



PARDES HANNAH

פרדס חנה

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Gosher Gesharim: Creating Webs of Radical Connection.

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Ellul-and-the-Days-of-Awe are a propitious time for us to explore the nature of our commitments and connections, our ability to stretch and re-calibrate. While daily life affords countless chances for reflecting on such bonds, the month of Ellul and the Days of Awe form a 40-day period of intensified reflection on the big questions. Even for those of us who don't have a daily practice, Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur are protected, communally sanctioned "retreats": *time-out* that allows for *time-in*.

In this era of political polarization and virtual friendships, we might be asking how we cultivate deep interpersonal connections, including caring bonds across political, religious, class and cultural difference. We might explore what happens when the veils of separation between people and peoples grow thinner, and we connect heart to heart, even across difference. The philosopher Martin Buber spoke of moments of I-You relation, where one becomes radically "present" with another, not hiding---letting the other into one's life. This involves a stance of radical trust: trusting the other and supposing the other "is also ready to deal with me as a partner."

The practice of seeing the world as a web of interconnection is both cheering and threatening to many of us. Where do we draw the boundaries? How porous are the boundaries? How safe do we need to feel before we can truly open? How confident do we feel with radical "not-knowing," living one's life as a wager that connection across divides is not only possible but potentially life-affirming and holy?

Deep connection enables ones to see the world through new eyes, to more skillfully surf the ebb and flow of relationship. It invites or challenges us to see the other as *tzelem elohim*, an image of the divine. Rabbi Aqiva held that the key teaching of the Torah is "to love one's neighbor as oneself." Ben Azzai demurred, holding that the key teaching is not necessarily loving the other so much as recognizing the other as "an image of God." When there cannot be love, he avers, let there be caring.

Other models of deep connection involve *havruta* or spiritual friendship, which entails the ability to listen deeply, to share in the joys and sadness of life's journey. Still other radical connections stretch across the generational divides. Others may cross the species divide: what is our responsibility and our shared community with animals and green living things and the more-than-human realm.

Thinking back over the past year, the year of Bernie and Trump, Hillary and Black Lives Matter, another year of yearning for peace in Israel-Palestine and beyond---from the big issues to the small ones that are also vital: what are our webs of connections with loved ones and not so loved ones, what is the nature of our hunger and longing for deeper connection, or less freighted connection? How do we cultivate and deepen such moments of radical connection, extend their lessons into our more ordinary lives?

What are the stances that open us to such encounters? And what are the practices (such as prayer, meditation, thanksgiving and the offering of blessing) that enable one to stand *in moments of heightened awareness*--- to note, celebrate and begin to integrate moments of inter-being with other beings and

with the divine source?

And what of our relations with the divine: what of *devequt*, the practice of radically connecting to the divine source, of holding the divine presence before us at all times, finding more skillful ways of aligning oneself with, and opening to, the life-force.

Martin Buber spoke of becoming less fearful *goshet gesharim*: courageous builders of bridges. What might this mean in our relations with our families, our acquaintances, our enemies; with our fellow Jews, with communities that have historically experienced enmity? What courage does this demand from us? What humility? What not-knowing? What balance between reverence and action, self-critique and self-regard, compassion for self and compassion for others, and yes, between דחילו ורחימו (*dehillu u-rehimu*) between Awe and Love, that is the signature of this Season of Turning.”

Shanah tovah u-metukah

May we be inscribed for Life and be graced with many moments of sweetness in the coming Year.