

Reaching The 50th Gate: Week 4 & 5 – Netzach & Hod

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We have now entered the fourth week of the seven-week Omer counting period. The weeks between Pesach and Shavuot each represent one of God's seven attributes, by emulating these characteristics, we are able to prepare ourselves for the spiritual mastery necessary for receiving the Torah on Sinai.

Netzach & Hod (Victory & Majesty)

The Light of Attachment As the energy of the upper Sefirot is channeled into ever more diminishing and specific proportions to the lower Sefirot, we begin to see a more exacting and refined view of our goals.

This process can be easily visualized in the human anatomy that parallels the Sefirot. Chesed, Gevurah and Tiferet manifest in the upper part of the body, in the arms and torso that represent upward, downward and outward movement, symbolizing the “larger” viewpoint and sweep of all we may accomplish. Still, the ideas are too broad, the goal yet imprecise. Our energies must be further distilled through Netzach and Hod. These Sefirot parallel the legs, which, though they can move in several directions, have limited mobility compared to the arms.

The legs are the main pillars that support the body, as well as the principal means of human locomotion. Spiritually, the legs represent the lower and outer reaches of man. With his legs, man makes contact with the physical ground. When he pushes his legs against the earth, he is able to lift himself and rise above it. With the energies of Netzach and Hod (which correspond to the right and left legs, respectively) we can learn to be firmly grounded even while we are striving for great heights. At the same time, we won't lose sight of our limitations despite our yearning for things beyond.

The Hebrew word NetZaCH shares the same root as l'NatZei'aCH (to gain dominance, victory, eternal). As the Sefirah that follows Tiferet (truth), Netzach represents the necessity of being honest in victory, as in (I Samuel 15:29), “Netzach Yisrael lo yeshaker—The Eternal [and Victorious One] of Israel will not lie.” Attainment of Netzach also means that others recognize the value of our achievements and our opponents call for a total cessation of hostilities. Even if there is no direct opposition to our objectives, there may still be “talk”

and perhaps ridicule. But Netzach—true victory—brings about the cessation of even this antagonism.

HOD means splendor. It is related to the word HODa'ah (admission), connoting a state of submission and empathy. The “splendor” of Hod is manifest in how one honors the Torah and Torah scholars. Hod reflects the “admission” that Torah is the means by which we come to learn about God; by submission to a Higher Power, we can formulate and better direct ourselves towards our goals. Hod also mirrors empathy, as we direct our energies to support the weak—including those who are physically weak, financially insecure, and emotionally or spiritually vulnerable.

These Sefirot direct us to avoid “walking in the path of the wicked” (cf. Psalms 1:1). The Hebrew word for foot, ReGeL, is etymologically related to leRaGeiL (to slander). By acquiring the attributes of Netzach and Hod, we minimize our involvement with slander and evil speech (see Likutey Moharan I, 14:12). Our efforts will lead to peace among people, furthering the influence of Tiferet (peace). Peace—the absence of conflict in our minds and surroundings—is naturally the best state in which to concentrate and focus on our objectives.

Netzach is an extension of Chesed, while Hod is an extension of Gevurah. Both Netzach and Hod are necessary in order to achieve a balance in life, as we must learn not only how to give or to hold back, but also how to receive and acquiesce to others. Using both “legs,” we can move forward, confident of success in our efforts, while harboring a healthy awareness that at times we should hold back and submit to forces stronger than ourselves.

This means, on the one hand, that if you are worthy of ascending to a certain level, you must not allow yourself to remain at your current level. No matter where you stand, never be content with your present level. You are always capable of doing and accomplishing more, and are therefore obligated to

develop and use that capability. This is Netzach.

On the other hand, if you should fall, regardless of how far and to what extent—even to the very depths of depravity, God forbid— you must never give up hope. Whatever happens, search out and entreat God to help you. You must “take a stand”—that is, remain strong in whichever way you can and whatever position you find yourself. Always choose to retain the vitality of the moment despite the restraints, challenges and opposition that you encounter. This is Hod.

These Sefirot also represent the ability for renewal, to begin again and—despite the challenges that deflect us—to give our goals another chance to be actualized.

Legs have tremendous strength. Practice standing firmly on the ground. When you decide to move forward, do so with conviction. When you must stop and give way, do so without hesitation or regret.

Walking in this manner reveals the secret of self-effacement. The right leg corresponds to self-assertion, the left leg to self-effacement. Walking requires a combination of the two. When you assert yourself, don't push God out of the picture. And when you must efface yourself, don't be fooled into thinking that you are any less of a person. The greatest Tzaddikim knew the secret of self-effacement, and therein lay their greatness. They were able to hold on no matter what challenges they faced, relying on their trust in God and their faith in themselves.

Additionally, Netzach means asserting yourself and understanding your own significance in your search for God. Hod means appreciating your own insignificance. Yet it is that very recognition of your own insignificance vis-à-vis God that allows you to recognize that God is everywhere.

Kabbalistically, Netzach and Hod correspond to the kidneys, whose function is to “advise” a person (Berakhot 61a). Just as

the kidneys act as a filtering system for the body, retaining necessary fluids and expelling waste matter, one who seeks advice must weigh what he hears, retain the ideas that will help him complete his task, and reject the superfluous. Netzach and Hod direct us to filter the advice necessary to complete our mission. The Kabbalah almost always speaks of Netzach and Hod as being bound to one another. Similar to fraternal twins, they represent a unique type of attachment, a unity of opposites that still allows for individual growth. The energies of Netzach and Hod allow us to stand on solid ground throughout our lives and develop our latent potential into actual deed.

Rebbe Nachman draws a connection between these two Sefirot and the power of halikhah (walking or going). When a person wishes to draw close to God, the Rebbe explains, he must employ the skills of “running” and “returning” (cf. Ezekiel 1:14):

If you progress and reach a particular level of spirituality—be it high or not so high—you should not stop there and be content with your achievement. In this case, the skill you need is to know and believe that you must advance still further. This is the skill of “running.” On the other hand, even if you fall to a lower level—even into the lowest pit of Hell, God forbid—you must still not despair in any way. Remain firm and search for God, pleading with Him and begging Him to help in whatever way He can. Even in the lowest pit of Hell, God is present, and even from there it is possible to be attached to Him. As King David said (Psalms 139:8): “If I make Hell my bed, behold, there You are.” The skill you need now is “returning” (Likutey Moharan I, 6:4).

The word HaLaKhaH, from the same root as HaLiKhaH, refers to Jewish Law. This suggests that the path we choose should be the lawful one, not the unlawful one. And, just as Netzach and Hod are adjacent energies to Tiferet (Torah, i.e., Law), the skills necessary to develop our forward motion depend on our knowledge of Halakhah.