

CHAPTER 4: NETZACH

of it in his head is enough. The following source, however, should be sufficient:

“All of the prophets [when they had visions of prophecy] looked into a mirror⁹¹ that didn’t illuminate, [while] Moshe looked into a mirror that did illuminate.”
(Yevamot 49b)

Illumination here means “clear knowledge” or “intellectual apprehension” of G-d’s message. It’s part of the ongoing analogy that runs through all of the Torah, that light is a symbol for knowledge of G-d and objective truth. Moshe had a totally clear vision of G-d’s message, while other prophets received messages via metaphor or riddle.

What this means for us is that there is a certain intellectual clarity that *netzach*-types have. They are simply able to remember more facts than the rest of us and are able to understand them in a much deeper way. They naturally think very logically and have a keen intuition that helps them sense the correct meaning of a text, article or any other communication medium.

NETZACH AND WAR Our Archenemy

Netzach is usually translated as victory, as in some sort of military triumph. I couldn’t think of a more unsuitable word to describe Moshe Rabbenu. You would certainly not describe the man who patiently teaches the Jewish people for forty years militaristic. Perhaps victory has something to do with one of the few times in the Torah that Moshe actually does fight a war: the battle against a rather sadistic and violent nation named Amalek.

When Israel was traveling in the desert, the nation was suddenly attacked. As the Torah records it:

“Amalek came and waged war with Yisrael in Refidim.

“And Moshe said to Yehoshua (Joshua), ‘Choose men and go war with Amalek tomorrow and I’ll stand on the top of the hill with the staff of G-d in my hand.’

“And Yehoshua did as Moshe said to him [namely] to fight with Amalek; and Moshe, Aharon and Chur ascended to the top of the hill.

“And it was when Moshe raised his hands, Israel would win and when he put down his hands, Amalek would win ...

“Yehoshua weakened Amalek and the people gathered with him⁹² by the sword.”
(Exodus 17:8-11, 13)

In the war with Amalek, Moshe’s hands somehow magically caused the Jewish people to triumph. This would seemingly be Moshe’s *victory*. However, if it were, we should have heard more specifics of what happened during the war. Throughout Tanach, we hear the details of many, many wars and military encounters. The reason for this deviation is that the war with Amalek wasn’t so much a military war as it was a religious war. A Mishnah explains:⁹³

“And it was when Moshe would raise his hands that Yisrael would win, etc.”

“Is it the hands of Moshe that make or break the war? Rather, this is telling you that as long as Yisrael was looking upward and subjugating their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would win. And if not, they would fall.”

The war with Amalek has very little to do with territorial gain and quite a bit to do with religion. The war is fought with soldiers and weapons, but is directed by an inner religious struggle; it is focus on G-d that makes the victory. This is why we don’t hear about any technical military strategy. The physical war is really a secondary element of the story. It is Israel’s belief in G-d that is primary. That belief in G-d was directly related to Moshe’s hands.

KEEPING THE FAITH

The war with Amalek was an important war that was supposed to teach the Jewish people about belief in G-d. The event makes quite a bit of sense in the storyline of the book of Exodus, because the Jewish people had just asked, “Is G-d among us or not?”⁹⁴ The war was a direct response to that question.

The foe that Israel is fighting in this war is a foe that is attacking its religiousness, its belief in G-d’s providential control over the world. When the Jewish People come out of Egypt, they are on fire with religious dedication to G-d. As a result,

“the nations of the world were afraid to wage war with them and [Amalek] came and began [to fight] and they made room for other nations [to come and also war with the Jews].

“An analogy, to what is this comparable? To a boiling hot bathtub, that not one person could descend into. This one fool came and leaped down into it. Even though he was scorched, he cooled it off for others.” (Rashi to Deuteronomy 25:18 from Tanchuma 9)

Amalek’s sole purpose is to be against religion. The nation doesn’t even profess another faith or ideology; all it knows is that it is against religious enthusiasm. The Amalekites can’t stand that Israel is red hot with religious conviction. They are willing to sacrifice their own lives to cool off the nation’s excitement.

To defeat Amalek, Moshe directs the Jewish people’s hearts heavenward. He reminds them about focusing on G-d and about how excited they are to keep the Torah. He goes on to teach them and guide them for forty years. Moshe Rabbenu is the answer to any religious cooling off that the Jews feel.

NETZACH MEANS ...

Even at the time when we’d expect to find a physical victory, what we find are *netzach*-based triumphs. *Netzach* means to win,⁹⁵ to orchestrate⁹⁶ and eternity.⁹⁷ All of these words have a lot to do with the *mid-*

dah of netzach. *Netzach* has to do with fighting and winning, because it's the fight for real truth – for religion and morality.

Amalek represents the drive for chaos to reign in place of the incisive and accurate truth that is ready to be embraced by Israel. Amalek desires things to be blurred and confused, not organized and clear. The *middah of netzach*, then, is connected to the clear truth; to really get to the bottom of things. In order to understand something, you need to rip it apart and see how it works⁹⁸ – you need to make *war* with it.

In order to validate whether or not something is true, you need to thrash out each and every idea with your intellect. Learning Torah is called the “War of Torah” by the Talmud.⁹⁹ That's why *netzach* also means eternity, because things that are actually true, after you peel away all of the layers of falsehood, are eternal and ever-lasting.

RESOLVING TIFERET

Now we can address the issues we ran into with *tiferet*. If you recall, we mentioned that though items and concepts that are created with the *middah of tiferet* can be uplifting and exciting and bring people to wonderful heights, it has its drawbacks. The creative output of *tiferet*-types can be morally problematic – it can be used for evil purposes as *tiferet*'s semiotic messages are often misinterpreted and misunderstood. The concept of *netzach* directly addresses these issues.

Because the *middah of netzach* represents the war for intellectual truth, *Netzach*-types can get to the bottom of an idea to see if it is true or a distorted lie. Because they tend to pick apart ideas until only true values are left, they can expose falsehood. *Netzach*-type thinking can analyze abstract semiotic symbols to tell us if they are moral. *Netzach* people give us lessons that are directly useful to our lives and not abstract semiotics.

In our story writing analogy, we said that the *chesed* component is the stage when one lets the words flow from one's fingertips and *gevurah* is the subsequent editing stage. *Tiferet* is the balance between the two, namely, well-edited writing that pours forth from the veins of the author. *Netzach* is the moral of the story. A story may teach the moral of “slow and steady wins the race” or “always trust the advice of wise, experienced people.” *Netzach* is also the ethical and emotional

challenge that the main character endures. He must strive to persevere and be emotionally stable in order to be victorious.

THE CONDUCTOR

Netzach also means to orchestrate. The conductor of an orchestra gives small but firm cues to his musicians, organizing them to maintain harmony. When a member of the symphony falls out of sync, the conductor is right there to guide him back to the harmony of the group. *Netzachs* use their wisdom to guide others to lead more harmonious lives. They advise people who have deviated from the path how to get back on track.

“The words of sages are like cattle prods.” (Ecclesiastes 12:11)

“... why are words of Torah compared to a prod?”

“To tell you that just as a prod guides the cow on the [correct] plowing path, to bring life to the world [when the plowed field is subsequently sown and grows produce], so do the words of Torah direct their learners from paths of death to paths of life.” (Chagigah 3b)

True wisdom that is spoken strongly and accurately can cut open even a boor's impenetrable skull to make room for truth to be planted and grown.

SPIRITUAL COACHING

Moshe Rabbenu doesn't just teach dry commandments to Israel, he directs each person to his or her correct path in life. The Vilna Gaon (Gra) writes¹⁰⁰ that Moshe was sort of a spiritual guide or religious life coach.

Rabbenu Avraham ben HaRambam explains:

“The specifics of their spiritual paths — listed or not — were all set by [Moshe] His servant and messenger ... as it says, ‘And you will notify them of the path, they will go on it.’” (Exodus 18:20) (Hamaspik, Chapter on Battle)

Moshe's contribution as a Shepherd is showing Israel the importance of wisdom and moral living for their communal, as well as individual, lives. Netzachs are naturally inclined to do the same.

HUMILITY: WHAT YOU'D EXPECT

In their healthy state, *netzach*-types are characterized by an organic humility.

“Moshe was exceedingly humble — more than anyone on the face of the earth.” (Numbers 12:3)

Moshe Rabbenu is known as the personification of the character trait of humility. Aside from having a naturally good faculty of memory, one of the reasons that *netzachs* are so good at absorbing and retaining information is that they humble themselves when they are studying, in order for the information to be absorbed with a greater clarity. This is in contradistinction to those whose pride stands in the way of their ability to listen objectively to new pieces of information.

MORALITY

Despite the term's association with victory in war, people with the *mid-dah* of *netzach* are usually so uninterested in physical fighting that they won't even see their anger manifested very often. When they do become angry, it's usually about a religious or moral matter. In the Talmud:

Rava says, “Any rabbinic scholar that gets fired up, it's his Torah that's firing him up, as it says, ‘Are not my words like fire?’ says G-d.” (Ta'anit 4a)

Most of the time, *netzachs* are friendly people, who enjoy studying, but when *Netzach*-types witness violations of the Torah — especially breaches of honesty and morality — they get fired up, similar to the way very wise people feel a healthy sense of indignation. When they get fired up, you may see them firmly laying down guidelines for people to live by or condemning inappropriate behavior that has cropped up in their surrounding culture. When this happens, you may even see them acting angry and livid, but the anger of a *netzach* is almost always limited to being kindled by issues surrounding morality and values.

QUESTION ME

If we are learning about the *netzach* personality from Moshe Rabbenu, we need to grapple with the incident recorded in the Torah that features Moshe becoming angry and hitting a rock instead of speaking to it. At first glance, this seems like an episode in which Moshe becomes fired up over a non-religious and non-ethical matter. The truth is that this is a religious matter. Moshe gets fired up in direct response to the Jewish people's attack on G-d.

“The Children of Israel and all of the assembly came to the Desert of Tzin ... and there was no water for the assembly and they gathered upon Moshe and Aharon.

“And the nation quarreled with Moshe, saying, ‘It should have been that we would have expired with the expiration of our brothers in front of G-d. Why have you brought this assembly of G-d to this desert to die there, us and our cattle? And why have you brought us up from Egypt to bring us to such a bad place as this ...’” (Numbers 20:3-5)

Moshe is fired up because the Jewish people would not stop complaining about G-d. They had already tested G-d ten times and they refused to stop.

NETZACH'S SUSCEPTIBILITIES

It is a mistake to think that *netzachs* are perfect and have no challenges. When *netzachs* are unhealthy, they can become stubborn, argumentative and arrogant, just like any other personality. Rabbenu Avraham ben HaRambam says it best. He pontificates about people who are engaged in religious activities the entire day and whether they too need to work on humility.

“What about the religious realm and that which comes from it?

“A scholar may easily err and become arrogant, because of those things [that come from it]. If he contrasts his wisdom — especially if he is exceptionally wise — with the stupidity of someone else — especially if it is exceedingly