

Parshat Vayelech
Hitbodedut Versus Hakhel
Atara Cohen - Class of 2020

We often isolate ourselves when we seek profound religious experiences. Many of us feel most spiritual alone, preferably with a quiet forest or a stunning mountainous sunset vista. *Hitbodedut*, the act of isolating oneself, perhaps taking a walk with God, is a popular and powerful religious practice. This is natural because we can hear our thoughts most clearly, or clear our minds of thought more easily, without the noise of others. Alone, we can most conjure what I call “warm and fuzzy God feelings.” Even more than being alone, loneliness can be a bittersweet way of connecting to God. Through our longing for another, we find the divine. With the help of the Meor V'Shemesh, an eighteen century Hassidic thinker, I am going to complicate this picture.

The Meor V'Shemesh challenges our romantic ideas of individual spirituality. In the teshuva season, we might think that we can repair our relationship with God most effectively when we are alone with God. The Meor V'Shemesh disagrees:

והגם כי ידמה בנפשו אשר בעת התבודדותו יעורר לבבו יותר לשוב בתשובה ולהדבק בה' מאשר יהי' בחברת אוהבים וחבירים מקשיבים כי ע"י חברת בני אדם יפרד מדבוקתו עכ"ז יותר ראוי ונכון להחזיק במעוז אהבת חבירים ולקרוב אותם לדרך ה' כי עי"ז יוכל להמשיך הארה לאורך ימים ע"י מה שמקרבתם לעבודת הבורא ובהתבודדות אינו פועל כ"א לשעתו

And when it appears to her that *hitbodedut* will awaken her heart to return and cleave to God more than a group of loved ones and attentive friends, for [she believes that] the society of friends separates her from her cleaving, even so it is more appropriate and right to hold onto the strength of the love of friendship and bring them close to God's path, because through this she can continue the enlightenment for a long time through her bringing them close to God's work, while *hitbodedut* only works temporarily. ¹

According to the Meor V'shemesh, even if we *feel* more spiritual alone, even if we *feel* like we do our most excellent, tear-jerking *teshuva* alone, we are wrong. Of course this *teshuva* works, but this is only temporary. Only when we do *teshuva* with other people can we help others in their own work with God and do lasting *teshuva*.

¹Meor V'Shemesh, Ki Teitzei



In Parashat *Vayelech*, the Meor V'shemesh concretizes his vision for communal *teshuva* and gives us a vision for how to continue our spiritual practices beyond the *teshuva* season. He wonders about the ritual of *hakhel*, the once-in-seven-years event when the entire nation gathers on Sukkot to hear the recitation of the book of Dvarim. Why does the entire nation need to be present?

והנראה לרמז בזה כי הנה השורש העיקרי משרשי העבודה הוא אהבת בני ישראל זה לזה מקטנם ועד גדלם, ואף גם האנשים הנוטים מדרך הטוב-- יאהב הדברים הטובים הנמצא בהם, וידרוש טובתם ולהתפלל בעדם על מחסורם אשר יחסר להם, וילמדם להיותם אוהבים זה לזה.

And it seems that it hints with this that the fundamental root of the roots of worship is the love of Israelites for one another, from their smallest to their greatest. Even the people who turn from the good path--love the good things found in them, and seek their goodness and pray for them for what they lack, and teach them to love each other.²

Hakhel, the long-awaited Torah experience, must happen in community because we can do divine work most effectively with others. By cultivating my love for even my not-so-great neighbor, I must seek out the good in her and lead her back towards goodness. Notably, the Meor V'Shemesh's example of how I can improve others is to "teach them to love each other." Love for one another is the prerequisite for proper Torah engagement.

Even if I think that I am so good, that I can learn better on my own, that my lonely spiritual wanderings are so powerful, I am actually lesser without others. My love for my fellow Jew is far more important than feeling the most intense warm and fuzzy God feelings.



Atara Cohen is a native of Riverdale NY. She graduated from Princeton University with a BA in Religion and a certificate in Judaic Studies. Atara has studied Torah in a variety of settings, including, Midreshet Nishmat, Hadar, and Drisha. During her time at Maharat, she has been a fellow at T'ruah, UJA, JOIN for Justice, and State of Formation Voices of Renewal and has taught Torah to diverse communities. Atara served as a clergy intern for two years at Columbia-Barnard Hillel and is currently the first Cooperberg-Rittmaster Pastoral & Educational Intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah. She lives in Manhattan where she spends her time knitting and trying new recipes on friends.

² Meor V'Shemesh Parshat Vayelech