

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –  
Parshat Ha’Azinu**

**Cultivating the spiritual practice of Remembering**

Based on a teaching from the Piaseczner Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapira, from “*Bnei Machshava Tova – People of Positive Mindfulness and Higher Consciousness.*” Translation from: “*Experiencing the Divine: A Guide to Jewish Spiritual Practice & Community*”, by Yaacov David Shulman, with Yiscah Smith’s understanding.

The Piaseczner Rebbe writes in his introduction to *Bnei Machshava Tova*, written in the late 1920’s, a short and deeply profound gem of a text, that the inherent aspiration and hope of every Jew is actually the same: to be in service to God, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak, and the God of Yaakov. A service that expresses wholeheartedness and presence, with our entire being. A service that utilizes all the limbs of our body and spirit, so that not one fiber of our body nor one spark of our spirit will ever extend beyond the holiness of the Divine presence, which hovers upon us and encompasses us.

And therefore, he offers the following prayer: “Our Father, Compassionate Father, have compassion on us. Awaken within our hearts a spark of desire and awareness, so that we will know that it is not enough to be like a mere servant, the son of a maidservant. It is true that he too serves and obeys the King, but his work is to grind away at the millstones, **far from the King**. He does not hear the King’s words nor does he enjoy or take pleasure by sensing the illuminating beauty of the King’s radiance. Rather his is a service with a **closed mind and a dulled heart**.

Instead, we passionately desire and long to be among those described in the Torah: ‘You are children of Hashem your God.’ (Deuteronomy 14:1) So, whenever we do Your work, whether in learning Torah, prayer or observing any of the *mitzvot*, **we sense our closeness to You**”.

Cultivating this type of service, the Piaseczner passionately believes that we will then be able to feel ourselves continuously growing closer to God --- enjoying the radiance of His glory, sensing His presence --- but not only when we pray and do *mitzvot*. He states, “**If we focus on holiness with clarity, strength and connection in each and every moment, we can actually sense the presence of God that infuses all creation, at all times**. Each of us can see with our own eyes that we stand in Hashem’s garden, in paradise, before God’s throne of glory.” It is precisely for this purpose that he wrote *Bnei Machshava Tova*, where he provides spiritual guidance, techniques and fundamental principles that will help any one of us achieve this goal --- if we choose to do the work.

In his very first entry he responds to what he understands as an unfortunate, serious and sad condition among the Jewish community in Warsaw during the time in between WWI and WWII. Without severe judgment nor assigning blame, he compassionately observes that most Jewish people in fact do not feel close to God. Their service resembles more of the servant grinding away at the millstones, far from the King, rather than that of the child of the King, who experiences closeness and enjoyment by sensing the illuminating beauty of the King’s radiance. But why is this the case? Let us explore entry one where the Piaseczner brings a verse from Parshat Ha’Azinu as the fundamental reason for this all too common feeling of distance and estrangement from the Divine.

### Entry 1 – Forgetfulness – אֹת א’

הפסוק מייסר את ישראל ואומר: “ותשכח א-ל מחוללך” ([דברים לב, יח](#)). זהו עיקר הסיבה שמרחקת את האדם מן אלוקיו, ובתפילתו של רבי ר' אלימלך (רבי אלימלך מליז'נסק) זצלה”ה אמור: “תהא מחשבתינו זכה צלולה וברורה וחזקה” (תפילה קודם תפילה).

Scripture admonishes the Israelites, saying, “You have forgotten God Who gave birth to you.” (Deuteronomy 32:18). **This** is the underlying factor that distances a person from God. In the prayer that he composed, Rebbe Elimelech of Lyzhansk says: “May our thoughts be pure, transparent, clear and powerful...” (*authentic*)

וכל איש יודע, שבאם היה רואה בעיניו ממש איך הוא עומד לפני ה', לא היה לו שום יצה"ר.

Everyone knows that when we envision ourselves standing in God’s presence and literally sense before Whom we stand, we are not subject to distraction or temptation. (temptation is an expression of the *yetzer hara* – here it does not mean the inclination to commit outright sins, but any tendency to lose sight of our purpose and to disconnect).

אדרבא, את כל נפשו וכל נשמתו היה מוציא בדיבורים קדושים לפני ה', עד שיתבטל כולו ויתכלל על ידיהם בו ית'. ולא זו אף זו, שבשעה שרק דעתו ומחשבתו חזקה בה', גם כן מרגיש כל אחד בעצמו ביטול היצה"ר, וכל ארסו שמפעפע בחושי גופו בטלים אז לה'.

The opposite is true: we would be moved to pour forth our entire spirit and soul in deep and sincere prayer until we seem to rise up with our words into complete union with Him, be He Blessed. And not only this, but when our attention and consciousness is firmly focused on God, we can feel that the urge to disconnect ceases to exist; then all of its poison, which usually penetrates and permeates one’s physical senses, becomes eradicated in this union with God.

והאם אין כל אחד מישראל מרגיש, למשל ביום הכיפורים ובפרט בעת כל נדרי ונעילה: ביטול כל תאוה והרהור ורצון לא טוב, מפני שמחשבתו ברה חזקה אז בה'?

Is it not true that all Jews experience something like this, for example on Yom Kippur, especially during the emotional prayers of *Kol Nidre* and *Neilah*? At moments like these, doesn't one feel that all lusts and thoughts of improper desires no longer exist, since at these moments a person's consciousness is clear and so resolutely focused on God?

**כל עיקר חסרון של נפילת האדם הוא "ותשכח אל מחוללך", שנופל ממחשבתו, ואינו זכה ברה וחזקה תמיד כמו ביום הכיפורים וכדומה.**

**The very essence of the imperfection caused by our human descent, the whole reason we fall away from the intensity of this awareness is: "You have forgotten God Who gave birth to you."** A person descends from his mindfulness. One's consciousness is not always as pure, clear and strong as it is on Yom Kippur and other such auspicious times.

ואפילו אם ירצה האיש לחזק ולהגביר את דעתו ומחשבתו, לא יוכל להתמיד כך במחשבתו זמן יותר ארוך.

And even if someone would want to strengthen and empower his mind and consciousness, he would be unable to sustain this mindfulness consistently for any significant period of time.

וכיון שכן, כל עבודתנו צריכה להיות איך לחזק את מחשבותנו: להרחיבה, לחזקה, ולשכללה, ולקשרה לה' ית'. שלא רק בזמנים אלו, בראש השנה בשעת התקיעות, יום הכיפורים וכדומה. רק גם תמיד תהיה ברה חזקה וקשורה בקדושה.

**Therefore, all our work must center on how to strengthen our mindfulness: how to broaden it, empower it, enhance it, so we can sense our connection to God more consistently. And not only during these times, as the shofar blowing on Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur and other similar auspicious times. Rather, so that our consciousness will be clearly and strongly connected to holiness at all times.**

In closing I invite you to consider adopting the following three practices:

1 - Visualize in your mind someone whom you remember frequently and think of a lot, someone whom you recall periodically from time to time and someone whom you seldom remember, perhaps even forgotten. Observe your feelings along the spectrum of sensing closeness at one end to feeling distant at the other end. Observe what other feelings arise in each case.

2 – Within the context of this teaching, how do you feel about your relationship with the Divine? I encourage you to observe rather than judge. Ideally, what would you like to start, stop and continue?

3 – Choose a specific time each day, let’s say for a week or perhaps even a month, and dedicate this time to spending a few moments remembering the Divine and how you perceive and experience Her Presence in your life, in the lives of your loved ones and friends and others with whom you connect and in the world at large, perhaps within nature.