



Dear friends,

It has been another rich year in the life of Pardes Hannah: We have offered our unique array of monthly davvenen and meditations, the occasional but vibrant Kabbalat Shabbat services, our Rosh Hodesh celebrations guided expertly by Lucinda Kurtz, Linda Dominik, Shira Orit and Megan Sims, and our lively and searching study sessions—this year 13 sessions on the the Cycle of the Jewish Spiritual Year. We have marked special events such as High Holiday services co-lead by Rabbi Aura and yours truly, made all the more vibrant by sharings from over a dozen Pardes Hannah members. (We love and cherish you!) In partnership with the Recon Congregation of Ann Arbor, we have held a Seder Tu Bishvat—celebrating our connection to the Earth, our ongoing gratitude for the gift of Life. For trees. For fruit and nuts. And poetry. Knowing (as Reb Arthur Waskow of blessed memory teaches) that we breathe in what the trees breathe out. And the Trees breathe in what we breathe out. One great web of being.

We have drawn inspiration from our most active members, those who join us on Zoom, from those who drop in on occasion, and increasingly, from the leadership of Rabbi Aura, who has added new tones (both literally and figuratively) to our community of Seekers. This year Aura has added a wonderful new series on entering into Prayer: *Opening the Siddur – Jewish Prayer, Sharing the Juice*. Coming this Fall, she will be offering monthly meditation sessions. Throughout this past year, our Board has been a quiet anchor and guide. Kudos to Linda Jo Doctor (our president), Jody Platt, Renee Robbins and Jane Blumenthal, who doubles as our nonpareil webmaster. Our Board members often work behind the scenes, but they make so much possible.

This past year, we have renewed our commitment to soulful prayer and chanting, to connecting deeply in conversation with each other, to embracing Torah as a Tree of Life. We have opened to the divine mystery that permeates Being and yet transcends our small worlds, *sovev umemaleh kol almin*. We have drawn strength from our mystical, neo-Hasidic Renewal-y roots; sensing the holiness of the Everyday; while knowing that not only we humans but the living Earth are in the words of Kabbalist Yosef ben Shalom Ashkenazi, *tzelem elohim*, faces of the divine. As Reb Zalman teaches, for a minute each day, see yourself as a cell of the Living Earth. (Do this!!) In these heartbreaking political times, we commit to deeply feeling both the joy and the suffering of life, to live **eyes open, heart open**—open to the radical amazement of what is. Seeking to heal and repair, and to hold space open for better days, for Tikkun.

As the Days of Awe of 5787 approach, it is hard for me to believe that this is the 33rd year of Pardes Hannah. If last year was the year of **LeV** (in gematria, 32), the year of the beating, open **heart**, this year in gematria is **LaG** (as in LaG B'Omer), 33, or as I prefer to write it, **GaL**, the year of **Seeing Anew**. Our theme for the High Holidays builds on this connection between 32 and 33, between LeV and GaL. For as the Hasidic master, the Zvi Elimelekh of Dynov teaches, the Open Heart, the LeV tov, opens a portal to **Deep Seeing**, as in the verse

גַּלְעֵינִי וְאֶבִּיטָה נִפְלְאוֹת (Ps. 119:18) *Gal einai ve-abita niflal'ot*, “Open my eyes that I may see wonders.” For when the heart is open, one sees *differently*.

As we enter the New Year, we might ask: How can we see the everyday and familiar with new eyes? (Perhaps it is by spending time with a toddler and seeing things, at ground level, that we no longer notice. Perhaps it is when we talk with another who sees the world from a different perspective. Perhaps it is what we notice only when we are ill or have recovered from illness. Or when we climb a mountain and gaze, or when we swim underwater. Or: When we see a starfield on a dark dark night. Or look at backlit trees, leaves shifting colors in the special light of early fall. When we slow down or speed up; when we chant into silence, meditate or davven—those moments when consciousness shifts, when particle becomes wave, when our molecules mix and are rearranged.) Or perhaps simply, when we draw a familiar object upside down... In short, when we pay attention—or better, cultivate attentiveness. It's in our lineage.

Moses, Moshe Rabbeinu, saw anew when he unexpectedly came upon the Burning Bush; when he realized that the Burning Bush (counter to all expectations) was not consumed. When his vision sunk ever deeper, first seeing the Fire, then the Angel, then God as YHWH—the One who Is-Was-Will Be all at once. Our hasidic masters reread the accompanying verse *שֶׁלֹּא-תַעֲלִיךָ מַעַל רַגְלֶיךָ* (Exodus 3:5), “Remove the sandals, *na'alekha*, from your feet” as “Remove that which encloses or imprisons you (*na'al*) from *raglekh*, from your way of walking in the world.” The verse continues: “for the ground on which you stand is holy ground.” As the kabbalists explain: There is no place devoid of the divine. *Leit attar panui minei*. And as Gandhi noted, when you wear leather shoes all the time, the world becomes a leather-covered place.

Heschel called this ability to be surprised, to see anew, “radical amazement.” To see with “eyes made for wonder.” At such moments of amazement and connection, gratitude often springs to our lips. And we find ourselves offering blessing, sacred words that connect (1) our seeing, (2) the local object of our seeing, and (3) the ultimate source of all life—in a circuit of awe and thanksgiving.

Maybe another name for this Deep Seeing is Waking, Waking Up. Reb Zalman tells the story about his daughter Shalvi, who, when she was about 7 years old, asked: “Abba, when you're asleep you can wake up, right? And when you're awake, can you wake up even more?” Out of the mouths of young ‘uns...(cf. Psalm 8:3).

Shalvi's question reminds me of *Birkhot ha-Shahar*, the early morning blessings. One of the first blessings we traditionally recite, when we first open our eyes is *שְׁתַּחֲוִי לַקָּדוֹשׁ*, thanking the Holy Breathing Spirit, for “opening the eyes of the ‘blind’” or unsighted. But not two minutes later few we add *הַמַּעֲבִיר שְׁנָה מֵעֵינֵי וְתַנּוּמָה מֵעַפְעָפִי*, thanking God for “removing sleep from our eyes and slumber from our eyelids.” Why recite the second bracha, which might seem extraneous? I suggest: to remind us that the work of removing film from our eyes is ongoing. May we find ways to see more deeply, more creatively, to continually “wake up more.”

That said, I don't want to be naïve. Seeing more deeply, holding *what is*, can be painful, even agonizing. We see our friends suffering, we experience heartbreak in love, we watch the news. In prayer, we stethoscopically hear the cry at the heart of the world, as well as the unfettered joy. Another aspect of *Gal einai ve-abita*, is to see multiplicity, to learn how to hold **complexity** with resilience and grace. (None of us have been immune from multi-layered seeing, in the wake of October 7 and the Gaza War. And from that other Israel-Palestine “war” that burns here at home, in our families and communities, and maybe in our own hearts.)

As the midrash tells us, at Sinai, when our consciousness was expanded, we were able to behold *ha-kol be-vat ahat*, everything at once- “life and death, affliction and healing.” At key moments,

we are called upon to practice this complex, nuanced seeing, knowing full well that there may be moments when we need to *turn away*: that we can't always stand face to face with What Is. That there are moments when we need to retreat, close our eyes and rest. (Even Moses at the Bush says, אֶסְרֶה-נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת-הַמַּרְאֶה הַזֶּה לִּי—let me *turn aside* that I may see—or absorb, not straight on, but from an angle—this marvelous sight.) For insight often happens in the quiet moments, in the pauses, when we “collect rather than dissipate time.” (Heschel). So, I offer up a prayer, for the ability to continually rebalance, to find moments of respite and rest, to experience deep and joyous Shabbatot—when we disentangle from daily life, and “see” with our *neshamah yeterah*, our “Sabbath soul.” So that when we re-enter the world, the world that so needs our healing, it is with renewed possibility. And yes, with eyes made for wonder. It's an act of sacred oscillation, of surfing the [ratzo va-shov, the divine ebb and flow](#).

As we enter this liminal space between the year past and the year ahead, I'd like to share something I read in a recent Shefa Gold post. She quoted Christian Sundberg “Your true power does not lie in your ability to mold your circumstances to how you would prefer them to be. Your true power lies in your ability to choose how you will meet your circumstances.” May we find skillful ways to meet the moment. And may we help each other in that quest.

I am writing these words in the back end of Ellul, as the moon is waning and Leil Selichot in the rear-view mirror. This is a time to look back at our lives on the scale of a year, to ask what is a-borning for us—what tender shoots to nurture—and what is a-dying—what we might let go. I suggest we move from peremptory self-judging (though accountability is absolutely needed) to the cultivation of curiosity. Knowing that we are both worthy and a work-in-progress. (Sometimes even a work in temporary regress, for as the kabbalists taught, “the seed needs to decompose in order for the plant to grow.” *Yeridah tzorekh aliyah*, a descent for the sake an ascent. (Menachem Azaria de Fano) While Nahman suggests moments of rest, play, even silliness as part of the dialectical path of growth.

In this season, we also ask: What are the structures, and the daily, weekly, and annual spiritual practices—the vitamins—that will enable us live deeply, from the inside-out? What has worked? What has gotten stuck? And: how might we appreciate what we do have (ff. the *Sefat Emet*), while finding ways of living in deeper alignment with our core values and our “deployment”—what we are here on this earth to be and do. I challenge us to embrace one new Jewish practice this year, something that might hallow your days: be it weekly Torah study, learning Hebrew or a new niggun or how to chant Torah; some tzedakah practice, working at a Food Pantry or in Refugee Resettlement, expanding *hakhnasat orhim* (inviting folks over for a meal or conversation). Or reciting blessings before and after eating. Perhaps cultivating a middah (a spiritual ethical quality) such as Patience (*savlanut*), or generous listening—practicing at listening to another (for half an hour, say) **without judgement** (*dan le-khaf z'khut*).

Or simply starting out each morning with a prayer of gratitude for the gift of life (the *Modeh Ani*). Saying again and again, thank you. Or before we fall asleep, letting go of excess rancor, a forgiveness practice encoded in the Bedtime Shema)

What practice or longing comes to mind for you? The ideas can be incubating, inchoate. Happy to explore the possibilities with you!

As we engage our social-political worlds (from here in the US to Israel-Palestine and beyond) we know there is work to do, for there has been so much blood spilled and hearts shattered in recent months, so much enmity afoot here and abroad, so much heartache where we most intensely live.

We Jews both need to keep our eyes open (*GaL einai*), and our hearts open too (*LeV tov*). To connect with each other in love. As my friend Michael Paley once said: “I love the Jews I like. And I also love the Jews I don’t like.” *Ha-leva’i*, may we find ways to practice that love. This work is not only for this moment, but must extend over the decades, beyond many of our lifetimes. How do we make things better?

More than ever, **we need community**. We need each other. To laugh and cry together, to deeply console each other—*veil Shver to zayn a yid*¹—and lovingly challenge each other too. And yes, to come together with other folks, other traditions, to make a more equitable and loving world, a world that continues to breathe and thrives. How might our Jewish sources and wisdom inform (and inspire) that ongoing work? As the Kotzker Rebbe said, we must begin with ourselves but not aim at ourselves. More than ever, we need the warmth of each other...to buoy each other, to share the grief and the joy, to better surf the *ratzo va-shov*—the ebb and flow of life—to harbor resilience and compassion, and to punctuate it all with touches (nay, gusts) of humor—the cosmic, the sweet, and the naughty!

And then there’s this quickie: ברכה פני ה' *Nokhah p'nei ha-Shem* (Lam. 2:9): I often say my key *kavvanah* (intention) at a given moment is to “**be present** before the One.” Saying *Hineni*, Here am I, *not hiding*. (Something I am prone to do.) Saying: use me, Hashem. How might I better serve? (Thanks to Sylvia Boorstein on *Hineni* and Shefa Gold, for the daily plea to “use me.”)

In conclusion, a *khap*, a *vort*, a quick Hasidic “word”—a repeat from last year. Why not, it’s a *practice*, something you can do time and again. It’s not TikTok, or something “branded” as new.! Nahman of Breslov, the great Hasidic teacher, pondered the verse from Song of Songs 5:2, קול דודי דופק, “Hark, my beloved is knocking [*dofeq*] at the door”—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 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, pulsing, ebbing and flowing, in a great wheel of Turning.

When you are ready—slowly, softly open your eyes...and *see*.

As the year turns, may we all be blessed with good health, with purpose-driven lives, with connections that are real and loving, surprises that amaze, ordinary moments that seem holy. May we be blessed with the joy of our joy and maybe even the “joy—the simcha” of our sorrows, knowing how much we can feel, hold, and love.

שנה טובה ומתוקה--Leshanah tovah tikatevu. May new life be inscribed in our hearts,
In gratitude, Reb Elliot

¹ Yiddish epigram: It’s hard to be a Jew. And a human being.