

Jewish Living as the Cultivation of a Spiritual Practice (1 of 3)

This series explores excerpts from Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe (d.1943). The Piaseczner's inspiring and redemptive ideas address our inherent spiritual nature and how we awaken to the Divine presence within us.

This session discusses cultivating closeness with the Divine imminently through an ongoing private conversation.

Have you ever felt that you just want to talk on your own to God? Have you ever felt, without intending to disrespect the Jewish tradition, that at times praying from the prayer book – the *Siddur* – is more of an arduous task to complete, rather than an entryway into experiencing an intimate conversation with God? I want to share a story that probably many of you will find resonates with you.

In fact, when the Men of the Great Assembly, at the beginning of the Second Temple period, approximately 2500 years ago, established the original silent prayer - העמידה, channeling eighteen blessings from High Above, referred to simply as *The Eighteen* – השמונה עשרה – as radical and innovative as this initiative was, they never intended for this eighteen blessing prayer to replace the time honored tradition of speaking with the Creator on one's own, when one was inspired to do so. A nineteenth blessing was added a little more than 500 years later during the period of the sadistic and cruel Roman leader Hadrian. However, the prayer has retained the name *The Eighteen* – השמונה עשרה.

More recently, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, in the 18th century, established the practice of *Hitbodedut* – התבודדות. The word itself means to cause oneself to be alone, which clearly is contrary to praying in the traditional prayer quorum – המנין. He stressed to his followers the importance of spending a significant dedicated time each morning talking to God alone, in solitary spiritual practice. Ideally the practitioner would go alone into the forest or seclude oneself where they would feel safe and uninhibited to speak from the heart, pure and unfiltered, without being self-conscious of one's words. This would be similar to expressing one's spontaneous stream of consciousness by speaking out loud. *Hitbodedut* manifested service of the heart – עבודת הלב – in the most ideal unconstrained and private way imaginable. This became a sacred tradition among the Breslover Chassidim. Many others have adopted this practice over the years as well.

I would be remiss not to mention that *hitbodedut* was not intended to replace the expected participation in the traditional communal morning prayer – שחרית - but rather Rebbe Nachman intended for *hitbodedut* practice to precede the morning service. Presently, we see that people have adopted this practice at any time during the day when they feel inspired to do so.

So just as the establishment of codified prayer in the *siddur* does not replace the need and the practice to speak freely with God alone, the latter likewise does not necessarily replace codified communal prayer.

While approaching *hitbodedut* a bit differently, Rav Kook addresses the need for this as well in *Shmoneh Kevatzim* 8:149. He teaches that the deeper a person is, the more they need to search inside of themselves. This person's understanding of himself is hidden due to the great depth of their soul. They need to spend a lot of time alone – *hitbodedut* – elevating their thoughts, deepening their opinions, and freeing their mind. By doing this, their soul will eventually reveal herself to them; a small ray of light will shine forth from their soul's great light. One will then find great happiness and rise up from a deep sadness (translated by Rav Ari Ze'ev Schwartz).

I will now share with you the Piaseczner's approach to *hitbodedut*, from his *Bnei Machshava Tova*, entry 9.

He begins by affirming that it is difficult for us, nearly impossible, to gather our thoughts clearly – להתחזק במחשבה טהורה, to move ourselves to awe, and to sensitize ourselves to holiness – והתעוררות של קדושה. In his opinion there is a very specific reason why our souls are virtually buried and our normal state of consciousness is slumber: moments of peak spiritual awakening - התעוררות - and moments of communal prayer - תפילה - do not occur simultaneously! Quite commonly, when we pray there is no inner motion to holiness. The times when we do feel moved and alert may not be the set times for prayers! Consequently, the person's soul grows accustomed to a groggy sleep state, - מורגל נפשו לישון - precluding the person from cultivating pure mindfulness. Over a lifetime of habituation, our soulfulness finds her only expression in mundane pursuits: what to eat, what to drink. The spirit becomes hidden and buried, - טמונה - crusted over with mundane layers and rarely finds herself applied in deep contemplation; she is constantly diverted to material associations in pursuit of worldly goals.

The Piaseczner taught several techniques to move ourselves into a proper emotional readiness as we prepare to pray. However, he urges us to seriously consider a second approach that warrants exploration. He firmly states that when we experience moments of inspiration and awe, we cannot abandon these openings simply because it may not be just the right moment for the daily prayers. **Use such an occurrence as a key – מפתח - to your soul.**

Any time we feel deeply --- with sadness, joy, or even business concerns, the feeling contains something of a revelation of the soul – גילוי הנפש. She simply is clothed in this mundane situation. Take advantage of this auspicious moment.

For example, when a profound feeling of broken heartedness wells up – **שבירת הלב** -, even for physical concerns, you have an important opportunity to align the mundane state of mind to the soul's perspective. As soon as you can, go off to a private setting and pray, on your own. Ideally begin with reciting verses from Psalms that have some bearing on your situation. If you are worried about your enemies, the verse, "Oh Lord, how great are my enemies - many rise up against me" (Psalm 3:2) would be appropriate. If you are feeling upset about something else, you could recite, "I have sunken into despair into the mire of the shadowy depths" (Psalm 69:3), or "I will raise up my eyes to the mountains, from where will my help come" (Psalm 121:1)?

Do not abruptly stop what you are doing and begin saying the words without paying attention to the feelings you are expressing or to the words you are saying. Take some time. Contemplate on what is worrying you. This situation is serious; it troubles you so much. It has become a real obstacle. To whom can you turn and who will save you if not The Holy One, the Source of compassion? Approach Him now in closeness – **מתקרב**. Visualize in your mind that you are standing in His presence, directly before Him, and pour out your heart, "O God, how great are my enemies, many rise up against me. Many say of my soul, God will not save him. But Lord, You are my shield, and the One who raises up my head" (Psalms 3:2-4).

After you have said some Psalms, pray in your own words in any language you know. Say the words that come naturally and rise spontaneously within you. With each word, with each phrase, feel that your mind and thoughts are growing stronger and rising. You may begin to feel that little by little, the mundane concerns that had such a hold on you are slipping away and you are leaving them behind. Of course, they still exist but they don't occupy as much of your thoughts and feelings. Instead, a deep cry bursts forth from the depths of your heart, "Master of the Universe - *Ribbono shel Olam* -, draw me near – **קרבני** - **אלריך** -, open me, hold me above all these worries so I can stay near You, with a pure mind and an open heart."

At the end of your prayer, recite a verse of encouragement and reinforcement - **התחזקות** - such as, "God is my shepherd, I shall not want, I will not fear evil, for – Master of the Universe - You are with me" (based on Psalm 23). And now you will rejoice that God is with you, for in truth – **באמת** - God **is** indeed with you! These few moments, as you poured out your heart, are moments of elevation - **התרוממות** - and closeness - **והתקרבות**. Your whole day is affected. You will continue to feel a sense of spiritual pleasure – **עונג רוחני** -, a sense of clarity and peace, for your soul was in the Garden of Eden today. What can compare with that? Could you possibly be any happier now that you are no longer feeling alone and lonely, disconnected and alienated? Rather you are feeling close – with God, with the Divine within you and with all expressions of creation around you.

Also, when you feel joyful, even if this joy results from having been helped out of some this-worldly issue, use it the same way. Don't ignore this auspicious time. This is an elevated moment for you, a time to draw out the sparks of your spirit. Find a spot where

you can concentrate and recite a few brief verses from Psalms, such Psalm 18:2-3, which express King David's joy when he was saved from the hands of Saul: "I will love you HaShem. The Lord is my Rock, my Fortress and my Rescuer; my God, my Rock, in whom I take refuge, my Shield, and my horn of Salvation, my Stronghold."

When you finish with these words, move to a spontaneous, personal prayer, as we described above: For example: "Master of the Universe - רַב־שַׁמַּי - Thank you for your great kindness, for taking care of me, for helping me in Your great compassion, for always guiding me for my own good --- and in particular now that You have saved me in this way." Again, as above, feel how this physical joy has brought you to an elevated state in which you can rejoice in God and dwell in spiritual bliss.

When you undertake this practice, you won't ignore even a sigh - אֲנָחָה - because even with a simple, slight sigh about this-worldly matters, a sigh that comes from your heart, you can attain a great revelation - הַתְּגִלּוֹת גְּדוּלָה - of your soul and bring her closer - וְלִקְרִיבָה - to God.

The soul is like a blocked source of water that you must search for. We work to dig and drill little openings and cracks. Every small access point can release a huge flow of water - מִים רַבִּים - enough to water - לְהַשְׁקוֹת - your own fields and your companions as well.

Reciting these spontaneous sentiments and feeling, deepening and exploring this breadth of emotion - התרחבות ההתרגשיות - is a great boon to prayer, and it is useful in its own right as well. Deep feelings function like a mikvah. When we immerse in them, unworthy attachments are washed away. When we emerge, we are closer to God. Deep emotion rouses the soul from sleep and pushes her out of apathy and dormancy - תרדמת עצלה. Then these two grow stronger: your spiritual passion - ההתלהבות - and your image-less mindfulness - והמחשבה. As our capacity for sustained and focused practice increases, the spiritual dimensions of our personality emerge, to the point where we can rouse ourselves - לעורר - to greater inspiration and passion at any time.

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