

Here we are, more than a year into COVID, and once again we have arrived at these ancient discussions that resound with the main topic of our own times: dealing with and quarantining infectious disease. Although we know quite a bit more than we did a year ago, and despite the advent of the first vaccines, the danger has not fully abated, and vigilance is still extremely important. Unfortunately, vigilance is also required to negotiate the ever-growing thicket of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories surrounding all aspects of our pandemic. How do we balance all this confusing information? Whom do we trust? Those of us who count the Omer using the kabbalistic Tree of Life, may smile a bit at the timely confluence of this double parashah, the ongoing pandemic, and the week of *Tiferet*, which will merge Sunday evening into the week of *Netzach*. Coincidence? I see something far more profound.

*Netzach* stands for eternity, victory, and endurance – vital attributes for dealing with this crisis. *Tiferet* prepares us for *Netzach* by teaching and giving us balance. *Tiferet* is located at the heart, the seat of emotions. It stands for the beauty that is derived through balance. It mediates between *Chessed* (lovingkindness) and *Gevurah* (strength, discernment), offering us tools for making informed choices about the flood of information available to us as well as tools for processing our own emotions. It can also help us balance ancient beliefs about the connection between disease and sin with today's research-based knowledge about cause and effect. Although most of us rightfully chafe at the notion that illness and sin may be related, there is a kernel of wisdom here too, and perhaps not surprisingly, the underlying factor that unites ancient belief and modern science is balance. When the body functions well, everything is in balance both internally and externally. The organs work together in harmony, providing us with a feeling of wellbeing. This feeling frees us to respond to outer stimuli in balanced fashion. We are more kindly disposed toward our fellow humans and to the earth with all its many forms of life, and we are also more able to deal well with the challenges of the large and small frustrations that inevitably pop up every day. But occasionally the slightest thing can upset this delicate balance, causing us to react in ways that create disharmony which radiates both outward and inward. The outward manifestation could include behavior that is less than exemplary – i.e., sinful, because it violates established social mores. The inward manifestation could be some form of organic disorder – i.e., illness. Of course, it would be naïve and simply incorrect to view sin as the root of all illness, but especially in skin diseases, research has revealed a definite psychophysiological relationship. The skin is one of the body's major sensory organs, and like nothing else it is able to express our emotions in ways others can readily see. Pallor, coldness, warmth, "goose bumps," redness, sweating, blushing, and dryness all betray our innermost feelings even when we try hard to disguise them. The ancients viewed skin and skin disorders in spiritual/religious terms. Negative behavior such as lying and slander (Miriam's leprous episode in Numbers 12:10, for example), causes distress and injury to the perpetrator as well as to the victim. In addition, our ancestors recognized what we know today to be a fact: Some skin diseases are highly contagious and require immediate quarantining. What we have learned about the lethality of certain molds affecting buildings also corroborates their reactions. Today, we have advanced, scientifically based treatments and solutions, but we can still learn something from the elaborate purification rituals outlined in our parashah. Blood from the sacrificial animals is placed on the cartilage of the right ear, the thumb of the right hand, and the big toe of the right foot of the person being cleansed – exactly like the priests' investiture! Why? Most people are right-handed, hence the right side. Blood carries the dual properties of plague and deliverance, sustenance and peril, power and fear, contact and avoidance. Its potential must be meticulously balanced. The ear, the organ that allows us to hear, was deemed by our sages to be the body part most easily affected by outside influences. Keeping what we hear in balance with observing our *mitzvot* is a lifelong challenge. Our unique, opposable thumb provides us with enormous dexterity to use for good or evil. And our big toe is a major factor in weight bearing, controlling the foot, and maintaining the body's balance. Philo remarked that "... words are judged by hearing, the hand is the symbol of action, and the foot of the pilgrimage of life." All of this points to the common denominator of balance. If we are vigilant in maintaining our emotional/spiritual balance, our physical balance will benefit. COVID has upset our balance in more ways than we wish to count, but it has also taught us how resilient and resourceful we humans can be. Now, in the third month of our second year, we have achieved at least a modicum of balance that will sustain us through to the end, which we pray will come soon. As we continue to count the Omer, may we move gracefully from the balance of *Tiferet* into the sustaining power of *Netzach* and on through the rest of the Sephirot to stand together at Sinai when we receive our Torah anew on Shavuot in four weeks.

Shabbat shalom!