



Pardes Hannah
The Jewish Renewal Community
of Ann Arbor, MI

pardeshannah.org

A Brief Reflection from Reb Elliot: Surfing the Ebb and Flow

This year's theme is "Surfing the Ebb and Flow," or in Hebrew *veha-hayyut ratzo va-shov*, meaning that the life force—the divine energy—flows out and returns, ebbs and flows. Based on a kabbalistic reading of Ezekiel 1:14, this captures a fundamental truth: that our lives, and indeed life itself, are in constant motion, rising and falling, like the tide, in a dance of ebb and flow.

On one level this pertains to the nature of awareness itself. Sometimes our consciousness is expansive and spacious, in flow-mode (*mohin de-gadlut*), while other times consciousness contracts (*mohin de-qatnut*). In the flow mode, we feel ourselves to be awake, deeply aligned, or "plugged in"; when we are on the spectrum of ebbing, it is as though there is a film over our eyes, and we feel scattered or disconnected. At such times we often feel less alive, or even depleted and dry, only to give way to renewed moments of connection and enlargement.

This oscillation unfolds in key aspects of our lives: in our spiritual practice, in our intellectual and work lives, in our embodiment, and in the web of our relationships. *Pe'amim karov, pe'amim eino karov*: Sometimes the Shekhinah is near,

and sometimes She is hidden. The Zohar captures this dialectic by likening Shekhinah to a Well/Spring. Sometimes we feel the divine presence bubbling up like an artesian spring: at such moments, all we have to do is reach out our hands and drink from Her plenitude. Other times, the Shekhinah is more like a trickle at the bottom of a well, Her blessing accessed only by repeated effort (*hishtadlut*), by digging deep.

We ask: What do we learn from fleeting moments of plenitude and grace? “Last forever!” we cry out in moments of flow and circumambient joy, but as Annie Dillard once noted, it won’t last forever; we were lucky to get it in the first place. Such is the ebb and flow that punctuates our lives. How do we work with and learn from the fallow periods...which are also our teachers? and from our falling away from connection, from our disappointments?

The late 18th century Hasidic master, Moshe Hayyim Efraim of Sydelikow captures the fleeting nature of the *hiyyut*, the divine vitality: “As my grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov taught, “*Veha-hayyut ratzo va-shov*”: the life force is always flowing out and returning...This is the inner meaning of ordinary consciousness and expanded awareness, namely: No one can stand on one rung forever. Everyone is constantly going up and down, expanding and contracting. [Giving a positive spin to this dialectic, he adds]: The descent is necessary to ascend...for when a person knows and feels that they are in a state of *qatnut* [contraction] they may pray or call out from the place where one truly is.”

From that awareness and acceptance of our lowly moments, deeper insight may emerge, paving the way (at least potentially) for a richer ascent. We might be moved to ask a question that is at the heart of the Days of Awe: Where are we truly at this moment? And: how may we serve from where we really stand? What insights may we harvest from both the array of both expansive and contracted states, and from the very fact of *ratzo va-shov*, the process of ebb and the flow itself.

Moshe de Leon, the central writer of the *Zohar*, taught that this ebb and flow is rooted in the divine rhythms themselves. The sefirot, the energy centers within the divine Interface, are constantly in movement. De Leon writes: Take a jar of water on a sunny day and shake it, so that light is reflected on a whitewashed wall, in patterns of ever-shifting light. As you gaze upon the light, you find that it moves faster than the eye can see. Such is the movement of the divine *ratzo va-shov*." Divinity here is a verb or gerund, a Becoming whose movement we cannot fully capture or arrest. Our namings of the divine are but freeze-frame images of an ever morphing, ever dancing God. Whenever I see light dancing on a tree in a garden, or light beams reflected on the side of a boat docked in a lake, I stop and meditate... following the dancing light, connecting it to the sefirotic movement and to the mystery that lies beyond our glimpsing. Now I see the light, now I don't...It is like we are looking at an object through a high-powered spiritual microscope: that which seems solid is (from another perspective) a kaleidoscopic movement of sefirotic energy, or if you prefer, of electrons. But the kabbalists don't stop there.

Moving from the sefirotic unfolding to the divine Source itself, they claim that underneath all this movement there is the still Center, the Ein Sof, or infinite divine Ground from which the sefirotic movement emerges. As with the divine matrix, so too with us: all life partakes of the *Ratzo va-Shov*, the oscillation between stillness and movement, silence and song, ebb and flow.

Especially as Tishrei approaches, I invite us to reflect on the rhythmic nature of our own lives: as old selves slowly fade away and new growth emerges, or as old patterns recombine and spiral back. In a sense, we all experience multiple “lives” and “deaths”—beginnings and endings—in our own lifetime. As Dylan sang decades ago, “Ah, but I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” But on another level, each of us emerges into life and ultimately passes into death; for some of us, this one precious life is all there is, for others of us, this life is an antechamber to another life or round (*gilgul ha-neshamot*) or seen as a Homecoming. *Veha-hayyut ratzo*, we bulk into life, *va-shov*: and we return, trans-formed, to the Source.

Similarly, from a molecular viewpoint, death is not an absolute end, as we are all reconstituted or recycled: slowly becoming part of the earth, or perhaps, part of a limestone cave...life, over aeons, passing through us.

Another way of thinking of the ebb and flow is to draw on a metaphor from contemporary physics, with parallels from Jewish mystical tradition: Sometimes we feel ourselves as

particles, separate beings with hard boundaries; other times our being overlaps with another, in a kind of intimate Venn Diagram; and at yet other times, as our boundaries melt further, we experience ourselves as waves on the Ocean of being. The first experience, that of boundedness, is surely dominant in our lives and our ethics, built, like our social language, on solid subject-object distinctions. This level of awareness is often called “ordinary consciousness” by kabbalists. And it is also a mode for experiencing holiness. It is as particles that we cross the street, negotiate contracts, acknowledge the Otherness of the other, and move through much of our lives. But sometimes, perhaps when we experience grief, or melting joy—love in its many flavors—or eat great food, experience a runner’s high, etc., we become wave. “Vehayyut ratzo va-shov” the life-force ebbs and it flows. What do we learn from moments of wave consciousness, that we might take into our ordinary lives? How might remain open-hearted and cultivate the glimpses? What are the practices that might help us navigate the movement to and fro of consciousness? Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l, the founder of Jewish Renewal movement, once suggested a practice that has stayed with me, one that enables us to reframe ordinary consciousness and to hold both particle and wave consciousness: “Do this for at least 40 days in a row, long enough for the practice to sink deeply into you....See yourself every day as a cell of the Living Earth.”

This last example brings us to another dimension of this year’s theme: What does it mean to hold an awareness of the

simultaneity of Ebb and of Flow in our lives, and in the lives of our communities? At some of our most expansive or joyous moments, other folks (even ones near to us) are experiencing dryness or loss....or perhaps just a humdrum boredom. And so too, on the individual level, perhaps we are we are experiencing flow in one part of our lives and contraction at another. As the midrashist had it, speaking about the heightened awareness of standing at Sinai: (*Tanhuma, Yitro*): "God spoke all these words." What is the meaning of All: it is the awareness that "God kills and brings to life in the same moments; God afflicts and heals all at once." Think what is happening at this very moment in our communities, in the Middle East and the U.S., in our own homes: How do we hold this manifold, layered, ever-shifting reality? How can we bear to hold this? The claim is that at our most awake, expansive moments we can at least glimpse this deeper truth.

Before we end, let us consider two more rivulets in this great multi-branched theme: Given the constant ebb and flow of the life-force, how can we find points of Balance in our lives. I am reminded of something my meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein once said: "When someone asks you what is the right thing for me to do, the right answer is: do what will help you find Balance in your Life." Of course, that wise (and subtle) answer elicits further questions and discernments. For surely, we can learn deeply when we are pulled to extremes: when we fall in love, when we dive into a new area of research or write a book, etc. But ultimately, the search for balance and integration is needed.

In the late antique Jewish mystical work, *Sefer Yetzirah* (The Book of Creation) we read. “If our mind wanders and goes out (*ratzo*), then *shov*—bring awareness back to the center point, *Ve-hashev yotzer al mekhono*: Bring your creative consciousness back to equilibrium, to the resting place. Return to the zafu, as it were!

Secondly, learning from an immersion in nature. Many of us discover this ebb and flow viscerally, cellularly, when we are most fully in the natural world. For example, it is April and I gaze on a slender branch that contains both the dead berry of last summer and this year’s tender bud, holding both in my awareness. Presence and Absence. Or: we are walking in the fields and forests, and as our senses quicken, we see all around us death, life, and regeneration all at once. We see burned forests slowly sprouting forth life, tender plants breaking through what had once been molten lava. We see decaying tree stumps sprouting forth new saplings or providing the material for new growth (think of mother or nurse logs). Increasingly, we experience how these cycles have been altered—disrupted—by our own actions and (too) Small Mind (*mohin de-qatnut*), disconnected consciousness, unaware of the intricate Web of Life.

We are mostly Midwesterners in these-here parts. So, perhaps we enter Lake Michigan or Huron and body surf the rise and fall of the waves; or we travel to a coast and enter the ocean—we feel ourselves lifted up and supported by the tide, and willingly surrender to the greater rhythms. Other times, we exert our agency, coordinate our breathing and muscular movements,

and swim hard against the tide. At low tide, we explore the tide pools, life made visible only during the waning. As night falls, we draw our attention to the Moon, whose very waning or waxing (and gravitational pull) influences the planetary tides. In Jewish mystical Tradition, the Moon is intimately linked with the Shekhinah, source and avatar of the divine ebb and flow. As our mind moves from the local to the expansive, we ask: How does the Shekhinah manifest in our embodied being: we who both carry and are carried by these rhythms, we who we yearn to skillfully surf the *ratzo va-shov*— in our small but precious lives, in the lives of our communities, and the life of our planet.

We ask:

What are the implications of the *ratzo va-shov*: for how we experience God and how we treat the other? For how we leave the year that is a-dying and enter the year that is aborning? As we live these questions, may our lives come to approach something like Prayer itself. As the poet Mary Oliver wrote: “So this is how you swim inward. So this is how you flow outwards. So this is how you pray.”

Shanah tovah umetukah: may this be a year of Renewal, of good health and safety, of real connection. And in the words of the *Zohar*, may we find sweetness even amidst the bitterness.

Heart to heart,
Reb Elliot