manifest in me, in my interactions, in the world? How might I connect even more deeply with the love already present in my heart, mind, body and soul? How might my desire to connect with others be the most effective expression of love, the most loving expression of love?





Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Chesed: Cultivating Loving Connection

with Rabbi Marc Margolius

Welcome to our shared journey through the seven weeks of the Omer, the period connecting Passover with Shavuot!

As we have learned, Jewish mystical tradition associates each week of the Omer with one of the seven “lower” *sephirot* or emanations of the Divine. Each *sephirah* or *middah* (literally, “measure”) is a sacred quality present in the world, with which we are innately endowed as beings created in the Divine Image. Each represents a “pool” of sacred energy which can deepen our awareness of the Divine Presence, and by which we can make that Presence manifest through our actions.

We might conceptualize our Omer practice as a kayak trip navigating the currents of these seven *sephirot*. For the first week of the Omer, we “put in” at the *middah* of *Chesed*, usually translated as “lovingkindness,” and understood in our practice this week as “Loving Connection.” We begin our journey in the current of love streaming through and around us, informing all the *middot* we will encounter “downstream” in the weeks ahead.

Chesed or Loving Connection enables us to experience ourselves as immersed in an infinite, unbounded, luminous flow of unconditionally loving Divine energy -- a flow which surrounds, suffuses, and connects everyone and everything. As beings created in the Divine Image, this *Chesed* energy is always coursing through us. In every moment, we can choose to facilitate -- or to impede -- this uninterrupted flow of *Chesed*, which the psalmist described as foundational to existence itself (Psalm 89:3):

כִּי־אָמַרְתִּי עוֹלָם חֶסֶד יִבְנֶה שָׁמַיִם תִּכַּן אֱמוּנָתְךָ בָּהֶם:

Ki amarti olam chesed yibaneh, shamayim takhin emunat'kha vahem.

I declare, “**Your steadfast love is confirmed forever;**
there in the heavens You establish Your faithfulness.”

We can experience the presence of *Chesed* in our daily lives when we notice our instinct to “connect the dots” -- when we seek to relate, to connect, to know and to be known by others. We can experience *Chesed* when we seek to “make sense” of our lives -- when our mind weaves a coherent narrative out of the disparate elements of our experience.

We can experience *Chesed* when we notice our inclination to suspend, even for a moment, judgments which may disconnect us from ourselves or others – when we are inclined to forgive rather than be resentful, to look for the good, rather than to assume the worst. We can experience *Chesed* when we notice our tendency to repair what is broken, to restore connection. And we can experience *Chesed* every time we breathe, receiving each in-breath as a gift given freely by the whole universe and releasing each out-breath as a gift given to the universe in return.

This week, we set an intention to “love” the quality of *Chesed* in our lives, to follow the stream rather than resisting it. In *sim shalom* (“grant peace”), the final blessing of the morning Amidah, we ask to be blessed with *ahavat chesed*, love of *chesed*. The prophet Micah (6:8) employs this very phrase in his best-known teaching: “God has told you, mortal, what is good, and what the Holy One seeks from you: only doing justice, loving *chesed* (*ahavat chesed*), and walking humbly with your God.”

This week, may we cultivate awareness of the “*Chesed* energy field” in which we exist. This week, may we bring compassionate attention to moments when we feel closed, shut down, disconnected, or constricted. In such moments, may we remember to notice, breathe in, and absorb the *Chesed* which is ever-present. And may we open and expand our minds, hearts, and bodies, that we might become better conduits through which that redemptive energy can flow through us to others, and to our planet.

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



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781: ***Gevurah: Setting Wise Limits*** ***with Rabbi Sam Feinsmith***

Last week we began our journey in the headwaters of the *sephirah Chesed*, Loving Connection, the gushing spring of transcendent love streaming through and around us. This week, we kayak downstream to the sacred pool of *Gevurah*, Setting Wise Limits or Boundaries, which gives the divine love flowing through us and around us focus, shape, measure, and form that it might be received and digested. You may recognize the linguistic resonance between the *Gevurah* (גבורה) and the Hebrew *gibor* (גיבור), one who is mighty, strong, valiant. Setting wise limits and boundaries can require us to muster a great deal of inner strength.

Why are such boundaries needed? Would it not be preferable to just swim in the current of love? Consider the following Hasidic teaching by Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch (d. 1772):

...During the creation of the worlds, the Holy and Blessed One needed to contract God's radiant light so the worlds could receive it without going out of existence...This contraction (*tzimtzum*) is called severity (*Din*), which contains (lit. delimits) the outflow of divine loving-kindness (*Chesed*), the nature of which is to spread. This is just like water in a vessel—the glass contains the water and doesn't allow it to flow outwards. Even though we may experience this contraction as severe, it is kindness nevertheless, for each and every thing that exists must have some good—that is, loving-kindness—mixed into it, for “the world is sustained through kindness” (Ps. 89:3). Even though the contraction is severe, without it the worlds would cease to exist.

This, then, is the meaning of “*YHVH Elohim* is both sun and shield” (Ibid. 84:12).¹ There is a well-known tradition that the name *YHVH* is called “sun.” The verse thus means to suggest that “sun and shield” are an apt analogy for “*YHVH Elohim*.” That is, just as we can't look at the sun on

¹ In classic rabbinic literature, the name *YHVH* is associated with divine love while the name *Elohim* is associated with divine severity, contraction, and judgment.

account of its luminous radiance without some shield or screen to block it and thereby enable us to enjoy its light, so too with the blessed name *YHVH*—whose light is extremely powerful on account of its luminous clarity and the radiant loving-kindness and compassion it contains—were it not to have some dividing screen, the world could not receive that love. This is why God needed to contract Godself and contain the name *YHVH* in the name *Elohim*, which is the shield.²

In like fashion, the love flowing into and through us can be too intense or diffuse to be made manifest and be fully received. You may recognize this kind of overpowering or unfocused love from your own experience of someone who smothered you with too much love, or someone who didn't know how to provide love in the right measure and at the right time, or someone who's love was indiscriminate. If our love is to be felt and received as loving, we must learn how to set wise limits that allow us to dole it out appropriately. Sometimes being truly loving means standing firm, setting limits, and saying no, even when the recipient may experience our doing so as severe.

When lacking clear and wise limits, our desire to love may express itself as attempting to fix someone's problem instead of listening empathetically and offering kind validation. Or the intensity of our love may crowd others out or rob them of agency. We may take on too much in an effort to shine love upon others, only to burn ourselves out. Or we may shower love indiscriminately in ways that condone harmful behavior or fail to protect those who are most vulnerable. Or we may consume too much, thinking that we are just practicing self-love even though we may be hurting ourselves and our planet. All such unhealthy expressions of *Chesed* can sever our connection with our own heart and with others, even those we had intended to hold in intimate connection.

As a current or modulation within the divine Totality of which we are an integral part, *Gevurah*, setting wise limits, is already innate in us. As we practice through meditation, yoga, or text study, we may begin to access our inner *Gevurah* in our daily lives more readily. We will become more aware of the inner obstacles to holding our tongue, stepping back to make space for others, practicing restraint, and saying a loving no.

² *Sefer Torat Ha'maggid, Va'era, s.v. Va'yedaber elohim el moshe va'yomer elav ani adonai*

And so, this week we set an intention to practice *Gevurah*, setting wise limits for the sake of enacting *chasadim tovim*, good and helpful acts of loving-kindness.³ And because (like all of these qualities) our *Gevurah* has its shadow side and imbalances, which may cause us to fall prey to anger, severity, judgment, and biting criticism on the one hand, or an anything-for-love mentality on the other, we refine and balance our *Gevurah* through the lens of each of the other *sephirot* lest it become too harsh or too flimsy. A guiding light for finding such balance: *Not too tight, not too loose*.

This week, may we cultivate awareness of the *Gevurah that is in us and all around us*, and may we put it to good use as a strong vehicle for channeling loving-kindness and shoring up our sense of loving connection. This week, may we notice the ways in which *Gevurah* can be helpful and also those in which it can cause harm. And may we find the inner strength and restraint to receive and channel transcendent love, for ourselves, for others, and for our planet.

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

³ A phrase borrowed from the opening blessing of the *Amidah*, the silent prayer.



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 *sefirot*, *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.



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Netzach with Rabbi Jonathan Slater

Over the past three weeks, we have engaged with the divine qualities of *Chesed* (loving connection), *Gevurah* (wise boundaries), and *Tiferet* (balanced self). Each of those qualities is unique, but they also exist in relation with each other. It is not really possible, nor wise, to consider any of them separate from the others. And, in fact, that is one lesson of this practice of working with the *middot* during the Counting of the Omer: each *middah* interpenetrates the others, and each is depended on and modified by the others.

In each of these weeks we have met the *middah* of *Netzach*, energetic response/perseverance. This week we take it on in full. We will investigate and experience the ways in which we can respond and act with sustained energy, sometimes this way, sometimes that.

How shall we understand *Netzach*. It has different valences and meanings in the Bible, and they all influence how we can enact it in our lives. One meaning is “eternity” or forever (see, for one example, Ps. 103:9). The idea is that God is not bound by mortal limitations, by time. Therefore, nothing is beyond God’s capacity to bring it about. What is more, all time exists as one, so all eternity is present for God without distinction. What for us would take forever, is already so in God’s mind.

For our practice, this invites us to access the divine quality of “eternity” in our own lives. As our beloved colleague, Rabbi Myriam Klotz would say in yoga: can we “hold the pose” even when we feel tired, or our muscles are aching? Is there yet some more energy that we can bring to our efforts to deepen our spiritual capacities, to engaging in bringing justice, in loving more fully? How might we persevere in bringing about “that day” -- the days of the Messiah, a time of righteousness and justice where all live without fear -- with a sense of divine potential and power? How might love sustain us? What boundaries do we need to preserve our strength to persevere? What is the balance of love and limits that keeps us in the game? Etc.

Another meaning of *netzach* is to vanquish or overcome an opponent. This aspect relates to our need for energetic response. Who or what is our opponent? For now, let’s consider our “inner critic”, the voice we may all know that tells us “you can’t”: “Who are

you to engage in spiritual practice -- you could never really pay attention, let alone meditate!" "Why should you get your hands dirty, let someone else do it!" "There is just too much to do -- I could never get it done!" We might consider this our *yetzer hara*. It can easily keep us from living out our intention. Instead, we bring our energetic response; we engage our full faculties to live up to our deepest desire and spiritual yearning. When the *yetzer hara* says "no you can't" we respond: "who says?" and just get going. When the *yetzer hara* says, "not you" we respond "oh, you bet it will be me" and turn to our intention.

But, *netzach* is not about "powering through". Rather, it is bringing perseverance and our inner energies in the right proportion, and with the appropriate additional quality to meet the moment. Sometimes we bring love to our opponent; other times we set appropriate boundaries so that good can be done. This week pay attention to when effort and energy are called for. Notice what the circumstances are, and in what manner you are called to act (or NOT act). What does it take just now, in just this moment, to live out my true intention?

Go for it!



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Hodayah: Cultivating Gratitude with Rabbi Myriam Klotz

This week the river banks of our Omer practice steer us from the steady, bold waters of *Netzach*—that capacity to persevere with conviction and strength—into the waters of the *sephirah* of *Hod* (“Splendor”). Here in the flow of *Hod*, we put down the paddle with which we have steered our kayak. Here, *Hod* invites us to ride with the currents of what is happening, just as it is. As the energetic compliment to *Netzach*, *Hod* asks us to surrender our ideas of how things could or should change or be. Instead, we not only loosen our grip on the paddle. We put the paddle down. We practice being right here, right now. Can I yield my wants, desires and convictions, set them aside and let the changing currents take me on this river of living? Can I soften around my willful efforts and simply be present to what is, right now, just as it is? Can I trust that this moment, this breath, this being, *this*, is enough, and offers me fullness and aliveness, just as this is?

It is not always easy to yield and receive what is, in all of its imperfect wholeness. It can be difficult to accept a person or situations just as they are, as part of creation’s manifestation right now. Especially if the situation, relationship, or condition is unpleasant or painful, or if we see an injustice we want to interrupt or suffering that we want to alleviate, we might resist mightily the surrender or yielding to what is beyond our control.

Or if something is pleasing and going according to our hopes we might want to hold onto that experience, person, or commodity, forever. We may try to persevere at keeping a dream alive when it no longer serves. We may fear that what we now have is not enough and we grasp at it in hopes of bringing more so that we will feel satisfied and secure.

Hod invites us into the quiet grace of a surrender supple enough that through it we *can* yield our opinions; loosen our attachments; acknowledge, and even appreciate the ever-changing nature of our existence and our experiences.

Connected to the *sefirah* of *Hod* is the quality of *Hodayah*, gratitude. If I find myself up the proverbial “creek without a paddle”, can I, paddleless, practice accepting what is? First, I acknowledge the reality of the moment: I am up the creek, in a kayak, and I don’t have a paddle. Deep breath. I acknowledge that this is so. No paddle. Now, enter the practice of *Hodayah*: what is it that I AM grateful for in this moment? I have a kayak. I have a life jacket. I have clothing on my body. There is sky above me, creek banks to my left and right. I have shoes on my feet. I have food in my belly. I have this breath. There is no alligator snapping at the stern. I have this body. I am, gratefully, alive. I am here, right now, to experience this moment in its imperfect wholeness.

Rabbinic Judaism offers a practice guide for cultivating gratitude through the *mitzvah*, the sacred act, of offering one hundred blessings each day. The obligation to find one hundred actions or moments to bless in a single day requires that we bring attention to what is happening in the everyday ups and downs of our lives. If we wait until just the right conditions arise in order to feel and express gratitude, we would likely never reach a goal of 100 blessings in a day, 100 moments of pausing to say to our Creator, “Thank You”.

So, this week is an opportunity to practice saying “thank you” more than usual. “Thank You” for this apple, even if it has a brown spot. “Thank You” that I am alive just as I am, even with fatigue or frustration or my foibles such as a forceful inner voice that says I am not enough. “Thank You” for the bright sunshine even if the temperature outside is too hot or too cold. “Thank You” that I have teeth in my mouth even if I have a toothache in one of them today.

This week, we focus on our capacity to accept life on its own terms, softening around our desires, cravings, aversions, delusions and perseverative habits of wanting it to be otherwise. Even if we haven’t perfected our expressions of *Chesed*, *Gevurah*, *Tiferet* and *Netzach* yet, this week is a great time to practice accepting where we are, where others are in their human journeys, just as they are. Practicing graceful acquiescence, like water that flows or pools in accordance to what is driving it or containing it, let us seek to cultivate gratitude, *hodaya*, finding something to be grateful for in the blessing that is manifesting even in the midst of this imperfect, ever-changing constellation of conditions.

May you feel satisfied with what you have, with who you are, and what you encounter.



May you be blessed in your surrendering with the sense of it yet being ok. That there is something to be grateful for, even so. May you find in the yielding, in the stillness of soft presence, your own emergent, authentic “Thank You’s”, awaiting your gaze and your embodiment, just as you are.

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





Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Yesod: Nurturing Our Foundation with Rabbi Josh Feigelson

Sometimes in the evening, after the kids are in bed and we're resting from the day, my wife and I like to watch YouTube videos of great dance numbers in old movies: Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, the Nicholas Brothers, Gregory Hines. There is something truly marvelous about the way these great dancers glide, stop, start, curve, tap, jump, and flip their way across the dance floor—and often together, with such incredible synchronicity and symbiosis. The beauty of these human forms, moving with both remarkable strength and astonishing finesse, is breathtaking.

While these dancers are each unique, what unites them is a virtuosic integration of power and grace, movement and rest. Or, in Omer terms, an integration of *Netzach* and *Hod*, the *middot* of the previous two weeks. This integration is its own *middah*, the one for this week: *Yesod*, Foundation. With our focus on *Yesod*, we bring our attention to experiencing our groundedness, our foundation that provides both the roots of our strength and the capacity to be receptive and adaptive.

Yesod is perhaps particularly present and necessary at moments of instability, transition. The Torah relates that after flooding the earth, when the upper and lower waters were released and the world returned to a state of chaos, the Holy One made a promise to Noah and to all of humanity (Genesis 8:22):

עַד כָּל־יְמֵי הָאָרֶץ זָרַע וְקָצִיר וְקָר וְחָם וְיָרֵחַ וְיוֹם וְלַיְלָה לֹא יִשְׁבְּתוּ:

So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease

Commenting on this passage, the Nineteenth-century Hasidic master Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz notes the four pairs mentioned here and understands that they reflect that this was a moment of *tikkun* or repair. He teaches that “This was the moment when the *yesod olam*, the foundation of the world, was made complete, such that it would last and endure.” (Beit Yaakov, Noach 37)

This may be a helpful image to consider for the week of *Yesod* in any year, but particularly now in 2021. So much of what we knew, relied on, took for granted, or that

we regarded as trustworthy simply because it had always been there, has shifted for us over the course of the pandemic. We have experienced losses on so many different levels, a shaking of the firm ground on which we stood.

Yet, through Jewish mindfulness practice, we have hopefully also been able to recenter ourselves and restore a sense of reliability or foundation. When we bring our attention to *Yesod*, we may be able to realize the support of the floor beneath us, or the chair on which we sit. By attending to our breath, we might be able to feel the resilience of our bodies. By pausing to notice the helpers and carers in our lives, we may also notice the ways in which our relationships form their own kind of foundation. By slowing down and allowing our awareness to become clearer, we might find that the Divine is right here, present with us, holding us, working through us.

In this week of *Yesod*, we aim to become grounded in a foundation that is both firm and flexible, durable and able to change and become. To do that, you might carry in your mind the image of some of those great dancers and ask yourself: How am I doing at integrating strength and suppleness? How can I make my soul-movements graceful? How might I cultivate a wisdom that dances?

This week, may we nurture a strong and sustainable foundation for our lives. May our practice help us find the foundations that are already here, but perhaps concealed from our awareness. May we embody both strength and grace--in body and spirit. May we make our lives a trustworthy, dependable foundation for others.

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



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Omer 5781:

Sh'mirat HaDibbur: Exercising Mindful Speech with Rabbi Sam Feinsmith

As we enter the seventh and final week of the Omer, we dive into the divine pool of *Malkhut* (“Nobility”). *Malkhut* is understood in Kabbalah as the reservoir that receives and holds the influx of pure Divinity that’s been cascading downriver from one *sephirah* to the next as it takes on shape, form, color, and texture. In the kabbalistic imagination, this energetic outflow emerges out of the divine source—*Eyn Sof* (lit. Endlessness)—and unfolds in stages, moving successively from pure Divinity in its most uniform, subtle, formless, and limitless state into increasingly multiform, coarse, formbound, and delimited manifestations. The end result of this process is Divinity incarnate as the physical world we know and inhabit. This is *Malkhut*.

Though the divine waters have never been cut off from their limitless Source, though the flow remains continuous and uninterrupted, by the time it reaches the reservoir of *Malkhut*, it becomes hidden from view, concealed beneath its material container. Our work, then, is to look to the depth dimension of our very physicality to discover the hidden pool of divinity that lies within the material world. In doing so, we discover unity within multiplicity, spirit animating matter.

It is in this regard that *Malkhut* is associated with divine speech. For the ten *sephirot* are none other than the composite elements of the godhead itself, which contains spirit (*Keter*), mind (*Chokhmah* and *Binah*), a constellation of heart qualities (*Tiferet* through *Yesod*), and body (*Malkhut*). Kabbalah thus imagines the Divine word, which brought the world into being (Genesis 1) and revealed itself through Torah (Exodus 20), as the outflow of spirit channelled through the divine mind and heart and then expressed outwardly through the divine mouth as the physical manifestation of God’s inner life.

The Hasidic masters teach that as perfect reflections of the Divine, our own speech too is a physical act wholly connected to and issuing from our inner life—heart, mind, and spirit. Words are thus, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua teaches, “a repository of the spirit” (*The Insecurity of Freedom*, pp. 259-260). In light of this insight, our work in the pool of *Malkhut* is to “learn to establish the right relationship between the heart and the word we are about to utter” (*Ibid.*).

We all know that our words begin internally, animated by perceptions, beliefs, impulses, thoughts, intentions, and feelings. However, when our attention is outwardly directed, we may not be aware of the subtle ways in which such inner phenomena impact what comes out of our mouths. Our tradition describes this kind of mindless speech as *min*

ha'safah v'lachutz, from the lips outward (B. Talmud Sanhedrin, 106b). Such words are like a body without a soul. What's more, without an awareness of these inner phenomena, our fears, desires, anxieties, and insecurities may cause us to speak out of turn and utter harsh or deceitful words.

By bringing mindful awareness to the inner phenomena that animate our speech—perceptions, biases, assumptions, judgments, intentions, impulses, thought patterns, feelings, and sensations—we unify our inner and outer life and create the conditions for our speech to become *lashon kodesh*, holy speech. When trained through the channels of the other six *sephirot*, our speech expresses our nobility, flowing from the boundless font of loving connection, tempered by the cooling waters of restraint, balanced in the middle stream of humility, energized by the tide of alacrity, opened by the flush of gratitude, and empowered by a forward flow toward what's right and good.

This week, through mindfulness meditation, yoga, and contemplative text study, we will develop our ability to exercise mindful speech, attending to the inner dimensions of our being that animate our words. And, as we prepare to receive the Torah on Shavuot, may we utter words that are both noble and ennobling, making God's loving Presence manifest right here on earth.

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