

A vort/d'var Torah from Reb Elliot:

About our learning this coming year, the year of (ta-da!) LeV/32/Heart. Each year, we at Pardes Hannah, select a theme that will guide our yearlong learning. This year, I am crafting a series on the Cycle of the Jewish Year: Mystical Teachings and Practices. At the core of this series lies a thesis, a belief, that this Cycle provides us with a comprehensive set of practices to face critical moments, and nurture our spiritual development. More on that, during and after the High Holy Days!!

Speaking of which, it is also our minhag (custom) to set a theme for the Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe. Pardes Hannah members are invited to reflect **briefly** (!!) on some aspect of this theme during Services, drawing on their own lived (or studied) experience. This year, in honor of our 32nd (LeV) year, our theme is: LeV Tov, the Path of the Good Heart. What, you ask, might the “Good Heart” connote?

Let me briefly present and unpack this theme, by citing its textual origin in *Pirkei Avot*:

Mishnah Avot 2:9

אָמַר לָהֶם, צְאוּ וּרְאוּ אִיזוֹהֵי דְרֹךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁיִּדְבַק בָּהּ הָאָדָם. רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, עֵינַי טוֹבָה. רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אוֹמֵר, חֶבֶר טוֹב. רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אוֹמֵר, שָׁכֵן טוֹב. רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַרוֹאֵה אֶת הַנּוֹלֵד. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אוֹמֵר, לֵב טוֹב. אָמַר לָהֶם, רוֹאֵה אֲנִי אֶת דְּבָרֵי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרֵף מִדְּבָרֵיכֶם, שֶׁבְכָלֵל דְּבָרָיו דְּבָרֵיכֶם.

He [Rabban Yohanan ben Zaqqai] said to [his disciples]: **Go forth** [go out] and **observe** which is the right way [a path of integrity] to which a person should **cleave**. [Upon returning] [Rabbi Eliezer](#) said, **a good eye** [to see others in a generous fashion]; [Rabbi Joshua](#) said, [to be] **a good friend**; [Rabbi Yose](#) said, [to be] **a good neighbor**; [Rabbi Shimon](#) said, to have **foresight** [to see that which is aborning: to be aware of consequences of one's actions; to see that which is just beginning to emerge]. [Rabbi Elazar](#) said, [to have] **a good heart**. Rabban Yohanan] said to them: In the words of [Elazar](#) ben Arakh I see your words, for in his words your words are included.

We are immediately confronted with questions: Why does R. Yohanan tell his disciples “to go out,” i.e., to not respond reflexively or too hastily, but to see what they **notice** in the world beyond and around them. (For how long did they wander and observe? Where did they go? What did they make sure not to miss?) Observing: what seems to work? Where lie the pitfalls? Second: Yohanan is suggesting the importance of finding a **central path or core practice**, one that is anchoring and sustainable (one can cleave to it!) and generative—something that stretches deep and wide. (One can imagine centering each one of these practices, consecutively, for a year or two, say, over 7-10 years.)

The first option, Eliezer's, is “*ayin tovah*,” the good eye, usually understood to mean a steady practice of judging the other with generosity, wishing the other well, not rushing to dismiss or cancel that one, or presupposing base motives. It means, among other things, to see the “good points” (*neqqudot tovot*) in others, to hear their animating “inner music” and underlying

concerns. Nahman of Breslov, speaking of the “good points,” encourages us to become a mirror for others, helping folks see the good in themselves, no matter how base or relentlessly self-abnegating these other might seem to be. Nahman adds, with a wink: and don’t forget that you too, no matter how low you are felling, also have these good points, these God-sparks of holiness within. (Think of a time that your negative judgment of someone shifted, as you learned some new information, or better understood their life-situation. And as you engage in self-reflection, be sure to include the good you see in yourself. Don’t forget your moments of accomplishment or your largest self.)

The second response, that of R. Joshua, suggests being (or possibly having/cultivating) a good friend. How might we invest in our friendships, co-create these deeper relations, [נק הנלל בחר](#) ([Avot 1:6](#)) ? What are the activities or qualities that characterize your deepest friendships? What do you do/experience together? At what hours and settings? Are there friends with whom you can share sad moments as well as joy? Niche friends, for certain moments? How do friends help each other uncover one’s own deepest truths and challenges? And: how do we give and receive [loving](#) reflective feedback (riffing on the Hebrew, *tokheha*, ff. [Lev. 19:17-18](#)) What happens when friends become frenemies? What have been some moments of irreversible loss, and of renewal and reconciliation? How do we navigate the hard times? More broadly, how do our friendships morph over time? As we mature and age? (Think of one gift or learning you received this year from a friendship...)

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The third response, that of R. Yose, moves our focus from the intimate to the proximate. How do we become good neighbors to others, to those who “happen” to live near us, who may hold different values and aesthetics? What is different about being a good neighbor rather than being a good friend? (Which is harder for us?) To riff on the debate between R. Akiva and ben Azzai in the Jerusalem Talmud, if friendship is characterized by a stance of **love**, neighborly relationships are born of **care**, seeing the divine image in the Other. What kind of neighborly relations have we experienced (nurtured, stumbled upon) over the past year? Do we trust our neighbors? What happens when we don’t? How do neighborly tensions (or comity and reconciliation) affect our way of being in the world? Our sense of home, where we live? What can we share with neighbors that we do no/cannot with friends?

The fourth response is from Rabbi Shimon. His suggestion/commitment is intriguing, and to this interpreter (*c’est moi*) layered. Usually the phrase *ha-ro’eh et ha-nolad* — seeing what is born— is read as anticipating the **consequences** of our actions. To realize that our actions **have** consequences, not all of which are unforeseen or unpredictable. (The caveat: at the same time that we seek to act impeccably, we realize that unforeseen good may emerge from tragedy, or that we can sometimes, out of a “good” consequence, grow into the wrong parts of ourselves.) Similarly, our knowledge of Ecology teaches us that the elimination of a pest may have unexpected negative consequences for the life of other species, and ultimately ourselves...Like in game theory, how many steps out, how many scenarios, should we consider when making a fateful decision? Is good intention *ever* enough?

A second way of reading R. Shimon's words is to "see what is a-borning," as an awareness of what is **just beginning to emerge**, like the tender shoots of the fig plant (ff. [Song of Songs 2:13](#)) Some provisional start-up or group or idea in need nurture or encouragement, or closely related, in need of pruning. (In tomato-land, we remove suckers.) Kierkegaard teaches that we live our lives forward, but understand it backwards. It is an accomplishment to see new growth before it is obvious to the casual eye: to notice what is just beginning to form...I think of new generational voices, or of rebirth of older ones: new growth emerging from the hard earth after a long winter. And I think of the medieval Kabbalist, David ben Yehuda he-Hasid's name for God, *Ha-efshar* (that which is possible) and *Ha-Efshar shebetokh ha-efshar* (possibility within possibility.) Have we have encountered such tender or surprising moments recently? Or to return to the first meaning, what have we learned from seeing/not seeing consequences? (In the political world, these lessons abound.... and are rarely frozen in place.)

Finally, we come to Elazar ben Arakh's statement that the central path is that of LeV ToV, [cultivating] the good heart. One of the first things to notice is Yohanan's response to his 5 students. In saying "In the words of [Elazar](#) ben Arakh I see your words, for in his words your words are included, is he playing favorites in a way that may create ill-feeling or competition among the group? As though to say, Eleazar's answer is the best, he gets the gold star and my *yasher koach*! Indeed, his words (and his path) encompass, and hence trump, all the preceding ones." Bad teacher, Yohanan, boo!

A more charitable reading might yield a more encouraging pedagogy: "because I heard each of your individual answers, I am now able to understand Elazar's path in a more comprehensive way, one that honors each and all of you." That is, Yohanan highlighted Lev Tov to show the value of **each student's** path...and to include all of them in one over-arching trope. So: What does it mean that the Good Heart *includes* seeing/judging others with generosity; cultivating loving and real friendships; being a good neighbor (caring about those you may not love, or have chosen to live near/with); while attending to both consequences and emergent possibilities.

In the late antique context, *Lev* may mean something like heart-mind—emotional intelligence and empathy combined with cognitive smarts and foresight, the interweaving of intention and embodied action, knowing when to draw near and when to give space. When to make an intervention, when to collaborate, and when to...wait.

Of course, the phrase LeV ToV has yet another meaning in Jewish Mystical Traditions. In the *B'nai Yissaskhar* of Zvi Elimelekh of Dynov (hasidic master from early-mid 19th Eastern Europe), LeV ToV has both arithmetical and moral meaning: Lev ToV [gimatriya](#) is 49¹, a cipher for the 49 day journey of the Omer, marking the journey from the Exodus to Receiving Torah at Sinai, a 49 day trek from Pesach to Shavuot, from Narrowness/Enslavement to Radical Receptivity.

1. For Gimatriya (also gematria) Charts, see page 5

In the Dynover's schema, the first **32 (LeV/ב"ל)** days of the journey are given to cultivating the heart (lev). A tipping point is reached on **LaG B'omer** (ל"ג, **the 33rd day of the Omer**), where the light of expanded Consciousness, begins to emerge, growing in intensity over the **ToV/ט"ו** (gemtriayah 17), the remaining 17 days till Sinai/Shavuot. (Zvi Elimelekh is here referring not only to Rabbinic notion of LaG B'Omer as the day on which a plague was lifted (a tipping point), but to the midrashic notion that the light of the First Day was the primordial light of expanded awareness, by means of which Adam and Eve saw from one end of the world to another.) According to Tradition, when God saw how humans misused that light, it was hidden away. Some say saved for the Righteous, or hidden in Torah, or available on Shabbat via the Sabbath-soul, or the World to Come, or accessible *davka* in our darkest moments (Winter's dark midwifing the emergent light of Hanukkah-awareness). In [Zoharic sources](#), this light is specifically called ToV, as in "God saw the light of the first day, that it was ToV, good!" ([Gen. 1:4](#)) while also identifying that ToV with the Primordial Light treasured away for the Righteous, **נֶתְּ לִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת צִדְקָתְךָ** [Psalm 31:20](#), "How great is your ToV, which you have hidden away for those who revere You."

The Dynover teaches that the traditional bonfires of LaG B'Omer are a visible symbol of that a-borning light of expanded awareness, as he transposes **LaG** (33) into **GaL**, the day of Opening the eyes. As in verse (Psalm 119:18) **גַּל-עֵינַי וְאַבְּךָ יְהוָה נִפְלְאוֹת מִתּוֹרָתְךָ**; **Gal Einai**, "Open my eyes, that I may see the **wonders** of your Torah/deep Teaching."

I ask: why does that this new seeing (GaL), with eyes made for **wonder**, only happen *after* the 32nd day of the Omer? I want to say: **Because when the heart (LeV/32) opens, one sees (GaL/33) differently.**

When have we experienced such moments? We've all heard of a Leap Year. How about being on the cusp of a LeV Year, a 32nd year that will be capped this coming Pesach! (Our first service was in Pesach 1994! Who would have think we'd still be around 32 years later!) How might we cultivate LeV ToV this year, seeing with new-old eyes, with "eyes made for Wonder" (as Heschel had it.)!

Takhlis. To help us bring down the **spiritual shefa** (שפע רוחני--flow/abundance), to keep it flowing, we need to attend to our **material shefa**, שפע גשמי! Help us keep the **heart at the center** by keeping the heart of Pardes Hannah vital, viable and beating. (See the cover letter for ways of joining us formally and/or financially sustaining our vision. *Rav todot*, many thanks!)

In conclusion, a khap, a vort, a quick Hasidic "word" (As in the old Yiddish joke, before I give a *vort*, let me say a few words.). Nahman of Breslov, the great Hasidic teacher, pondered the verse from Song of Songs 5:2, **קוֹל וְדוֹפֵק דוֹפֵק**, Hark! My beloved is knocking [dofeq], noting that the word *dofeq* can mean not only knocking, but **pulsing**. "Listen! (he said) The divine beloved is pulsing (dofeq) within me." God coursing through our embodied being, each moment anew.

Let's try this now as a practice, something I learned from Reb Zalman, of blessed memory. I invite you to place your fingers on a pulse point (I like the carotid artery, but the wrist also works.) Feel that pulse coursing through you, the Beloved knocking. Stay with it for a few beats.

Now, if you are with a loved one or a friend or someone who is game, and it feels comfortable, let the other guide your hand towards their pulse point, while you guide your friend's hand to yours. Breathe quietly, feeling both your pulse and theirs. (I can almost *hear* the pulsing with my fingers...) Know this pulsing is also there, right now, in our friends, our neighbors, our adversaries, in our dogs and cats, in a myriad life forms, for the earth is breathing, ebbing and flowing, in a great wheel of Turning. As the year turns, may we all be blessed with good health, with purpose-driven lives, with connections that are real and loving, with surprises that amaze, ordinary moments that seem holy, with the joy of our joy and even, perhaps, the “joy—the simcha” of our sorrows, knowing how much we can feel, hold, and love.

שנה טובה ומתוקה לכולנו — *Leshanah tovah tikatevu*, may new life be inscribed in our hearts,
In gratitude,
Reb Elliot

Gimatriya Charts

ל"ב LeV, the Heart = 32

L/30 = ל

V/2 = ב

טו"ב/TOV, Good = 17

T/9 = ט

O/6 = ו

V/2 = ב

לב טו"ב/LeV ToV = 32 + 17 = 49 (days of the Omer)

ל"ג = ג"ל = ל"ג

GaL (open the eyes) = LaG/ 33

30+3 = ל"ג LaG = 33

3+30 = ג"ל GaL = 33

LaG B'Omer = GaL B'Omer, the day of opening the eyes, of seeing with expanded awareness