

Jewish Living as the Cultivation of a Spiritual Practice (2 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 the cultivation of observing and trusting our feelings as a means of sensing the Divine within.

Except when noted, this teaching is from the Piaseczner's *Bnei Machshava Tova*, Entry 11. Human beings have a multitude of feelings – הרבה הרגשות -, whose opening is like a drip: weak and slight. When we expand one of them - נרחיב - and draw it to capacity – ונוציא אל הפועל -, it flows like a mighty river and a stream of water, whose waters never cease. However, if we fail to expand it – ואם אין מרחיבים -, it passes as if it never was created, lost without ever seeing the light of day.

There are times when a person feels, as an example, vaguely ill at ease – אי נעימות בקרבו. He is not sure what is troubling him. Perhaps he should eat something or rest or have a drink of alcohol and then the feeling disappears just as it came. In fact, what the person felt was a tentative probing of the soul – מן הושטת -. She desired to be experienced – להתפעל -, seeking awareness in the person's expanded consciousness – מחשבה טהורה. The same is true for fleeting sensations of joy - שמחה -, and so on. These subtle sensations are not garbed in physical attire – בלבוש גופני -, for a part of the soul was extended, - הושטת - so they are difficult to identify. The person therefore doesn't know how to articulate what it is and what he is feeling inside --- this rattling – קשקוש -, this pressing - פרפור - of his soul! So, he pours himself a drink, he eats, or he does some other mundane task. He does not succeed in quelling – השקיט - the spasms of the soul; he simply amplifies the rattling - רעש - and rumbling - רעם - of the bodily feelings - הרגשות גופני -, so the cry of the soul – קול הנפש - is inaudible. This is what the priests of Molech did when they burnt a child on the sacrificial flames. When they beat the drums, the father could not hear his son shrieking, pleading from the heat of the fire. The bodily sensations thunder so loudly that the quaking of the soul – רעידת הנפש - passes as naught, as a sort of spiritual miscarriage – מין הפלת נפלים של הנשמה -.

We therefore adjure our community in the strongest possible terms: know how to observe – יודע להסתכל. Whatever transpires within you and around you, know how to see what it is – תדע איך להסתכל. And this looking – הסתכלות – is not a mere seeing – ראייה – of something, but a kind of birth – לידה – by which we midwife and give birth to something which we can gaze upon – נסתכל בה. Thus, we can examine the content and the context of our feeling.

Whatever sensation arises – שמרגיש איזה הרגשה – , we must look at it clearly – להסתכל. We explore it in depth to see where it leads and what comprises it. We pay attention to our sensations and amplify the subtleties until we are able to gaze at the form of the emotion – בצורת ההרגשה להסתכל. Whenever a person senses something, he must pay attention. He must examine the sensation and the situation to understand the whole content of the message.

You might think that only fleeting and insignificant feelings – הרגשות קטנות – pass unnoticed because of this lack of attention – חוסר הסתכלות. Rather, complete mitzvot provide us with many opportunities to examine and be self-aware; yet whole mitzvot pass in the same way they came. A person may feel something inside himself and is unable to concentrate – להתרכז – , describe and know what he is feeling – מה הוא מרגיש. How is the sense – הרגשה – of Yom Kippur different from Rosh HaShanah? What is unique about the emotional quality of Passover, and the rest of the holy times?

New emotionality – התרגישויות חדשות – is not being requested from you nor heavenly ecstasy, for everything is already in you – כי הכל בך. Emotionality is within you – איש מתרגש – and you are indeed an emotional person – and the התרגשות בך. You must strive only to know yourself – להכיר אותך – and what is happening within you – ואת אשר בך. Your soul is full of activities – מלאה התפעלויות – , cries and supplications. You must only give it a platform within yourself – בקרבך – on which it can be revealed – מתרחש. and strengthened – ותתחזק. Then you will know – תדע – and feel – ותרגיש – her emotions simply as they are. (*Hachsharat Ha'Avrachim*, Chapter 4).

We exhort you in the strongest terms: teach yourself to watch – למד את עצמך להסתכל. In general, become a person who seeks out God – שמחפש את ה' – everywhere. Perhaps in your looking you will uncover God's subtle presence – מסתתר – and sense the holiness of his glory. And when you seek Him out, you will indeed find Him. Where will you find Him? In yourself – בך – and in everything around you – ובכל סביבותיך.

Now, if this is your goal – תכלית – , you must clearly, consistently, and diligently distance yourself from rushing – להתרחק מן המהירות. When you rush, you cannot work with deliberation and contemplation – התבוננות. Of course, you must also keep a distance from the opposite extreme of lethargy and sloth.

Observe your inner states with deep contemplation – הסתכל והתבונן. If you do not develop the tool of attention, you will be completely unaware of a multitude that transpires in your soul. Such experiences create lasting impressions! In truth, the only tool you need for this work is attention. This is already enough: learn to slow down and examine every sensation that passes through you. By doing this, you are actually examining the inner structures of the heavenly plan as it evolves and interfaces within your existence.

The human soul actually loves to be emotional and to feel – אוהבת להתרגש. Not just joy – שמחה – rather it simply – סתם – loves to experience all of her sensations. She even desires – רוצה – to be emotional with pain and crying – עצב ובכיה. This explains why we all have this inner desire, as much as we may tend to deny it, to view terrible occurrences and to hear about calamities, catastrophes and disasters – מעשיות נוראות, causing us to cry – לבכות – and even weep. Feeling even that which causes sadness and grief is part of expressing that we are alive, sensitive and engaged with real living. All of these feelings manifest to ourselves and to others that we possess a soul, a soul that seeks expression at all times and beckons us to allow her this expression. (*Tzav v'Ziruz*, Entry 9).

In fact, only a person who fulfills and honors – משלים – this spiritual law and need – חוק – by investing emotionality in their prayer, contemplative practice and Torah study ensures the well-being and health of the soul – שומר נפשו. This is not the case for one whose sacred practice is performed without emotionality – בלא התרגשות. The soul then either seeks other cheap emotional experiences, even sinful ones, to fulfill this law, or she eventually becomes spiritually ill – מחלות נפש – due to the lack of an essential need of hers going unfulfilled. (*Tzav v'Ziruz*, Entry 9).

This will already be enough – די לך – to become – להעשות – a spiritual person – איש רוח, and possessor of pure consciousness – בעל מחשבה טהורה. You develop the ability to work with a higher state of mind – שיתגלה בך מחשבה עילאה –, which allows you to directly experience spirituality – רוחניות – and see the luminous presence of God filling the universe. There are a multitude of sensations and capacities – חושים ויכוליות – in each of us, and we need to draw them – להוציא – into divine service. We need to embrace God – לחבק – with every part of ourselves.

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