

COUNTING THE OMER

A Personal Journal

I AM
THOU art THAT

I AM

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Introduction

For centuries, the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot have been used by the Jewish people as a time for intense introspection and spiritual growth. This Omer journal was developed to perpetuate the practice among liberal Jews and others.

In the Book of Leviticus (23:15), Torah instructs us, “You shall count from the day that you brought the omer as a wave offering.” The omer was a measure of barley (roughly two quarts) that Jews brought to the Temple as an offering on the afternoon of the second day of Pesach (Passover). From that point on, they counted 49 days leading up to the festival of Shavuot, which celebrates the giving and receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Counting the omer, however, was more than a device to keep track of Shavuot, and it is its deeper spiritual meaning that has kept it alive over the past 2000 years. To understand the deeper meaning, we have to remember the inner message of Passover. In Hebrew, the word for Egypt is *mitzrayim*, which means narrow places, limitations, boundaries. While Passover does mark the historic exodus from Egypt, its spiritual meaning has to do with our personal exodus from the narrow places in our lives. We are given the opportunity on Pesach to leave behind all limitations.

Yet most of us need external limitations, rules, and boundaries to keep ourselves in check. The challenge of Judaism is to refine our character to the point where we have no need for external limits because we are so in touch with God and so honoring of creation that we engage the world without thought of exploitation or selfishness.

The 49 days of *S'firat haOmer* (Counting the Omer) are an opportunity to move toward that ideal by examining and refining our characters. Each day we are to move one step closer to being the just and kind person we were intended to be.

The culmination of S'firat haOmer is Shavuot, the giving and receiving of the Torah at Sinai. For some, this seems like a contradiction. Did we leave the confines of Egyptian rule to subjugate ourselves to Torah's rule? Did we refine our characters to be free of external laws only be weighed down with a new set of laws? Where is the freedom in this? Freedom as Judaism understands it is not license. Being free does not mean we are free to do whatever we wish. Indeed, striving to grasp all that we desire is a sure sign of our enslavement to desire. Freedom is the freedom to be the holy person you were born to be, free to be that unique manifestation of Divinity that is your true nature. Torah is given to help us do for ourselves what we could not do by ourselves. Torah points to the higher truths of universal justice and compassion that the self alone would not instinctively pursue, and binds us to a community of like-minded seekers whose efforts toward God realization support and further our own.

During S'firat haOmer, we take ourselves as far as we can on our own. On Shavuot we are given the tools, guidance, and communal support we need to go even farther.

The Tree of Life

As the traditions around S'firat haOmer developed, they became inseparably bound up with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is a symbolic map of the inner flow of divine energy and how it manifests in our physical reality.

There are ten such manifestations, called the ten sefirot:

- Keter/pure consciousness
- Hokhma/wisdom
- Binah/understanding
- Chesed/compassion
- Gevurah/restraint
- Tiferet/harmony
- Netzach/perseverance
- Hod/humility
- Yesod/bonding
- Malchut/dignity

The first three sefirot are not considered character traits and are not included in the spiritual work of S'firat haOmer. Indeed, these higher sefirot cannot be activated until the others are properly cultivated.

Each of the seven weeks of S'firat haOmer is devoted to one of the seven ethical sefirot. Each day of the week is devoted to one of the seven as well: Sunday is Chesed/compassion; Monday is Gevurah/restraint; Tuesday is Tiferet/harmony; Wednesday is Netzach/perseverance; Thursday is Hod/humility; Friday is Yesod/bonding; Saturday is Malchut/dignity. Thus the first day of the first week focuses on the Chesed aspect of Chesed; the second day of the first week focuses on the Gevurah aspect of Chesed, and so on.

Using the Omer Journal

This Omer Journal is a tool for keeping track of and aiding your spiritual work from Passover to Shavuot. It contains a separate page for each day of the omer period. Each page has three components:

1. the specific **character trait** upon which to reflect during that day,
2. a **teaching** from Reb Yerachmiel to be mulled over throughout the day, and
3. a **thought on prayer** to aid your contemplative practice.

Space is given for you to keep a written account of your responses to Reb Yerachmiel and your progress with self-refinement. You will find that using the journal will make the introspection of the Omer period more effective. If you are sharing the experience of counting the omer with others, having your journal at hand when you get together will help you recall your thoughts, feelings, and reactions more accurately.

How to Count the Omer

The omer is counted at night. Given that the "Jewish day" starts on the evening of the prior "secular day," remember to count the omer that is coming, not the day that has past. Thus on Monday night, you will read the counting for Tuesday.

Following your reading of the comments on the day's S'firat haOmer page, continue with 30 minutes of meditation. In this way, your unconscious mind will mull over the character trait to be analyzed during the following day and thereby enrich the quality of your thinking during the day.

Be sure to write down any important thoughts or insights or questions that arise.

Omer Blessing

The blessing for counting the omer is:

*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Ruach haOlam
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al s'firat ha-omer.*

Blessed are You, Breath of all Life,
Who provides me with this opportunity
to refine my life through the counting of the omer.

Today is the (insert the appropriate number)
day of counting the omer.

Today I will focus my attention on
my capacity to (insert the day's character trait).

May my efforts aid in the redemption of the world
through justice, mercy, and spiritual awakening.

Amen.

Sh'ma Meditation

*Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.
Baruch shem kavod malchuto l'olam va-ed.*

Listen, Israel: That which we call God is Oneness Itself.
Blessed is the One Who manifests the many.

*V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha
b'chol l'vavcha,
uv'chol nafsh'cha,
uv'chol m'odecha.
V'hayu had'varim ha-eileh
asher anochi m'tzav'cha hayom al l'vavecha.
V'shinantam l'vanecha.
V'dibarta bam
b'shivt'cha b'veitecha
uv'lecht'cha vaderech.
Uv'shochb'cha uv'kumecha.
Uk'shartam l'ot al yadecha,
v'hayu l'totafot bein einecha.
Uch'tavtam al m'zuzot beitecha uvish'arecha.*

Love God with every beat of your heart,
with every breath of your mouth,
with all you have and are.
Speak of God and the path to God.
Let all children see in you a model for holiness.
Open to God when you sit in your house,
when you walk on your path,
when you lie down,
and when you rise up.
Bind this awareness upon your hand
that your deeds be just.
Make it a lens before your eyes
revealing the One manifest as the Many.
Write these words upon the doorposts of your house
and make your home a place of peace.
Carve them upon your gates
that your going out and your coming in be for peace.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

PREPARING FOR THE OMER:

25 Principles for Right Living

The Hebrew Bible provides practical benchmarks for examining one's level of spirituality. Chief among these is the Holiness Code found in the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19. As you move into the weeks of S'firat haOmer, it is vital to have a clear assessment of where you are spiritually. Read the following carefully, consider the questions, and then complete the self-assessment at the end.

1. **You shall be holy, because I, Adonai your God, am holy.**

The Hebrew word for holy is *kadosh*. It means separate, operating on a different plane. We are asked to live on a higher plane than our ego might prescribe. Holiness is often counter-instinctual, asking us to refrain from things that are natural and to do things that are not so natural.

When do you experience these moments of holiness?

2. **Revere your father and mother.**

The Ten Commandments tell us to “honor” our parents. Here we are told to revere them as well. *Honor* is taken to mean that we insure they have food, clothing, and shelter. *Revere* is understood to mean that we do not seek to usurp their place, interrupt them when they are speaking, or contradict them in a disrespectful manner.

How does this apply to you and your parents?

3. **Keep My Sabbaths.**

The reference here is to three specific Sabbaths: the weekly day of rest, the sabbatical year, and the Jubilee year. The first puts the work week in perspective. The second marks the stages of your personal life. The third marks the deepening spiritual letting go that comes with the second half of life heralded by the Jubilee year.

How might you use the Sabbath principle to enrich your life spiritually?

4. **Do not turn to idols or make gods for yourselves.**

Idols and gods are ego projections that keep us from seeing and pursuing our highest potential.

What are some of the idols and gods that lure you? How might you free yourself from them?

5. **Sacrifice with the right intent and at the right time.**

The rabbis taught that intent was the key issue here; improper intent can result in *karet*, being spiritually cut off from God.

How might wrongful intent cause this to happen? What are some of the sacrifices you have made? What are some you are still called upon to make? What is the right intent and time for sacrifice?

6. **Do not reap the corners of your fields nor gather the gleanings of your harvest.**

The corners and the gleanings were to be left for the poor. This

means that a portion of our earnings must be devoted to the survival of others. This is a restricting of self that makes room for others to succeed from our success.

How might that be done in your life?

7. Do not pick the undeveloped twigs of your vineyard.

Unripened vines must be allowed to mature; single grapes may not be picked, but only clusters.

What might 'unripened vines' mean in your life? What might you be tempted to pick too early? How can you let it grow?

8. Leave the fallen fruit to the poor.

Fruit that has ripened and fallen to the ground before you can pick it is no longer yours but must be left for the poor and powerless.

To what might this refer in your life?

9. Do not steal.

This refers not simply to tangible property unjustly taken, but also to intangibles such as time, energy, hopes, and dreams.

What has been stolen from you? Who did the stealing? What do you tend to steal from others? How can you stop stealing?

10. Do not lie.

People lie to protect themselves. The truth is often unflattering. It can get us into trouble. Many people have specific aspects of their lives where lying is almost automatic.

When do you lie? Why? What are you trying to protect? What might it be like to live with radical honesty about oneself?

11. Do not swear falsely by My Name.

People often use God to excuse the basest human hungers: greed, power, selfishness. "God" may be the most powerful and potentially dangerous word in any language.

Where is "God" misused? What can you do to end such misuse?

12. Do not cheat another.

The very fabric of civilization rests upon our being able to trust one another to do what we say. When cheating, we deliberately mislead another to further our own gain.

Where might you be cheating? Why do you do it? How can you stop?

13. Do not rob.

According to the sages, robbing refers to cheating a person out of rightfully earned wages. Torah is telling us to honor our contracts.

Where might you be promising one thing and delivering another?

14. Do not withhold a worker's wage until morning.

You cannot withhold wages past the agreed upon time of payment. If you promise to pay at the end of the day, you cannot wait until morning. If you promise to pay at the end of the week, you cannot wait until after Shabbat. Employers have an obligation to honor their contracts and must take care not to exploit the worker. This is true even if you do not formally employ someone.

Where might this commandment be relevant in your life even outside the work environment?

15. Do not curse the deaf.

The deaf cannot hear what you are saying, yet still you must refrain from saying it.

Why? What damage does such talk do even if the person spoken about is unaware of it? How might this apply to your life?

16. Do not put a stumbling block before the blind.

This refers to any situation in which you can take advantage of someone because you see something or know something the other does not. We are responsible for each other's well being and must do nothing to undermine it.

Where might you be putting a stumbling block before the blind?

17. Do not pervert justice to favor the poor or the powerful.

Justice is only just if it is impartial. Feelings about either the rich

or the poor, the powerful or the powerless, must be put aside when deciding what is right and wrong.

What assumptions do you make about "the rich" or "the poor" that might cloud your thinking and render you less than impartial?

18. Judge everyone with righteousness.

Give everyone the benefit of the doubt. This principle is usually applied in social situations where motive and intent are hard to judge, rather than in legal situations where reparations for damages must be made regardless of mitigating circumstances.

How might this apply to your life?

19. Do not gossip.

Gossip is a powerful and destructive force. And it is so easy to do.

What leads you to gossip? What might you do to avoid it?

20. Do not stand aside while your neighbor's blood is shed.

If another is in danger, you are obligated to do all that you can, short of self-destruction, to help. It is vital to society that people know they can count on the kindness and courage of strangers.

Can strangers count on you?

21. Do not hate in your heart.

Torah does not say you must not hate, only that your hatred must have limits; it cannot get so deep as to be in your heart.

What does “in your heart” mean to you? Do you ever hate that deeply? When? What triggers it? How can you avoid it?

22. Reprove another’s error, but do not sin when doing so.

Torah says we are to correct each other’s mistakes, but that we must take care to do so in a manner that does not embarrass the other person. Embarrassing another is the sin referred to here.

How might you reprove someone without embarrassing them? Why does Torah say we should reprove each other? What is the bigger issue here? Do you reprove people? Do you do it well, or do you often “sin” in your manner of reproof? How do you know?

23. Do not take revenge.

According to our sages, revenge is a physical act of retaliation against another person. It is revenge when you actively and deliberately seek to do someone harm.

Why is this a perfect example of the Torah’s counter-intuitive ethics? How does it relate to your life?

24. Do not bear a grudge.

Our sages say that bearing a grudge means to constantly remind a person of his or her failings and shortcomings. For example, you agree to lend a neighbor a tool but say, “I am willing to lend this to you even though you refused to lend me what I needed.” Rashi says that God wants us to purge resentment from our hearts.

How can we do this?

25. Love your fellow as yourself.

Rabbi Akiva said that this was the central principle of the entire Torah. Hillel paraphrased it, saying, “Do not do to another what is hateful to yourself.” Maimonides taught that only the most saintly person can love all people equally. All Torah is asking, he says, is that we wish for others the same degree of success and prosperity that we wish for ourselves and that we treat each other with utmost respect. The Alter of Slobodka said this commandment means that “just as we instinctively love ourselves and accept even our basest traits, so we should love others without first seeking a reason for doing so.”

Where does this principle operate in your life? What difficulties do you have with it? What rewards does it hold for you?

1

CHESED of CHESED

Your capacity to love another

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Franz Kafka wrote:

"In the struggle between
yourself and the world,
second the world."

*Where are you and the world
in conflict?*

*What can you let go of
this night that would ease
the conflict?*

*What a great wonder that you should be able to draw so near to God in prayer.
How many walls there are between you and God, yet a single word of prayer
can topple all the walls and bring you close to God.*

–Liqqutim Yeqarim 2b

GEVURAH of CHESED

Your capacity to restrain
inappropriate love

2

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Ramana Maharshi wrote:

"Reality is simply the loss of
the ego. Destroy the ego by
seeking its identity. It will
automatically vanish and
reality will shine forth by
itself. This is the direct
method."

Who are you really?

*When you speak even a few words of prayer in love and awe,
the power of your word gives birth to God's glory.*

– Maggid Devaraw Le-Ya'aqov 27a

3 *TIFERET of CHESED* Your capacity for empathy

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "I would beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart, and to try to love the questions themselves... Don't search for the answers. Live the questions now. Perhaps, then, someday far in the future, you will gradually—without even noticing it—live your way into the answer."

What are your questions?

How can you live them?

How great is even a single word of prayer: it causes the angles to sing to God! All the worlds join with you as you open your heart to God.

– Maggid Devaraw Le-Ya'aqov 27a

NETZACH of CHESED 4 Your capacity to make and keep long-term loving commitments

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Ramana Maharshi said, "No one doubts his or her own existence, though you may doubt the existence of God. If you find out the truth about yourself and discover your own source, that is all that is required."

What are your deepest doubts?

What is the truth about yourself?

What is your source?

Prayer answers itself. When you pray, you bind yourself to the Flow of Life, and that in and of itself is the answer to your prayer.

–Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

5 *HOD of CHESED*

Your capacity to forgive a loved one

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Moses said,
"For this pattern which I
give you today is not
hidden from you, and it is
not far away. It is not in
heaven for you to say, 'Who
will go up to heaven and
bring it down for us, so that
we can hear and do it?' Nor
is it beyond the sea for you
to say, 'Who will cross the
sea and bring it back for us,
so that we can hear it and
do it?' But the teaching is
very near to you, it is in
your mouth and in your
heart, so that you can do it."

What is the teaching?

Where have you hidden it?

When will you do it?

It is possible to be so humble that humility itself is a stumbling block to you. Know that you are empty of permanence and be humbled by that. But know, too, that you are created in the image and likeness of God; be emboldened by that. Use your power to open the heavens with your prayer. Use your humility to open your heart to heaven.

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

YESOD of CHESED

Your capacity for intimacy

6

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Ramana Maharshi said,
"The whole of wisdom is
contained in two Biblical
statements: 'I am that I AM'
and 'Be still and know that I
am God.'"

*What do these teachings
mean to you?*

How can you live them?

Faith is the basis of all prayer. What is the basis of faith? "God renews each day the work of Creation." If you have faith, every day is a new Creation, all the worlds are new, and you, yourself, have just been born. How could you not want to sing in praise of the freedom and freshness of this new Creation?

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

7

MALKUT of CHESED

Your capacity to love in a manner
that promotes dignity in self and other

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

God said,
"Do not make idols to
yourselves. And do not
erect a monument to
yourselves. And do not put
a stone mosaic in your land
for bowing over. For only I
am the Eternal your God.

*What idols have you made
to yourself?*

How can you tear them down?

*What monument have you
erected to bring others to
honor you?*

How can you remove it?

*Where are you surrendering
yourself to an image of
yourself?*

How can you free yourself?

*Take special care to guard your tongue before your morning prayer.
A person who wakes up in the morning is like a new creation.
Begin your day with unkind or trivial words, and the day is tainted.
All of your words each day are related to one another.
All of them are rooted in the first words that you speak that day.*

– Israel Baal Shem Tov

CHESED OF GEVURAH
Your capacity to make judgments
without being judgmental

8

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Abu Yazid al-Bistami said,
"This thing we tell of can
never be found by seeking,
yet only seekers find it."

What are you seeking?

Where do you seek it?

How can you find it?

*Prayer leads to compassion. Aligning yourself with God through prayer
returns you to your most spiritually simple state; a state of nonduality
where you and God are both absorbed into the vast emptiness of Ain Sof/Infinity.
This nonduality opens the heart to its connectedness with all life,
which in turn fills our otherwise tight and frightened egos
with an expansive compassion for all living things.*

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

9

GEVURAH of GEVURAH

Your capacity to be ordered and orderly
without being obsessive

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Ramana Maharshi said,
"When we stop regarding
the unreal as real, then
reality alone will remain, and
we will be that."

What do you regard as real?

*What do you regard
as unreal?*

*How do you know you don't
have it backward?*

*One great sage taught: "Before you begin to pray, decide that you are ready to die
in that very prayer."*

*Before you pray, know that true prayer is an emptying of your self into God,
a dying of the separate self into the greater oneness of That Which Is.
Your "I" fades, and the "I Am" that is God—the true "I" behind every ego—
is made manifest. If you are not ready to die to falsehood and
awaken to the truth of yourself as a manifestation of God,
your prayer will fall short of its potential.*

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

TIFERET of GEVURAH
Your capacity to feel compassion
even for those you dislike

10

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Jesus said,
"The kingdom of God is
within you."

What is the Kingdom of God?

*How does it manifest in
your life?*

*Enter into prayer slowly. Do not exhaust your strength, but proceed step by step.
Even if you are not moved as the prayer begins, pay close attention to the meanings
of each word as you speak it. As your confidence grows and God draws you near,
you can speak more naturally and enter into the Divine Presence*

– Zawa'at RIVaSH 4a-b

11 *NETZACH of GEVURAH* Your capacity for follow-through

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Rainier Maria Rilke wrote,
"For one human being to
love another human being:
that is perhaps the most
difficult task that has been
entrusted to us, the
ultimate task, the final test
and proof, the work for
which all other work is
merely preparation."

What is love?

Whom do you love?

How do you know?

How do they know?

A person who is truly at prayer must seek to go beyond the material world. You should speak simply and devote all your attention to the meanings of your words. In this way, you will draw near to God, and your heart will be set aflame with love.

– Pitgamin Qaddishin 17a

HOD of GEVURAH 12 Your capacity to make judgments without being arrogant

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Lin-chi said,
"When you meet the
Buddha, kill the Buddha."

Who is the Buddha?

Why must you kill him?

How can a person come to know God's hidden ways?

The stars, which by day are hidden, can nevertheless be seen by one who uses the proper lens.

God, Who is hidden in the world, can be seen through the lens of prayer.

Just as the stars can be seen without a lens when the night is dark,

so God can be seen in silence when you enter the dark night of meditation

– Shemu'ah Tovah 73b, adapted

13 *YESOD of GEVURAH*

Your capacity to make and keep commitments

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

We read in Torah:
"But YHVH has not given
you a mind to know or eyes
to see or ears to hear until
this day." (Deuteronomy 29:3)
This day; today; right now.

*What do you know now
that you did not know a
moment ago?*

*When you transcend your sense of self and separateness
and come to realize that you are nothing but God,
then you can look deeply into all things and see that they, too, are God.*

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

MALCHUT of GEVURAH 14

Your capacity to restrain yourself
from self-defeating behaviors

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Abraham Isaac Kook wrote,
"It is our right to hate the
actions of evil people. But
because they, too, are the
image of God, it is our duty
to honor them with love."

Whom do you hate?

Whom do you honor?

*How can you honor those
you hate?*

*What would it take for you
to see even the hated as the
image of God?*

*Imagine that the letters of prayer are the garments of God.
What a joy to be making a garment for God with your words!
Enter into each letter with all your strength.
God dwells in each letter; and as you enter it,
you become one with God.*

– Zawa'at RIVaSH 13a

15 *CHESED of TIFERET*

Your capacity to be helpful
without being condescending

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Lao Tzu said,
"I have just three things to
teach: simplicity, patience,
compassion. These three
are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in
thoughts, you return to the
source of being. Patient
with both friends and
enemies, you accord with
the way things are. Com-
passionate toward yourself,
you reconcile all beings in
the world."

*Where are you simple?
Patient? Compassionate?*

*What more can you do to
cultivate each of these
treasures in your life?*

*Let nothing be seen as a distraction to your prayer.
Rather, uplift every sound in your song of joy and praise and thanksgiving.
All that surrounds you can be included in your prayer and uplifted.
Even the song of a passing bird may go into your prayer
and become part of the symphony you compose to God.*

– Darkhey Tzedek 6b

GEVURAH of TIFERET 16

Your capacity to translate compassion
into focused action

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

We read in Torah,
"Justice, justice you are to
pursue in order that you
may live..." (Deuteronomy
16:20) Why pursue and not
capture? Why chase after
and not establish? Because
justice is never steady state.
Justice is not once and for
all. Justice is a quality of
doing that must be reestab-
lished with each deed done.

How are you pursuing justice?

*Where might you be taking
justice for granted?*

*How do you prepare yourself
for justice in every act of doing?*

*You should become so concentrated in prayer
that you lose awareness of your physical body.
The letters and words of your prayers seem to flow together seamlessly,
seemingly spoken of their own accord.
This is the gateway to union with God.*

– Israel Baal Shem Tov

17 *TIFERET of TIFERET*

Your capacity to be compassionate
with people you find difficult

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Meister Eckhart said,
"The eye through which I
see God is the same eye
through which God sees
me; my eye and God's eye
are one eye, one seeing, one
knowing, one love."

*What do you see when you
look through the one eye
of love?*

*Where are you blind to
seeing and being seen?*

*What can you do to open
your eye more often?*

*When you focus all your attention on prayer,
you may begin to see sparks of light shining from within your words.
The lights within each letter touch one another
and together they ignite even more sparks.
These are the flames of God's Light pouring into Creation moment to moment.
This experience of light is what the Psalmist spoke of when he said,
"Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart."*

– Israel Baal Shem Tov

NETZACH of TIFERET 18

Your capacity to make good
on promises to help another

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Catherine of Sienna said,
"All the way to heaven
is heaven.

What is heaven?

What is the way to heaven?

*When your prayer is pure and unstained with ego,
the breath that rises from your lips
joins with the Breath that is always flowing into you from God.
In reference to this, our masters said,
"Every breath shall praise God; with every single breath you breathe, God is praised."
As the breath leaves you, it merges with God and returns to you as God's breath.
Thus that part of God which is within you
is reunited with its Source through your breathing.*

– Liqutim Yeqarim 12a

19 *HOD of TIFERET*

Your capacity to be humble when helping others

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

William Blake wrote,
"If the doors of perception
were cleansed, everything
would appear to us as it is:
infinite."

*What blots your doors
of perception?*

How might you clean them?

The world was created with the downward flow of Breath. Your task is to return that breath to God through words of prayer and the silence of meditation. When you come to see this process of Breath, you awaken to being a part of the constant flow of Creation.

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

YESOD of TIFERET 20

Your capacity to bond with those you help

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

The Prophet Muhammad,
peace be upon him, said,
"Wherever you turn, there is
God's face."

Where do you turn?

Whose face do you see?

Your prayer opens a channel for the Divine Flow, filling you and all the world with God. It happens continually. Time has no meaning in the sight of God. The Divine Spring is limitless and ever-flowing. Your task is to make of yourself a channel for the Living Waters of God so that through you, all Creation is nourished and blessed.

– Liqutim Yeqarim 12a

21 *MALCHUT of TIFERET*

Your capacity to help others
without demeaning them

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

Philo wrote,
"The goal of wisdom is
laughter and play—not the
kind that one sees in little
children who do not yet
have the faculty of reason,
but the kind that is devel-
oped in those who have
grown mature through
both time and understand-
ing. If someone has experi-
enced the wisdom that can
only be heard from oneself,
learned from oneself, and
created from oneself, one
does not merely participate
in laughter: one becomes
laughter itself."

What is so funny?

*Do not imagine that the words of prayer rise up to God.
It is not the words themselves that ascend,
but the burning desire for God that inflames your heart that rises like smoke to Heaven.
If your prayer contains only words and lacks your heart's desire,
how can it rise up to God?*

– Or Ha-Me'ir 3:16c

CHESED of NETZACH 22

Your capacity to make both your ends
and your means just

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel was
rumored to be in posses-
sion of the last remaining
fruit from the Tree of
Knowledge of Good and
Evil. A seeker once traveled
many weeks to reach Reb
Yerachmiel's home to gaze
upon this holy treasure. The
man found Reb Yerachmiel
sitting beneath a tree eating
his lunch. In a golden bowl
beside him sat a single piece
of fruit.

"Is that the fruit from the
Tree of Knowledge of Good
and Evil?" asked the seeker.

"No," replied Reb Yerach-
miel, tossing aside the core
of an apple he had just
finished eating. "That was."

*What does the Fruit
taste like?*

*You should be so absorbed in prayer that you are no longer aware of yourself at all.
There is nothing in your awareness but the Flow of Life,
and all your thoughts are with God.
If you are aware of how intensely you are praying,
you are not praying intensely enough.*

.– Or Ha-Emet 2b

23 *GEVURAH of NETZACH*

Your capacity to break bad habits

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once approached Reb Yerachmiel and asked, "In Torah, we read, 'YHVH, God, called out to Adam and said: "Where are you?"' (Genesis 3:9) How can it be that God does not know the whereabouts of Adam?"

Reb Yerachmiel grabbed a burlap bag that was laying on a nearby chair and tossed it over the head of the student. "It isn't that God does not know where Adam is; it is that Adam doesn't know where Adam is. And neither do you.

"So quickly, without eyes or ears, where are you at this very moment?"

You must forget yourself in prayer.

In such prayer you transcend time, and all things are one.

Distinctions between life and death, land and sea, lose their meaning.

But none of this can happen if you are attached to the material world.

In this world you are distracted by thoughts of good and evil,

distinctions that have no meaning in the higher worlds.

You cannot attain the heights of prayer

if you are attached to the world of time and space.

– Maggid Devaraw Le-Ya'aqov 69a

TIFERET of NETZACH 24

Your capacity to facilitate the growth of others

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

"YHVH, God, said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?'" (Genesis 3:13) God asks this of us at each moment.

What is this you have done?

What are you doing now?

Your body is finite, your spirit is infinite.

Before you begin to pray, cast aside that which limits you and enter into the limitless world of Nothing.

In prayer, turn to God alone and have no thought of yourself.

Nothing but God exists for you, and you have ceased to exist as a separate being.

True redemption and healing can happen only when you step outside the limits of self.

.– Shemu'ah Tovah 80a

25 *NETZACH of NETZACH*

Your capacity to start
and maintain new habits

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once asked Reb Yerachmiel, "Why does God not answer Cain when he asks, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'" (Genesis 4:9)

Reb Yerachmiel replied, "Never mind Cain. Who is your keeper?"

*In prayer, seek to make yourself a vessel for God's Presence.
God, however, is limitless, Endless is God's Name.
How can any finite self become a vessel for the Infinite and Endless God?
Therefore, make yourself empty of self, see yourself without limits;
only one who is nothing can contain the fullness of the Nothing that is One.*

– Maggid Devaraw Le-Ya'aqov 14a

HOD of NETZACH 26

Your capacity to yield
from a position of strength

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

When God said to Avram, "Go forth from your land, from your kindred, from your father's house, to the land that I will let you see" (Genesis 12:1), God set forth the path of awakening: leave behind all you know and see what you do not yet see.

What is the land that you will see?

*As long as you can still say the words, "Blessed are You" by your own volition, know that you have not yet reached the deeper levels of prayer.
Be so stripped of self that you have neither the awareness nor the power to utter a single word on your own.*

– Avodat Yisra'el 98b

27 *YESOD of NETZACH*
Your capacity to maintain long term commitments to others

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once came to Reb Yerachmiel and asked, "Who is God?"

The rebbe replied, "I am God. Walk in presence! And be wholehearted!" (Genesis 17:1)

*You want to know God?
Walk in Presence! Be wholehearted!*

*There are times in prayer when the love of God burns so powerfully within your heart that the words of prayer seem to rush through you quickly and without conscious deliberation.
At such times, it is not you yourself who speaks; rather it is God who speaks through you.*

– Keter Shem Tov 38b

MALCHUT of NETZACH **28**
Your capacity to stand up for what is right and just

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A skeptic once interrupted Reb Yerachmiel's talk and asked, "Is anything beyond God?" (Genesis 18:14)

"Yes," the Rebbe replied.

"What is that?" the man asked.

"Nothing," answered the Rebbe. "Now show me the no-thing!"

*Make yourself like a shofar,
hollow and ready to make the sound of one who blows through you.
At such moments, know that it is God Who breathes through you and gives life to you.
You are the vessel for God's breath, you are the sound of God's Silence.*

– Maggid Devaraw Le-Ya'aqov 68a, adapted

29 *CHESED of HOD*

Your capacity to be humble
without being subtly arrogant

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once asked,
"What does Torah mean
when she says, 'Come, you
who are blessed by God,
why are you standing
outside?'" (Genesis 24:31)

"Just what she says," Reb
Yerachmiel replied. "Come
in! Come in!"

*There will be times in your prayer when you are praying in an ordinary state of mind
and you feel that you cannot draw near to God.*

Do not abandon your practice.

For there will come an instant in the midst of this ordinary prayer

when the light of your soul will be kindled and you will rise up to the highest worlds.

At that moment you are like one who has been given a ladder.

The light that shines within you is a gift from above.

– Liqutim Yeqarim 3d

GEVURAH of HOD 30

Your capacity to compromise
without feeling angry

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A woman once came to
Reb Yerachmiel and asked,
"I identify closely with the
despair of our Mother
Rebecca when she cries
out to God, 'If this be so,
why do I exist?' (Genesis
25:22) Tell me, Rebbe, why
do I exist?"

Reb Yerachmiel said, "Do
not ask the question,
answer it. What is the
reason for your existence?"

*All of your prayers should be for the sake of God's Presence,
who herself is called Prayer.*

Know that your needs are only a reflection of a need in the world

and that you should pray to have the greater need met and not merely your own.

In this way, you unite all the world in the quest for fullness and peace.

– Hekhal Berakhah 4:82a, adapted

31 *TIFERET of HOD*

Your capacity to cultivate humility
without also cultivating helplessness

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel once saw a student reading under the shade of an ancient oak. He snatched the book from the student's hands and said, "God is in this place and I, I did not know it! (Genesis 28:16) Now you know it. Who is this God? What does God want right here and right now?"

*The unpronounceable four-letter Name of God means that God was, is, and will be the Source and Substance of all the worlds.
When you see this Name in your prayers, the very Name itself is the Source of Life.
When you see this Name in your prayers, know that at that moment you are Face to Face with God,
and if you are ready for it, Scripture says of this moment,
"Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth."*

– Ketonit Passim 43b

NETZACH of HOD 32

Your capacity to be humble
without being weak

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Once a student came to ask Reb Yerachmiel about a career change she was contemplating.

The Rebbe listening quietly and said, "Am I in place of God?" (Genesis 30:2) If you say no, you insult me. If you say yes, you are an idolater. So answer me now!"

*Prayer is union with the Divine.
Just as two people will move their bodies back and forth as they begin the act of love,
so must you sway your body back and forth as you begin to join with God.
But as you reach the heights of union, both with humans and with God,
the movement of your body ceases
and you lose yourself in the bliss of selflessness.*

– Zawa'at RIVaSH 7b

33 *HOD of HOD*
Your capacity to be humble
without also being self-serving

LAG B'OMER!
Take The Day Off

*Be joyful always. Know that God's Presence is within you.
Know that wherever you look, you are looking at God
and God is looking at you.
God's flowing Life is everywhere.
In God only should you trust.
In God only should you feel wonder.*

– Zawa'at RIVaSH 18a

YESOD of HOD **34**
Your capacity to be humble
without withdrawing from the world

REB YERACHMIEL'S NOTEBOOK

God said,
"Who told you you were
naked?" (Genesis 3:11)

*So, who was it in your life
that taught you were naked?*

*Who was it in your life who
introduced the shame of
being your simple self?
Do you know? Can you tell?*

*Can you make peace with
the person?*

Can you say thank you?

*It is possible to pray so that no one is aware of the depth of your devotion.
Though you make no movement of your body,
you are engulfed in the loving flame of God.
And when you cry out in the ecstasy of that moment,
your cry will be a whisper.*

– Liqutim Yeqarim 15d

35

MALCHUT of HOD

Your capacity to be humble
without suppressing your human spirit

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once asked,
“Why would the angel that
wrestled with Jacob say,
‘What is your name?’
(Genesis 32:28) Didn’t
he know with whom
he was wrestling?”

Reb Yerachmiel replied,
“The angel knew, but did
Jacob? We all wrestle
with angels—now tell me
your name.”

*When you stand before God in prayer, you should feel that you stand alone—
in all the world, only you and God exist.
Then there can be no distractions,
nothing can disturb you in your prayer.*

– Ben Porat Yosef 88d

CHESED of YESOD

Your capacity to bond
with the people you say you love

36

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once rose to ask
a question and said, “I have
seen God face to face and
my life has been saved.”
(Genesis 32:31)

Before another word could
be spoken, Reb Yerachmiel
shouted, “You’ve seen the
Face of God! Mazal tov!
Show it to me now!”

*Through everything you see, become aware of the Divine.
If you encounter love, recall the Love of God.
If you experience fear, think of the Awe of God.
Even in the bathroom, you should know
that you are separating the healthy from the unhealthy,
and devote yourself to the service of God.*

.– Zawa’at RIVaSH 3b

37 *GEVURAH of YESOD*
Your capacity to bond
without smothering those you love

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel was once walking with his students when they came to a fork in the road.

He turned to his students and said, "And I—where am I to go?" (Genesis 37:30) Without moving an inch, show me where you are going."

*Sometimes you may feel blocked in your prayer.
You know that the whole world is filled with God but you cannot feel it with your heart.
Do not despair.
At such times, you are like a child who is just beginning to understand
how close to God she is.
Even though your mind cannot yet transcend the world,
know that God is with you in your prayer*

– Zawa'at RIVaSH 7b

TIFERET of YESOD **38**
Your capacity to bond
with loved ones unconditionally

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once asked Reb Yerachmiel if the story of the Burning Bush was true.

The Rebbe replied, "Torah says, 'Here, the bush is burning with fire, and the bush is not consumed!' (Exodus 3:2) HERE the bush is burning! Right here! Quick, show me the bush that is not consumed."

*A person at prayer is like a bed of coals.
As long as a single spark remains, a great fire can again be kindled.
But without that single spark, no fire is possible.
Always remain attached to God, even in those times when you feel separate from God.
You must preserve that single spark—
lest the fire of your soul be extinguished.*

– Keter Shem Tov 37b–38a

39 *NETZACH of YESOD*

Your capacity to maintain a bond with a loved one
when things are rough between you

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A question was asked:
"If God commands Moses
'Put off your sandals from
your feet, for the place on
which you stand is holy
ground' (Exodus 3:5), why
don't Jews remove their
shoes when in prayer?"

The Rebbe replied, "Never
mind your shoes! Show me
how to stand on this holy
ground right now!"

*Take care of what you do in the moments immediately after prayer.
The fires you kindled may turn against you.
Your love of the One may distract you from caring for the many.
That is why it is good to turn from prayer and begin at once to work or study
and in this way channel your energies for the good*

.- Degel Mahaneh Ephraim 131b, adapted

HOD of YESOD 40

Your capacity to bond
without dominating

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel once said,
"Do not think that only
Moses should ask, 'Who
am I that I should go to
Pharaoh, that I should
bring the Children of
Israel out of Egypt?'
(Exodus 3:11) We are
all Moses. We are all
Pharaoh. We are all
Israel. Now show me
the Liberator."

*When you seek to be alone with God,
it is often wise to do so in the company of friends.
One alone can be in danger of getting lost,
and while each of you may turn to God separately,
you are there for each other should the need arise.
If you are more experienced, you may meditate alone,
but even then it is best to have someone else in the house with you.*

- Zawa'at RIVaSH 7b

41

YESOD of YESOD

Your capacity to bond with others
in pursuit of a common goal
even when you dislike the other people involved

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel taught:
"Each of us is a manifesta-
tion of God. And God's
most sublime name is
'Ehyeh asher Ehyeh' — I
will be howsoever I will
be. (Exodus 3:13–14)
What is good for God is
good for you—who are
you right now?"

*There will be times when you are not in prayer and yet feel close to God.
There will also be times deep in prayer when you feel separate from God.
In both cases, stand where you are and serve Life with love.*

– Zawa'at RIVaSH 17b, adapted

MALCHUT of YESOD

Your capacity to bond
without losing yourself
or dominating the other

42

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A philosophy student once
came to Reb Yerachmiel
and asked, "Where does evil
come from?"

Reb Yerachmiel replied,
"God said to Moses, 'Who
placed a mouth in human
beings or who is it that
makes one mute or deaf or
open-eyed or blind? Is it
not I, YHVH?' (Exodus 4:11)
Now, open your blind eye!"

*A prayer that is not spoken in the name of all the living
is no prayer.*

– Martin Buber, adapted

43 *CHESED of MALCHUT*

Your capacity to exercise authority
without being authoritarian

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel once addressed a class of rabbis: "Imagine a person comes to you and says, 'Who is YHVH that I should hearken to his voice...?' (Exodus 5:2) You have no time to think—show me YHVH now!"

*The Psalm reads, "It is good to sing unto God."
It is even better if you can sing in such a way
that God sings with you, in you.*

– Martin Buber, adapted

GEVURAH of MALCHUT 44

Your capacity to know where
your freedom ends and another's begins

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once complained to Reb Yerachmiel about this great dread that arose in her whenever she sat in meditation.

Reb Yerachmiel replied, "Do not be afraid! Stand fast and see...!" (Exodus 14:13) Without moving a muscle, tell me what you see."

*Imagine identical twins standing before you.
Each is beautiful and without flaw, but one is covered with a veil while the other is not.
The beauty of each is not diminished, but the beauty of one is not shining forth.
You are like the twin with the veil.
Your divinity is present but it is not shining forth.
Prayer is the means by which you remove the veil.*

– Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

45 *TIFERET of MALCHUT*

Your capacity to lead others
with compassion

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Once a philosophy professor sought to engage Reb Yerachmiel in a debate about the existence of God. "Can you show me this God of yours?" the professor asked.

Reb Yerachmiel replied, "You cannot see my face, for no human can see me and live! (Exodus 33:20) Knowing you will die as soon as you see, look and show me the Face of God!"

*Do not think that you are speaking to God as you might speak to a person.
With a person, there is distance and difference.
With God, time and space melt away
and there is nothing but knowing without knower or known.*

.- Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

NETZACH of MALCHUT 46

Your capacity to remain true
to your convictions
in the face of obstacles and resistance

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student came to Reb Yerachmiel and said, "I have studied and prayed for months now, but still I am unsure as to whether or not God exists."

Reb Yerachmiel replied, "Know today and lay it in your heart that YHVH is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath, there is nothing else." (Deuteronomy 4:39) Quick! Show me something that is not God!"

*In Scripture, it is written, "I shall not die but live" (Psalm 118:17).
To really live, you must first give your self to death.
You must first let go of the separate self and see that in that death you—the real you—
do not die, but live in, with, and as the fullness of God.*

.- Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael

47

HOD of MALCHUT

Your capacity to appreciate the uniqueness of both yourself and others

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

Reb Yerachmiel once addressed a student, saying, "I myself am troubled. Torah says that God fills all the world, and that 'I myself was standing between YHVH and you...' (Deuteronomy 5:5) Help me understand this: Quickly take your place between me and God that I might understand what Torah is saying."

*What was Adam's real sin?
Adam's real sin was that he worried about tomorrow.*

– Martin Buber

YESOD of MALCHUT

Your capacity to cultivate your self-esteem without diminishing the self-esteem of others

48

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student struggling with doing many mitzvot came to Reb Yerachmiel for advice.

Reb Yerachmiel said, "What does God ask of you except to ... walk in all his ways' (Deuteronomy 10:12–13). Now show me how you walk in God."

*"And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart."
Why "upon your heart" and not "in your heart"?
Because there are times when your heart is closed to the words of God.
At such times, let the words rest upon your heart by keeping them fresh in your mind.
And then, when the time of hardness passes and your heart once again opens,
the words will be there to enter into your heart once more.*

– Martin Buber, adapted

49 *MALCHUT of MALCHUT*

Your capacity to honor and affirm
your own divine uniqueness
regardless of outward success or failure

TALES OF REB YERACHMIEL

A student once came to see
Reb Yerachmiel about how
she might avoid the
conflicts in her life.

Reb Yerachmiel said, "See, I
place before you this day
blessing and curse...'
(Deuteronomy 11:26) Now
without desiring one or
flinching from the other,
embrace them both."

NOTES

*Rabbi Pinchas used to teach: Your soul will teach you.
Your soul is constantly teaching you,
and yet you often have such a hard time learning what it has to teach.
Why is this so?
Because while the soul teaches constantly,
it never repeats.*

– Martin Buber, adapted

About Rami Shapiro



Rami Shapiro is widely regarded as one of the most creative voices in contemporary American Judaism. An award-winning poet and essayist, he has created liturgies that are used in prayer services throughout North America. He has written more than a dozen works of poetry,

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Rabbi Shapiro is a graduate of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and holds a doctoral degree in religious studies from Union Graduate School. A congregational rabbi for 20 years, Rabbi Shapiro is currently the senior rabbi of Metivta, a center for contemplative Judaism in Los Angeles, California. Rami also directs the Simply Jewish Foundation (www.simplyjewish.com).

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