

## **“The Way” into 5785: Zen Guitar and Lifelong Learning**

“Return to the beginning. Enter by form. Clean your dojo. As you have every day, tie on the white belt and empty your cup. Pick up your guitar, tune, then play.”<sup>1</sup>

Any of you ever heard of something called the Tonic Equator? I hadn’t either until my first guitar lesson several weeks ago. In this first lesson, my teacher brought me back to the most basic elements of playing an instrument – the scales – and showed me how much I didn’t know. It’s a more or less simple concept: The Tonic Equator is the fret where the tonal center of your scale sits. You can play your scales on a guitar in three basic forms—below the Equator, straddling the Equator, and above the Equator. For years, as I learned guitar without a teacher’s guidance, I played my scales in the straddled mode—This method works just fine, but the notes don’t come in a predictable pattern on the fretboard. Playing a scale above the Equator is much simpler: three-notes-per-string.

When my teacher explained the simplicity of that pattern, and that every guitar player I’ve ever watched shred through scales was using this technique to maximize their speed, it felt like my head was exploding in the best way. I caught myself laughing out loud. I even got choked up. It seems a silly thing to cry about, I

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<sup>1</sup> Sudo, Philip Toshio. Zen Guitar (p. 13). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

admit, but it was stunningly simple revelations like this that made me understand the full benefits of seeking out a teacher and taking a lesson. Reflecting on that experience, I've come to three key takeaways that have applications for building a rich, fulfilling Jewish life in this new year: 1. Practice regularly, and always with beginner's mind. 2. Study can't only happen on your own; find a partner or, better yet, a teacher. And 3. It is never too late.

### ***The Value of Practice with Beginner's Mind***

The quote with which I began comes from a book that changed my whole approach to practice. It's called *Zen Guitar*, and it's written by Philip Toshio Sudo, who endeavors to interpret his own inherited tradition of Zen Buddhism through the lens of approaching an instrument and pursuing mastery. In the final pages, he lays out his entire philosophy, which he calls "The Way of Zen Guitar."

The Way of Zen Guitar teaches: "Seek the truth as an *unsui* (novice), floating and flowing... Take joy in the struggle... Pay attention to the task at hand. Know why you practice. Do what has to be done, when it has to be done. Do a little more, and do not stop for your whole lifetime."

In Jewish practice, it is inevitable that at some point you will look at the Torah and say: "Ughhhh, this parasha again?" Even with the core text of our tradition, it's pretty hard to avoid the boredom that comes from repetition.

Every time I catch myself saying this, though, I come back to *The Way of Zen Guitar*. Seek the truth as a novice. Take joy in the struggle. For those who have read thousands of pages of Torah, Talmud, and Jewish literature, our tradition instructs us to remember that there are at least “seventy faces to the Torah” and we must “turn it and turn it again for everything is in it.” If you can study with a beginner’s mind, always expecting to find something new to learn, even an oft studied passage can yield surprising insights.

In *Zen Guitar*, Sudo calls this putting on the White Belt. No matter your level of mastery, to use Sudo’s words: “wearing the white belt here means you have agreed to set aside all knowledge and preconceptions and open your mind to learning as though for the first time.”

Judaism, too, teaches us to study with beginner’s mind because we often don’t realize just how much we’ve forgotten. In a midrash on a verse from Ecclesiastes we learn:

The Rabbis... taught in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: It is for one’s own good that a person studies Torah and forgets, as were a person to study Torah and not forget it, one would engage in Torah study two or three years and would return to engage in their labor and never pay attention to it [again] for the rest of their life. Rather, because a

person studies Torah and forgets it, they do not move or remove themselves from matters of Torah.

Jewish tradition, culture, and history can be endlessly inspiring and engaging if we allow them to be part of our life and thought beyond our first interactions. So practice regularly, and remember to keep that white belt on.

### ***Find a Partner, or, Better Yet, A Teacher***

The Way of Zen Guitar teaches: “Band together... Surround yourself with people of character. Cherish good chemistry. Add two and two to make one... Work not to become the best player, but the best person...”

Twice in Pirkei Avot, from two different sages—Rabban Gamliel and R. Yehoshua ben Perachiah—we are told: “Aseh lecha Rav,” “Appoint for yourself a teacher.” If the same injunction shows up twice in our most famous book of rabbinic advice, we ought to pay heed. Let’s go in reverse order, beginning with Rabban Gamliel. He teaches: “Appoint for yourself a teacher, avoid doubt, and do not make a habit of tithing by guesswork.” Rabban Gamliel’s context here was legal, and had to do with determining the correct amount due for payment of tithes in ancient Israel. While that context is not our context, the advice still rings true. In securing a teacher for yourself, you are going a long way toward eliminating carelessness and doubt from your Jewish life. Our best teachers push us

to think critically, to not make assumptions, to edify ourselves against perversions of the truth, all the while providing us with a sense of security in the knowledge that there is someone else who cares about our growth.

Rabbi Yehoshua comes to teach us another important aspect of acquiring a teacher. “Appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and give everyone the benefit of the doubt.” Through learning with someone, you may in fact come to see them as a partner, a friend, a companion with and from whom you might learn. There is nothing like excellent chevruta study, partner study, for helping you refine your own views and sharpen your critical thinking. Spending quality time with someone who might think differently from you will broaden your capacity for empathy and to extend that benefit of the doubt.

In 5785, find new teachers and partners. Study with peers in your community you’ve never studied with. Take a trip with fellow members to somewhere you’ve never been. If your kid is becoming b’nei mitzvah and they have a bimah partner, then get together with that family and take a look at the Torah portion together over ice cream. If there’s some Jewish idea or part of the tradition that you’ve never quite been able to fully understand, make an appointment to hang out in one of our offices. Take advantage of the many retired clergy that are part of our community and the wealth of knowledge they possess. Attend our educational programs and come learn from our guest teachers. Cherish the good

chemistry that comes from banding together with others to work on becoming the best person you can be.

### ***It's Never Too Late***

The Way of Zen Guitar teaches: “Do not feel you have arrived... Keep going. When you go beyond, keep going. Mi zai, mi zai (Not yet, not yet).”

Earlier I cited a classic text from Pirkei Avot—it’s from Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, who says: “Turn it, and turn it again, for everything is in it...” but this line does not end there: “Turn it, and turn it again, for everything is in it,” he says, “And look into it, and become grey and old therein; and do not move away from it, for you have no better portion than it.” Judaism is not meant only for your deep engagement when you’re a kid and then never again until you’re retired and you have more time on your hands. Torah is relevant in the here and now. There are lessons from the Jewish library to be gleaned about almost every aspect of life. There is no wrong time in one’s life to start building a relationship with Jewish learning. Rabbi Akiva, the great sage of the first generation of rabbis, was illiterate until he was 40 years old and only then began his journey toward Torah mastery.

If you don’t know where to start, all you need to do is ask! We can recommend any of several books, articles, websites, tools and guides to kick off your journey toward a deepened sense of connection with any part of Jewish

civilization, from the Aleph-Bet to Zionism and everything in between. Jewish learning is a lifelong journey—Do not feel you have arrived! When you go beyond, keep going! Mi zai, mi zai.

I know—Given the year we’ve had, a sermon focused more on the state of the world may have been a more predictable message with which to start these High Holy Days. Still, as ever, in dark times we search for Jewish meaning, and then share that meaning around so that everyone’s light burns a bit brighter. We might feel as though we’ve been scattered across the fretboard and that our fundamentals have all been thrown into flux. But amidst the chaos of a difficult year, the lesson of the Tonic Equator is that **profound wisdom and life changing learning is there to be found if we can (1) seize the moment and (2) seek out teachers and friends who can (3) help us see the world with fresh eyes.** May 5785 be a year of continuing to seek out those epiphanies. Let’s hunt together for “Aha!” moments, and keep holding on to hope. I will close with the final words of Sudo’s Way: “See the glass as half full. Understand that as you try to fill it, the glass will get bigger. Endeavor to make harmony from disharmony... Study those before you; encourage those behind you. Combine beauty with virtue. Own nothing, illuminate everything. Exit from form. Awaken.”