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ימים נוראים

DAYS OF AWE



YOM KIPPUR

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YOM KIPPUR #1: JOY

We have been studying the teachings of Rav Nachman of Bratslav. Tonight I want to focus on one of his most central teachings: joy.

מצוה גדולה להיות בשמחה תמיד, ולהתגבר להרחיק העצבות והמרה שחרה בכל כחו.
It is a great mitzvah to be joyful at all times, and to strengthen oneself and keep far from sorrow (melancholy, despair) and dark bitterness with all one's strength. (Likkutei Moharan, II, 24; Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #30)

מצוה גדולה להיות בשמחה תמיד -- it is a great *mitzvah* to be joyful always. We are *commanded* to be joyful. Joy is not optional. It is a mitzvah, a religious obligation. And as mitzvot go, being joyful seems a little odd.

For one thing, we're usually commanded to do things that have meaning and purpose beyond our own private pleasure. So why the command to be joyful? Because according to Nachman, being joyful, or not, has consequences. The main one, he teaches, is that our relationship with God depends on joy. He says, for example:

כשהאדם כל היום בשמחה אזי בנקל לו ליחד לו שעה ביום לשבר את לבו ולהשיח את אשר עם לבבו לפני השם יתברך, אבל כשיש לו עצבות חס ושלוש קשה לו להתבודד ולפרש שיחתו. האדם צריך להתחזק להיות שמח תמיד וביותר בשעת התפלה, ושצריכין להכריח עצמו בכל כחותיו לזכות לשמחה.

When you are always joyful, it is easy to set aside some time each day to express your thoughts before God with a broken heart. But when you are depressed, it is very difficult to isolate yourself and speak to God. You must force yourself always to be joyful, especially during prayer. . . . (Wisdom, # 20).

I can't speak for everyone, but I certainly find this true for me. Very often we think that prayer most readily arises out of pain or fear. And that may be true of a certain kind of prayer, when we call out for help in a moment of desperation. But in terms of a regular disciplined prayer life, I think Nachman is right. When we allow our thoughts and emotions to spiral downward, when we feel worn out or hopeless -- certainly if we are depressed -- it is very difficult to get up every day and pray.

And this is true not only of prayer. Nachman continues:

עקר ישוב הדעת הוא על ידי שמחה כי על ידי השמחה המח מיושב ויכול להנהיג המח כרצונו לחשב על תכליתו הנצחי. אבל על ידי מרה שחרה ועצבות המח והדעת בגלות, וקשה לו לישוב דעתו. נמצא שעצבות היא מניעה גדולה מאד לעבודת השם יתברך

If you are always joyful you will be able to achieve a clear, settled mind (ישוב הדעת). Joy settles the mind and then you can control it as you wish. You can reflect on the ultimate purpose of life. But when a person is darkly bitter, and depressed, his intellect and understanding go into "exile" and it is very hard for him to concentrate. This makes it very hard for him to concentrate his mind on teshuvah. Sorrow is a terrible obstacle to serving God. (Likkutei Etzot, Da'at, #49; see Likkutei Moharan 10).¹

1. See also Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #27 and Likkutei Moharan 10:

When we are wallowing in sadness, when negativity swirls around our minds and hearts, we have little energy left to raise our sights, and focus on ultimate issues. When we despair, it becomes harder to fulfill mitzvot, harder to study, harder to be present to others and give of ourselves. When we are too down it is hard to find the energy to change and evolve, to effect teshuvah, and hard to summon the courage and strength to repair the wrongs we've done.

So we are commanded to be joyful because joy supports our service of God, and assists us in fulfilling our mission. It is not just a matter of what feels good or doesn't; joy becomes an obligation because the absence of joy keeps us from being who we are meant to be.

In fact, joy is not only supports our service to God, it's at the heart of it. There's actually a lot of confusion about this. Some people believe that a religious life -- observance and prayer -- is all about solemnity, and that services (or service) should be somber. We may even think that an excess of joy is somehow irreverent. And that's a very damaging misconception, because there are people who stay away from Judaism (or from religion altogether) because they think that a serious engagement with spiritual matters is going to be depressing. On the contrary -- *the primary mode of Jewish spirituality is joy*. Of course there are moments of solemnity. But even then, there's almost always joy at the root of it. Joy is our expression of appreciation for life, appreciation of God's world, appreciation of opportunity to serve. And joy draws others closer to God too.

Which brings us to another reason why joy -- *simhah* -- is a mitzvah, a religious obligation. Just last week, there was a cover story in the New York Times magazine about "the emerging science of social contagion," bearing the title, "Is Happiness Catching?" Of course it is! Even without the scientific evidence, we know experientially that joy is contagious. When those around us allow themselves to experience and express joy, it is much easier for us to do the same. And the converse, we know, is also true. So joy is a commandment, because whether we are joyful or not is not a purely private affair of the individual -- it affects everyone around us.²

על ידי מרה שחרה ועצבות, המוח והדעת בגלות וקשה לו לישוב דעתו לשוב אל ה', ומחמת זה הוא רחוק מהשם יתברך. כי עקר מה שהעולם רחוקים מהשם יתברך הוא מחמת שאינם מישבין עצמן היטב, מה התכלית מכל העולם. אבל על ידי שמחה, המוח מיושב ויכולין לישוב עצמו היטב, כי שמחה היא עולם החרות. ועל כן כשמקשר שמחה לדעתו, אזי דעתו בחרות ואינו בגלות, ויוכל להנהיג המוח והדעת כרצונו, לישוב דעתו היטב מה התכלית מכל עניני העולם הזה. ועל ידי זה ישוב אל ה'

When a person is depressed, his intellect and his mind go into exile. This makes it very hard for him to concentrate his mind on teshuvah. The main reason why people are far from God is that they do not stop to consider what the main purpose of their existence is. But when someone is joyful his mind becomes settled and he is able to understand things clearly. Joy is freedom. When a person fill his mind with joy, his intellect becomes freed from its exile.

2. See, e.g., Likkutei Etzot, Hithazkut, # 9 and Likkutei Moharan 25:5:

כשמתחזק ומתגבר ומשבר המניעות וכו' ובכל פעם עולה למדרגה השניה הגבוה יותר לפי בחינתו, בזה עושה טובה גם לחברו שהיה עומד באותה המדרגה שהוא נכנס בה עתה, כי חברו יוצא ממנה ועולה למדרגה יותר עליונה, כי אי אפשר לשני בני אדם שיעמדו במדרגה אחת.

When a person succeeds in breaking through the barriers and rises from level to level, this also benefits his fellow, who was previously standing on the level he himself has now entered. For it means that the other person was obliged to leave that level and rise to the next higher one, for it is impossible for two people to be

Now, one may legitimately object: sometimes life is depressing. We live in a broken and often profoundly sad world. How can we be joyful after watching the news? And there is real suffering in our own lives. Things happen -- to ourselves and our loved ones -- that seem impossible to bear. Is Nachman recommending putting on blinders? Is this a pollyana-ish, "put on a happy face" theology? Not at all.

Nachman himself knew from pain. Four of his eight children, including his only two sons, died in infancy or early childhood. He and his community were victims of threatened and actual pogroms. His entire house was destroyed in a fire. He went on a much-anticipated trip to Israel, only to have it cut short by Napoleon's invasion. On they way home, his boat was attacked by pirates and he barely escaped being sold into slavery. He suffered from terrible opposition and conflicts from other Rebbes and sects. He died of tuberculosis at the ripe old age of 38.

And, perhaps most tellingly, Nachman suffered from very severe depression. Were he alive today, he would likely be diagnosed, perhaps with bipolar disorder. Arthur Green's biography of him is aptly named "Tormented Master," for tormented he was. So when Nachman speaks about joy, rest assured he speaks not from a life of ease, nor from comfortable insulation from the profound pain and difficulty of life.

Moreover, Nachman himself says: "A broken heart is precious indeed. . . . A broken heart is precious in God's eyes." (לב נשבר יקר מאד) (Likkutei Etzot, Hitbodedut, #23). So how can he speak about a commandment to be joyful, and to be joyful *always*?! How do we square that with the preciousness of the broken heart, and with the pain of life?

It turns out, there is a relationship between the two. Nachman says:

אחר לב נשבר בא שמחה. וזה סימן אם היה לו לב נשבר כשבא אחר כך לשמחה
After a broken heart comes joy. The test of whether your heart was really broken
is if afterwards you feel joy (Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #32; Wisdom # 45).

Now to understand this, first we have to distinguish between brokenheartedness and despair:

לב נשבר יקר מאד. ודע שלב נשבר ועצבות אינם ענין אחד כלל. כי עצבות היא כמו שהוא בכעס
וברגז, אבל לב נשבר הוא כבן המתחטא לפני אביו כתינוק שבוכה וקובל לפני אביו, על שנתרחק
ממנו, וזה יקר וחביב לפני השם יתברך.

A broken heart is precious indeed. You should understand that a broken heart has nothing to do with despair. When a person is depressed it is a form of anger and irritation. But someone with a broken heart is like a child nagging his father or a baby crying and screaming because his father is far away. A broken heart is precious in God's eyes. (Likkutei Etzot, Hitbodedut, #23).

In Nachman's terminology, despair is a complaint, an expression of anger. It arises from the sense of things not going well for us, of our not getting what we want. It's about giving up hope, becoming paralyzed with pain, not caring anymore, a general pessimism about life. Brokenheartedness, on the other hand, is primarily about a sense of distance from God. It is the pain that comes when our vision and hope, our longing and yearning come smack up against our awareness of all that remains lacking, of the brokenness in world, of which our own suffering is but a part. Brokenheartedness involves empathy with God and other people; it is pain over

on the same level at the same time.

the state of world, pain over our own distance from God. It comes not so much from a personal complaint about not getting enough, but from our awareness of not giving or doing or being enough.

The challenge in this distinction, of course, is that brokenheartedness and despair are closely related, and often intermingled. And, one can lead to the other. Without joy, our brokenheartedness can easily slide into despair and depression. And so we come back to Nachman's teaching:

מצוה גדולה להיות בשמחה תמיד, ולהתגבר להרחיק העצבות והמרה שחרה בכל כחו.

It is a great mitzvah to be joyful at all times, and to strengthen oneself and keep far from sorrow (melancholy, despair) and dark bitterness with all one's strength. (Likkutei Moharan, II, 24; Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #30)

Now, in speaking of this teaching that joy is a mitzvah, we've been focusing on the issue of joy as an obligation. But Nachman's teaching also suggests something else: it takes effort to be joyful. Joy is not something that just happens, but something we must actively cultivate. How? Nachman offers plenty of help, some very practical suggestions.

First, he says, we have to set aside time for genuine brokenheartedness:

והיה טוב שיהיה לו לב נשבר כל היום. אך מחמת שרב בני אדם יכולין בקל לבוא מלב נשבר לעצבות שהוא מזיק מאד רחמנא לצלן, על כן צריכים ליחד לו איזה שעות ביום לפרש שיחתו בלב נשבר, ואז לבד יהיה לו לב נשבר, ושאר כל היום יהיה בשמחה. ועין בשמחה רבוי האזהרות והעצות להיות בשמחה תמיד

It would be good if one could go through the whole day with a broken heart. But this would easily lead the majority of the people to fall into despair, and despair is very destructive. Therefore, the best thing is to set aside a certain period each day to pray with a broken heart and then to spend the rest of the day in joy. (Likkutei Etzot, Hitbodedut, #23).

Clearly, Nachman is not telling us that to be joyful we have to turn away from or ignore pain. On the contrary, in order to be joyful, true pain -- brokenheartedness -- must have a place in our lives. Which brings us to another important point about joy.

We've spoken of the command to be joyful always as being an odd mitzvah. One of the ways it seems odd is that, as a rule, we're only commanded to do things we might not otherwise do. And given the choice, who wouldn't be joyful? And yet -- many of us, often, don't. We don't choose joy in the simple sense of looking for reasons to be unhappy even when life is good, when we are blessed. For example, many of us choose to focus on the 1% that's wrong, rather than on the 99% that's right. But on a deeper level, sometimes we don't choose joy precisely because of this intimate relationship between joy and brokenheartedness. If we are unwilling to experience the full pain of a broken heart, we shrink our emotional capacity, and we are unlikely to feel real joy either. Sometimes we make the wrong choice; we limit our emotional range to avoid hurting, even if that means sacrificing joy. And so we need to be commanded -- *mitzvah g'dolah!* -- to be joyful, even if that means our hearts will be broken.

The key lies in Nachman's teaching that brokenheartedness must have a place, but a contained place. Setting aside time every day to experience brokenheartedness keeps us connected with our own honest pain, and the brokenness of the world, while not allowing that pain and brokenness to overwhelm us. That's the first technique.

The second technique is: if necessary, be silly. To be clear, we shouldn't confuse silliness and fun on the one hand, with joy on the other. There's a big difference. But, one can be a path to the other, as Nachman teaches:

גם כמה פעמים צריכין לשמח את עצמו על ידי מלי דשטותא מלי דבדיחותא. ומרבי צרות האדם,
שסובל כל אחד בגוף ונפש וממון, על כן על פי רב אין יכולין לשמח את עצמו כי אם על ידי מלי
דשטותא, לעשות עצמו כשוטה כדי לבוא לשמחה, שכל החיות בגוף ונפש תלוי בזה. גם למעלה
נעשה מזה יחוד גדול על ידי בדיחא דעתה, דהינו שמחה

There may be times when the only way to make yourself joyful is by doing something silly or making jokes. There are so many troubles that people have to go through physically, spiritually, and financially that in many cases the only way they can make themselves joyful is by doing something silly or foolish. The whole vitality of body and soul depend on being joyful. And in the worlds above as well great unifications are brought about through the joy of the spirit. (Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #29; Likkutei Moharan, I, 48).

In other words, we have an obligation to do whatever it takes to bring ourselves back to joy, especially in hard times.

Now this teaching reminds that emotions don't just happen to us, we don't just feel what we feel. We have some responsibility for them, we cultivate them, and to a large extent, what we feel is a choice. And here we need to pause for an essential distinction. Nachman spoke from a deeply authentic place of experience with depression. But he did not speak from medical knowledge about the nature or cause of clinical depression. When he spoke of our having responsibility for our feelings and our obligation to be joyful, he did not know about the impact of brain chemistry on our feelings, and he did not understand depression as the illness that it is.

Nevertheless, even when we are speaking of clinical depression -- which is very different from grief, sadness, or other kinds of despair -- Nachman's teachings are instructive. The idea that we are obligated to do what it takes to be joyful obviously extends beyond doing something silly. It applies also to available treatments for depression, including therapy and antidepressants. The implication of Nachman's teaching is that we actually have a halakhic obligation to treat clinical depression, whether in ourselves or our loved ones, with whatever is available and most effective. It is true that not all emotional states are under the control of our mind or our will; but we are nevertheless obligated to do whatever *is* in our control.

So that said, let's come back to Nachman's teaching about silliness, which may sound rather light-hearted or shallow, but is in fact quite profound. The human faculty of humor and silliness is an essential tool, indispensable in the service God. Rav Nachman therefore exhorts us to cultivate the capacity for lightness, even in very serious matters, as a path toward real joy, which is itself quite serious, and profound. The goal, in a sense, is to be very light about sorrow, and very serious about joy.

And that is certainly true of the work of teshuvah, which is, of course, very serious. It is really hard work, and we need to fully engage in it. We have to confront our emptiness, and our failings, and our shortcomings. If we are honest about it, it will break our hearts.

And it's appropriate that we be heartbroken today. Heartbroken at our failure until now to use our time meaningfully, purposefully. Heartbroken that we have lost so many days in empty pleasures or in paralyzing despair. Heartbroken that we have not loved enough, not learned enough, not grown enough, not helped enough. Heartbroken that however old we are, we have

gotten to this point in our lives and don't really know ourselves so well, if at all. Heartbroken that we have spent too little time thinking about why we're here. Heartbroken that we have failed to treasure every moment. Heartbroken that we have grieved unduly over things that don't matter. Heartbroken that we have too long ignored the things that do matter.

But we also need to laugh at ourselves, to lighten up -- to recognize that much of what we have done this past year, what we have allowed ourselves to become, is just foolishness, silliness. It's a very good idea, today, to have a very good laugh at ourselves. When we're a little silly, when we laugh, a breath of gentleness is wafted through the world. What was rigid, thaws, and what was a burden becomes light. When we laugh at how foolish we have been, it's much easier to see how delightful it is to be able to make a different choice now.

And that takes us to Nachman's third technique for cultivating joy -- after setting aside time for brokenheartedness and using silliness (or whatever else it takes) -- and that is to learn from and thereby transform the things that are most painful. Sometimes I think of it as "leaning into" the pain, the way one leans into the turn on a ski slope. When you're skiing, and you're going too fast and afraid of losing control, the natural inclination is to lean up the mountain, away from the direction of the fall. But in fact, the way to regain control is to lean *into* the turn, to put one's weight forward down the mountain, leaning *into* the direction of one's fear.

Similarly, the way to transform pain into joy is not to run from it, but to lean into it. To mine it for what it can teach. As Nachman says:

צריכין להשתדל להפך כל העצבות והדאגות לשמחה. ודעת לנבון נקל למצא בכל הצרות
והיסורין והדאגות איזה הרחבה שעל ידי זה יכול להפך כל המרה שחרה לשמחה. וזה עקר
שלמות השמחה, כשמתגברין על המרה שחרה והעצבות וחוטפין אותם לתוך השמחה בעל כרחם,
דהינו שמהפכין אותם לשמחה:

Try hard to turn your very despair and worry into joy. If you really set your mind to it, you will find that even amidst the worst troubles and suffering there is an opening which you can use to convert all the despair into joy. True joy is when you drag your darkness and despair even against their will and force them to turn into joy. (Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #31; Likkutei Moharan, I, 23).

What are the "openings" in suffering which allows for joy? They are found in the awareness that whenever there is pain, there is an opportunity for growth. The openings are the potential for learning and transformation, the opportunity for service, the capacity to raise our sights and perhaps sense the presence of God.

Nachman speaks of transforming despair, of dragging the darkness into joy. The language evokes a joyful hora, a circle dance, with someone standing outside. Just as the dancers can pull the outsider into the circle and make him or her part of the dance, so we can pull our despair and worry into our circle of joy. In fact, it is precisely this pulling of darkness into the circle of light -- our integration and transformation of brokenness -- that is the main wellspring of authentic joy:

אחר לב נשבר בא שמחה. וזה סימן אם היה לו לב נשבר כשבא אחר כך לשמחה:
After a broken heart comes joy. The test of whether your heart was really broken is if afterwards you feel joy. (Likkutei Etzot, Simḥah, #32; Wisdom # 45).

And this is why we sing such joyful melodies on Yom Kippur. It is why our service intersperses brokenheartedness (*Yizkor* in memory of our dead, *Eleh Ezkerah* in memory of all the martyrs of

the Jewish people, and *Vidui*, our confession of sin) with ecstatic joy. How do we attain מחילה, forgiveness, from God? By dragging our brokenheartedness over our sins into a circle dance (מחול) of joy. And that is why, solemn as it is, Yom Kippur may well be the most joyful day of the year. Joy in the truest sense of the word: grounded in an honest look at our world and at ourselves, and in the disciplined, conscious effort to choose hope over despair, learning over helplessness, faith over cynicism, compassion over anger, gratitude over complaint, and above all, joy.

כי מצוה גדולה להיות בשמחה תמיד
For it is a great mitzvah to be joyful at all times.

YOM KIPPUR #2: HA-MA'AVIR AL MIDOTAV

In his Sefer HaMidot, a listing of qualities, character traits, and behaviors that a person should cultivate, or avoid, Rav Nachman includes the following, under the heading Teshuvah (98): מי שמעביר על מדותיו, מעבירין לו על כל פשע. One who “passes over his *midot*, attributes” all that person’s sins are forgiven. It comes directly from the Talmud, and it’s a beautiful and extremely rich phrase.

So what does it mean -- *ma'avir al midotav*? It conveys so much in just three words. *Midot* are qualities, character traits, and also measures, i.e., rights or entitlements. *Ma'avir* is one of those fabulous Hebrew words which mean a thing and it’s opposite. It means “to pass over” -- either in the sense of ignoring (to let pass, look the other way), or in the sense of reviewing, taking note of; it can mean to remove, to cause to be present, or to transform.

So one possibility is that המעביר על מדותיו refers to someone who does the work of *heshbon hanefesh* -- the accounting of the soul -- reviewing one’s qualities and character. And it would carry the particular connotation of causing one’s qualities to change and evolve -- *ma'avir* -- to pass on by, and be transformed into something else. The opposite is expressed in the Talmud as העומד על מדותיו -- “one who stands on one’s qualities.” *Hama'avir* is fluid, active, dynamic; *ha-omed* is static, rigid, fixed. In this sense, the phrase harkens back to our teaching on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, when we spoke of beginning again and being a *ba'al teshuvah*, of becoming rather than being. The entire phrase then -- מי שמעביר על מדותיו, מעבירין לו על כל פשע -- would suggest that one who does this work of evaluating and transforming one’s own character, on a regular basis, has one’s sins forgiven.

But the phrase also means so much more. המעביר על מדותיו speaks to a kind of humility, meaning someone who passes over (ignores) his or her own good qualities and deeds. Whatever mitzvot we do, whatever talents we have, whatever positive traits we have -- the idea is to do them and to live them, not talk about them (even to one’s self) or focus on them at all. In this regard, too, the phrase is a warning not to measure other people by our own measures or qualities -- not to say (or think) “look how much better I am than that person, that person doesn’t measure up to me in some way.”

Which brings us to what is probably the primary meaning of המעביר על מדותיו

אמר רבא: כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעו, שנאמר נשא עון ועבר על-פְּשָׁע, למי נושא עון - למי שעובר על פשע.

Raba said: One who passes over his *midot* is forgiven all his iniquities, as it says, “Forgiving iniquity and passing by transgression” (Micah 7). For whom is iniquity forgiven? One who passes by transgression (Rosh Hashanah 17a).

In this context, המעביר על מדותיו refers to one who passes by other people’s transgressions. First in the most general sense, it speaks of ignoring others’ transgressions when it’s none of our business, and doesn’t concern us. It reminds us not to go around looking for other people’s failings. That’s the easier case. But more specifically, it speaks of passing by other people’s transgressions *against us*; it challenges us to grant forgiveness readily and easily, foregoing the full measure of our rights.

And that, of course, is where it gets harder. It means forgiving and letting a transgression pass without insisting on full restitution. Forgiving and letting it go without insisting on a full apology,

or maybe even any apology. Forgiving and letting it go without saying I told you so, without making the other person feel bad, without drawing that little drop of blood. It means not standing on the full measure of strict justice, even when we're right.

Now, before we go further, I do want to make one thing clear. The fact that we're all supposed to be generous about forgiving, and we're not supposed to be looking at each other's transgressions, doesn't mean we can be careless about wrongdoing, nor does it relieve us of responsibility for apologizing and making restitution. We're not allowed to treat each other badly and then say, listen, you're supposed to look the other way.

Nevertheless, we see the importance and power of ignoring transgressions in a story from the Talmud, in which we learn, incidentally, of the origins of Avinu Malkeinu. The Talmud (Taanit 25b) tells the story of a drought, which the rabbis understood to be a sin of Divine wrath in response to the community's sins. Rabbi Eliezer tried everything to bring rain: he fasted and said all the appropriate prayers, but nothing worked. Rabbi Akiva went before the ark and prayed: אבינו מלכנו אין לנו מלך אלא אתה. אבינו מלכנו למעןך רחם עלינו. The rains then fell. So we might have thought that forgiveness came because of Rabbi Akiva's greatness in creating this beautiful prayer, Avinu Malkeinu, or perhaps because he was superior in some other respect. But no. The Talmud tells us that a *bat kol* (a heavenly voice) came and declared, "not because one is greater than the other, but because this one (Rabbi Akiva) *ma'avir al midotav* and the other one (Rabbi Eliezer) *eino ma'avir al midotav*." That's the power of this principle: Rabbi Akiva's generosity in overlooking transgressions against him brings forgiveness for everyone.

And there's a certain fairness to that. What right do we have to stand here today, throw ourselves on God's grace and ask forgiveness that we don't really merit, if we're unwilling to be gracious with those who have hurt us? "Who could stand, Adonai, if you kept count of every sin?" If God stood on the full measure of God's rights -- oy! So why do we?

Now, in the Talmud, the phrase *על מדותיו המעביר* usually appears in connection with a very particular kind of transgression: affronts to *kavod*, to one's honor. And these are often the hardest cases, because they're not at either extreme; we're not talking about heinous crimes, nor the stupid little things that we really don't care about and that are easy to ignore. We're talking about the transgressions that cause offense, hurtful words, things that make us feel ignored or unappreciated, rejected or unseen. Moments when we don't get the respect or recognition we feel we're entitled to, when we feel taken advantage of, or taken for granted. We're talking about how we deal with that whole murky realm of hurt feelings and bruised egos: from actual insults and angry words, harsh looks or tone of voice, to unreturned phone calls or emails, never getting a thank you note, being seated at the wrong table at the wedding, or not being invited in the first place. We're talking about all those injustices and slights -- perceived or real-- that we carry around. Would that we could just let them go: *מי שמעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו: על כל פשע*!

And yet -- I'm not so sure. The Talmud itself expresses profound ambivalence on the question of affronts to *kavod*. In the very same passage in which we learn that we should pass by transgressions, the Talmud also teaches us the apparent opposite principle: why was King Saul, for example, punished? Because he did not respond to an affront on his honor. And, in that same passage, "Any scholar, who does not avenge himself and retain anger like a serpent, is no scholar."

I think the Talmud's ambivalence reflects our own. On the one hand, we know that we hold onto anger and resentment that we should let pass. We all, at times, overreact to affronts to our

kavod, and when it happens, we know (most of the time!) that we're being petty. On the other hand, it's not always so petty; seemingly minor affronts can cause very deep pain. And basic human decency and civility in small things (what our tradition calls *derekh eretz*) matter. That's why our tradition teaches us to take each other's honor very seriously. It's why we're taught that to shame another person publicly is equivalent to shedding blood.

Moreover, we are commanded to pursue justice, and to engage in *tokh'vah* (healthy, loving, reproof)? It is not always just, healthy, kind or loving to keep ignoring bad behavior and letting it pass. Some transgressions cause real harm, to us or others. And some sins are so serious that it seems wrong to just forgive, without any indication of remorse or repair. Indeed, there may be some sins which are so egregious that human forgiveness may not be possible, or even desirable, at all. So I don't want to overstate the case, and argue that this is what we should do *always*. Nor do I want to be artificially categorical, and suggest that there's a bright line rule for when to overlook transgressions, and when not to. How and when forgiveness should and does come is something of a mystery, whether that forgiveness comes from God, or from the human heart.

And here is where another of Rav Nachman's teachings comes in, one of his most challenging, both to fully understand and to live:

כשיש עליו מחלוקות ומריבה והוא שותק ואינו משגיח על המחלוקות והבזיונות שמבזין אותו, ושומע חרפתו ואינו משיב, זה עקר תשובתו ותקונו על כל העוונות. והוא חכם באמת וזוכה לכבוד אלקי ולחלק טוב לעולם הבא, ויזכה להכלל בבחינת אדם היושב על הכסא, שמשם יוצא המשפט על כל באי עולם:

When you find yourself in the middle of dispute and conflict, and you remain silent and pay no attention to the conflicts and the abuse (בזיונות -- disgrace, something that brings shame) which people throw at you -- when you hear the insults and contempt against you and you do not respond -- this is true repentance and the remedy for all past sins. Someone who achieves this can truly be said to be wise, and to merit true honor, i.e., the honor of God. . . (Likkutei Etzot, Maḥlokhet Um'rivah, #3; from Likkutei Moharan 6).

Let's unpack this a little. In helping us apply the Talmudic injunction to ignore transgressions against our honor (*kavod*), Nachman makes a very important distinction between two kinds of *kavod*. The first is worldly *kavod* -- our desire for position, recognition, praise, power, and status. This kind of *kavod*, Nachman says, is a manifestation of the *yetzer hara*, the evil impulse. Why? Because the need for this kind of *kavod* usually masks some inner shame, inadequacy, or woundedness. And certain kinds of affronts which trigger that inner shame (not only actual arguments and insults, but all those things we've been talking about which bruise our egos), trigger our *yetzer hara*; they push our buttons. And that is precisely when we are most likely tend to "stand on our *mido!*" -- to insist on our rights, and also to review all our merits and good qualities and all the reasons why we don't deserve to be treated this way and why the other person is wrong.. And of course, that is precisely when we shouldn't. That is precisely when we need to hold back, not respond, and be silent.

Earlier I mentioned the classic rabbinic statement that to publicly humiliate someone is equivalent to shedding blood. It comes from the idea that when we shame someone, we cause someone to blush or blanch -- the blood runs from his or her face. Nachman takes that metaphor of bloodshed, and turns it on its head. Traditionally, the *yetzer hara* resides on the left side, which is associated with harshness, judgment, rigidity, and anger. So when there is an affront to our egos and our worldly *kavod*, Nachman teaches, our blood pours into the left side of

our hearts (please ignore the biology, it's a metaphor!). In other words, the *yetzer hara* (our angry, rigid, judgmental side) gets fed and empowered with "too much blood on the left" whenever our worldly *kavod* is offended. See if you can really picture this image: when that inner place of shame or hurt is triggered, we feel humiliated or out of control, and our egos rush to our defense, to cover it over. It is almost (or perhaps *literally*) a physiological response -- all our blood and energy rushes to that place of defensiveness, retaliation, self-justification, and anger.

And that, Nachman says, is precisely what we need to avoid -- precisely that response. In a gorgeous play on words, he says that the remedy is to turn דָּם לְשֵׁט -- blood to silence. He's speaking first of being literally physically silent -- not responding, not arguing, not answering back. That's already a pretty high level, and very helpful. If we can at least keep our mouths shut, and not have angry exchanges, that's already a good thing. But beyond that, he's talking about the next level -- שֵׁט -- inner silence. The higher level involves not only refraining from external action and words, but internal control as well: not dwelling on it, not rehearsing the injury in our heads, not planning what we would have said, not allowing the hurt and resentment to take hold inside us.

"One who allows transgressions to pass, that person's own transgressions are forgiven." Does the forgiveness come to us as a reward? Maybe. But perhaps the rabbis also understood that by making a practice of passing by the transgressions of others, we ourselves will commit fewer transgressions that need to be forgiven. In the specific instance, we won't escalate conflict and perpetuate grievances; we won't let one misstep by another person -- even a serious one -- become an entire opera libretto in our heads. And over time, we ourselves will become different. We will heal those places of shame and inadequacy and woundedness, instead of feeding them. And then maybe we can stop acting from that place of harshness and judgment. We won't chase after recognition and justification, demanding our due. We won't lash out in anger, and we won't become distant and cold.

In Nachman's language, when one does this -- when we turn *dam* to *dom*, hot-bloodedness to inner silence, God opens all the chambers of the heart. In other words, we become more generous of spirit, more open, and more loving. And this he says, is the equivalent of slaughtering the *yetzer hara*, the hallmark of true *teshuvah*.

Now I mentioned that Nachman makes a distinction between two kinds of *kavod*. We have spoken about the first: worldly *kavod*, the honor of the ego. What is the second? The honor of God. This is a very different kind of *kavod*. It's not easy to describe, but I think most of us know it when we see it. Occasionally in life we come across people who have a quiet dignity, who don't need or seek recognition, status, power or position. People who don't take offense easily, who don't get ruffled easily, who always seem to be able to give *kavod* to others without in any way diminishing their own. They have a certain calmness and almost a regal bearing.

This is the manifestation of *k'vod Elohim* -- the honor that God bestows. It is a dignity and honor that comes from knowing deeply that one is made in the image of the Divine, and from caring more for God's honor than for one's own. As Nachman says:

Someone who achieves this can truly be said to be wise, and to merit true honor, i.e., the honor of God, and a good portion in the World that is Coming. And such a person merits to be considered "a person sitting on the throne", from which comes all judgment of the world.

When we attain this kind of *kavod*, we are less vulnerable to affronts of our worldly *kavod*. Not only can we remain silent if and when they come, but they come less frequently.

And this distinction between worldly *kavod* and the honor of God can help us understand the seeming contradiction between needing to pass over transgressions, and needing to avenge honor. We all have an obligation to treat each other with the highest *kavod* -- to be absolutely scrupulous about each other's dignity. But the obligation refers to a person's *kavod* and dignity in this latter sense, the dignity and honor that comes from being in the image of God. It is, ultimately, not our own but God's honor that is at stake; on a level that has nothing to do with our egos.

That's why a scholar who does not avenge an affront is no scholar -- it's not about the scholar's ego, but about the honor and dignity of the Torah. The same was true in the case of Saul, who was appointed as king by God. It reminds me of a moment in the television show *West Wing*, when President Bartlett didn't want his old friend Leo, now Chief of Staff, to call him Mr. President. But Leo insisted, saying that it wasn't about Bartlett the man at all, it was honor due the office.

We all hold the high office of being human, of being God's representative. And when that office is debased, diminished, treated without respect -- whether in ourselves or another -- we do need to defend God's honor.

But how do we know which kind of honor has been affronted -- is it about God, or just our own egos? Again, there is no bright line; I can't give you clear rules. Most of the time, there's probably some of each. But I think a part of us intuitively knows the difference; and the more we practice passing over transgressions, the better we get at distinguishing between them. Most of us, most of the time, respond more to affronts to our worldly honor. Certainly, if we find ourselves wanting to draw that drop of blood (if something makes us want to humiliate or hurt someone else), if we lose control, if we find ourselves crafting those dialogues (or monologues) in our heads about what we could have said, and what we're going to say -- chances are there's at least some ego-*kavod* involved. And we're better off just letting it pass.

Which brings us to the last interpretation of *המעביר על מדותי*. The wording evokes the central image of forgiveness in the Jewish tradition: the thirteen attributes of God (*sh'losh esreh midot*), a centerpiece of the Yom Kippur liturgy. It comes from Exodus 34, when Moshe prays to God to forgive the people Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf. The Torah says that God "passed before Moshe" (*ויעבור ה' על פניו*), calling out these thirteen *midot* (compassionate, gracious, forgiving, etc.). How does God's graciousness, compassion, forgiveness, pass through the world? Through us. This is perhaps the deepest meaning of *המעביר על מדותי* -- it speaks of the person who causes God's *midot* to pass through the world. When we pass over (ignore) our own *kavod*, our own *midot*, and the transgressions of others, we not only imitate God, we actually become the conveyor, the vehicle, the chariot, which causes all of God's *midot* (the Divine qualities of forgiveness) to pass through the world. And all one's own sins are forgiven.

That is why Rabbi Akiva succeeded where Rabbi Eliezer failed. Not because he wrote, or prayed, *Avinu Malkeinu*. But because he was *המעביר על מדותי*. Because through his very being, he brought the Divine power of forgiveness into the world.

YOM KIPPUR #2: L'KHAF Z'KHUT

This morning we spoke about *hama'avir al midotav*, foregoing one's rights, passing over transgression. This afternoon, as Yom Kippur ends and the gates close, we need to go a step further. Rav Nachman taught:

דע כי צריך לדון את כל אדם לכף זכות, ואפילו מי שהוא רשע גמור, צריך לחפש ולמצא בו איזה מעט טוב, שבאותו המעט אינו רשע, ועל ידי זה שמוצא בו מעט טוב, ודן אותו לכף זכות, על ידי זה מעלה אותו באמת לכף זכות, ויוכל להשיבו בתשובה.

Know that it is necessary to judge everyone on the scale of merit. And even regarding one who is completely wicked, one needs to search and find within him some little bit of good, for in that little bit he is not wicked. And by means of this finding a little bit of goodness within him, and judging him on the scale of merit, one raises him up to be in truth meritorious, and it is possible to bring him back in teshuvah (Likkutei Moharan, I, 282).

What does it mean to judge everyone on the scale of merit *לכף זכות*? The phrase is by no means original to Nachman. We see it already in the Mishnah (Pirkei Avot 1:6), and in the Talmud (Shabbat 127a), where judging others on the scale of merit is included on a list of six things which benefit a person both in this world and in the world to come.

As used in the Talmud, judging on the scale of merit refers primarily to how we respond to behavior that can be interpreted in more than one way: do we immediately assume the most damning scenario possible, or do we try to imagine an innocent explanation? The principle is illustrated by several stories along these lines, where a particular rabbi in the Talmud engages in behavior that looks, on the surface, really bad. In each case, the moral of the story is that we are supposed to see each other in the best possible light. So, for example:

Our Rabbis taught: The scholars were once in need of something from a noblewoman where all the great men of Rome were to be found [in other words, a prostitute]. They said, "Who will go?" "I will go," replied Rabbi Yehoshua. So Rabbi Yehoshua and his disciples went. When he reached the door of her house, he removed his tefillin at a distance of four cubits, entered, and shut the door in front of them. After he came out he descended, went to the mikveh, and learned with his disciples (Shabbat 127b).

The situation doesn't look too good for Rabbi Yehoshua. He volunteers to go on an errand to a prostitute, removes his tefillin when he gets there and, violating all norms of modesty, shuts the door behind him. Worse yet, when he emerges he goes straight to the mikveh (one of the uses of which is to purify the body after a sexual emission) before continuing to study Torah. What explanation could there be? But the Talmud continues

He said to them [his disciples], "When I removed my tefillin, of what did you suspect me?"

"We thought: our Master reasons, 'Let not sacred words enter a place of uncleanness.'"

"When I shut [the door], of what did you suspect me?" "We thought: perhaps he has [to discuss] an affair of State with her."

"When I descended and went to the mikveh, of what did you suspect me?" "We thought, perhaps some spit spurted from her mouth upon the

Rabbi's garments.”

“By the [Temple] Service!” he exclaimed to them, “It was exactly so; and just as you judged me favorably, so may the Omnipresent judge you favorably.”

That’s the basic understanding of the rabbinic concept of judging *לכף זכות*, and it’s an important lesson. It is all too easy to imagine the worst about another person, to attribute guilt when we don’t know all the facts (and of course, we *never* know all the facts!), and to fill in the gaps in the story to create the worst possible narrative. Or, we ascribe bad motives to behavior that may be neutral, or positive. How often do we assume that people are doing it (whatever *it* is) deliberately, rather than assuming that something must have been an oversight or a mistake. I’ll give you an example. You’re driving along, and someone cuts you off. Do you project intentionality onto the other driver, assuming that he or she did it on purpose and is therefore a jerk? Why not, instead, assume that the other driver didn’t see us, or just made an error of judgment, as we are all prone to do?

Similarly, we fail to judge another *לכף זכות*, on the scale of merit, when we anticipate negative reactions from other people before we learn what they really think or how they will in fact respond. We assume in advance that someone is going to be competitive, possessive, defensive, angry, ungenerous -- whatever it may be. Over and over, we are led astray by our imaginations, by the illusions our minds create based on what we think we perceive. As Nachman says, “Even people with excellent vision can make mistakes when they look from a distance and things appear the opposite of what they really are (Likkutei Etzot, Einayim.)” The reality is, when it comes to another person, we are always looking from a distance; we never know the whole story, the personal history leading to this moment, the complexity of what is going on in another’s heart, soul and mind. More often than not, things do indeed appear the opposite of what they really are.

So that’s the classic rabbinic notion of judging *לכף זכות*, on the scale of merit: assume the best, not the worst.

But Nachman goes further, and what he does with this classic concept is quite profound. He says as follows: “And even regarding one who is completely wicked, one needs to search and find within him some little bit of good, for in that little bit he is not wicked.” This is a significant expansion of the Talmud’s concept. It’s not just about particular fact patterns, and not just about refraining from imagining the worst. For Nachman, to judge *לכף זכות* means that there is an affirmative obligation to seek out the best in every person -- to find something wonderful, redeemable, and valuable.

The Talmudic stories are cases where someone’s behavior looked bad, but turned out to be entirely innocent. But of course, that’s the easy case. Nachman challenges us to look at the harder cases. What if the person did in fact do something wrong, maybe seriously wrong? Or what if someone really is impossible to be around, treats other people poorly, takes advantage, isn’t particularly kind? How do we understand our obligation to judge *לכף זכות* then?

To be clear, I don’t believe that Rav Nachman is telling us to completely ignore the negative aspects of another’s behavior or personality. And here we need to make a distinction. Very often, we focus on someone’s bad qualities even when those qualities have no effect on us at all, and when there is absolutely no purpose in our attending to another person’s sins. We need to stop doing that -- period. On the other hand, sometimes we do need to be attentive to the bad behavior or character of another, because it does affect us, or it affects other people we

care about. And it can't just be ignored. So Nachman doesn't suggest that we just look the other way. Indeed, in discussing the obligation to judge לכף זכות, nowhere does he say "don't judge." Nor does he say that there isn't wickedness, which may need to be addressed.

What he *does* say, is that if we have a religious obligation to see beyond our surface experience of another person, and to recognize each person as being in the image of God. We then have a further obligation to deeply internalize the implications of that awareness: that is, it is therefore impossible that there is a complete absence of goodness within that person. However terrible he or she may seem. And we have to find it. For Nachman then, to judge another favorably (לכף זכות) is an act of love; it is an active extension of oneself in love and caring for another.

Now, what are the effects of judging others favorably? The Gemara focuses on our reward. The story in the Talmud I told earlier is one of several like it in that section, and they all end the same way:

ואתה, כשם שדנתני ליכות - המקום ידין אותך ליכות

And as for you, just as you judged me on the scale of merit, God will judge you on the scale of merit (Shabbat 127b).

That sounds good. But if we think about it more deeply, what does that really mean?

It can't mean that God judges us in the same way the person is judged in the story, i.e., when a situation *looks* bad, God will interpret it for the good. God doesn't function in the realm of interpretation; God *knows* the actual facts of the matter, the whole story, everyone's motives. There's no gap in the Divine perception to leave room for misinterpretation. Instead, I believe it means is that if we make it a practice to judge others לכף זכות, we will become people who more often merit favorable judgment ourselves. Why? Because the way we judge others affects who we are. When we approach other people with suspicion, distrust, judgment, woundedness -- any negativity -- we behave toward them in a particular way. We become cautious, self-protective, defensive, and sometimes harsh ourselves. Conversely, when we see and anticipate the best in others, we behave toward them differently. We are generous, open, soft, and loving. When this becomes our world view -- when, as an expression of love and faith in other people, and God, we make it a practice of judging לכף זכות -- then that worldview turns us into more loving, more faithful people.

And here the literal meaning of the expression itself -- לכף זכות -- is instructive. כף is the palm of the hand, and לכף זכות is an idiom which literally means, "by or according to the hand of merit." So the expression points to the difference between hands of merit and guilty hands. Whose hands are we talking about? Our hands. The real question underlying our obligation to judge לכף זכות is, do we have clean hands? It's about turning our hands into scales of merit, not scales of guilt, so that people can trust, and feel safe, putting themselves in our hands.

So that's one effect of judging לכף זכות -- it affects who we are, it cleans our hands. But Nachman points to another effect as well:

And by means of this finding a little bit of goodness within him, and judging him on the scale of merit, one raises him up to be in truth meritorious, and it is possible to bring him back in teshuvah.

Here, Nachman focuses on the effect on the other person, the one being judged. And he says

that it is actually possible to bring someone to teshuvah by means of this. This is a key point: we judge favorably not only because it's what we want for ourselves, but because doing so helps someone else to do better, to be better.

Now, there are two very significant implications of this. First, we have a responsibility to be actively concerned about each other's spiritual health -- in love, not in harsh judgment. Indeed, this concern speaks to the essence of love, because to love is to actively work toward the betterment and growth of the beloved.

Second, it teaches us that our judgment of others -- how we see other people -- not only affects who we are, but it affects the reality of who *they* are. People really do become the way others see them. And this is true whether we tell them how we see them, or not. Even if we don't reveal to another person what we think about them, when we judge that person לכתף זכות we offer him or her a second chance. We open space within ourselves for the other to rise to the occasion, to behave well, to change. And that positive expectation -- that space -- is sensed even when (perhaps most powerfully when) it is unspoken.

Think back through your own experience to a time when someone saw you in a good light, saw something wonderful in you, expected you to do well, just when you were feeling the worst about yourself. Maybe someone said something encouraging to you, or complimented you on a good quality or deed, at a moment when you were feeling ashamed. Or someone described you as better than you thought you were. Or maybe it was entirely unspoken -- someone trusted you when you weren't sure you were trustworthy, or had enough faith to let you try again when you'd screwed something up the first time, or simply continued to love you when you felt unlovable. It is such a powerful experience, and so much more effective than criticism in motivating us to change and do better.

But then, Nachman takes even another step:

וכן צריך האדם למצא גם בעצמו, כי זה ידוע שצריך האדם לזהר מאד להיות בשמחה תמיד, ולהרחיק העצבות מאד מאד (כמבאר אצלנו כמה פעמים). ואפילו כשמתחיל להסתכל בעצמו ורואה שאין בו שום טוב, והוא מלא חטאים, ורוצה הבעל דבר להפילו על ידי זה בעצבות ומרה שחורה, חס ושלוש, אף על פי כן אסור לו לפל מזה, רק צריך לחפש ולמצא בעצמו איזה מעט טוב, כי איך אפשר שלא עשה מימיו איזה מצוה או דבר טוב.

And similarly, a person needs to find goodness also in himself, [because one should be very careful always to be joyful, and to distance oneself from sadness.] And even when a person begins to look into himself, and sees within no goodness, and that he is full of sin, and the Evil One wants to bring him down into sorrow and bitterness, God forbid, nevertheless, it is forbidden to fall thus. He need only search and find within himself some point of good, for how is it possible that he has never in his life done some mitzvah or something good?

We not only need to judge others לכתף זכות, we need to do the same for ourselves. We need to see an aspect of good within ourselves, no matter what we've done or not done, no matter how inadequate we may feel. He continues:

ואף שכשמתחיל להסתכל באותו הדבר הטוב, הוא רואה שהוא גם כן מלא פצעים ואין בו מתם, היינו שרואה שגם המצוה והדבר שבקדושה שזכה לעשות, הוא גם כן מלא פניות ומחשבות זרות ופגמים הרבה, עם כל זה איך אפשר שלא יהיה באותה המצוה והדבר שבקדושה איזה מעט טוב, כי על כל פנים איך שהוא, על כל פנים היה איזה נקודה טובה בהמצוה והדבר טוב שעשה, כי צריך

האדם לחפש ולבקש למצא בעצמו איזה מעט טוב, כדי להחיות את עצמו, ולבוא לידי שמחה כנ"ל, ועל ידי זה שמחפש ומוצא בעצמו עדין מעט טוב. על ידי זה הוא יוצא באמת מכף חובה לכף זכות ויוכל לשוב בתשובה,

And even when he begins to examine that good thing, and he sees that even that is full of blemishes and is impure (that is, he sees that even the mitzvah and whatever holiness he merited to achieve, even that is full of ulterior motives and evil thoughts and many blemishes), even with all this, how is it possible that within that very mitzvah or holy thing there is not some tiny bit of good. For no matter what, there must be some point of goodness in the mitzvah or good thing that he did. For a person needs to search and seek out and find within himself some bit of goodness, in order to continue to revitalize himself, and make himself joyful. And by means of his seeking out and finding some bit of goodness within himself, he will bring himself in truth from guilt to merit, and it will be possible for him to turn in teshuvah.

As we said on Rosh Hashanah and last night, the process of teshuvah isn't about wallowing in past sins, and certainly not so much so that we become depressed by them. Looking honestly at ourselves means exactly that -- looking *honestly*. We have to see the negative, but also the positive. And we have to do it for the same reason as we do with others: to bring ourselves to teshuvah, as an expression of love and faith, in ourselves.

Now, in the same way that Nachman was not saying we should completely ignore the negative deeds or qualities in another, neither is he saying we should just our own dark sides. On the contrary, he's assuming that we are all examining our souls and our actions so carefully that we need to be warned not to see only the negative. *Halavai* we should be so diligent! Granted, some of us are perfectionists. But most of us aren't too hard on ourselves, we're too easy. Our culture encourages us to excuse anything. So Nachman's teaching is important not only because of what it says, but because it presupposes a need to say it.

Nor is this is simplistic, feel-good "whatever you do is wonderful." Not at all. Nachman challenges to find the truly "good" within. In phrasing it that way, he moves us out of moral relativism. Everyone has good within, but not every aspect of us is so good. Our goal is to be so rigorous in our soul searching (*heshbon hanefesh*) that we can then trust ourselves when we do think we've found the good. Without the rigors of a disciplined self-examination, it is all too easy for the ego to masquerade as the good. So the process of teshuvah, even the search for the good, *should* make us uncomfortable. Our task is to train ourselves in distinguishing the point of goodness within, from the constructs of the ego that protect us from feeling shame; to learn to identify true holiness, and begin building on it.

And then Nachman continues:

וכמו כן צריך לחפש עוד, למצא בעצמו עוד איזה דבר טוב, ואף שגם אותו הדבר הטוב הוא גם כן מערב בפסלת הרבה, עם כל זה יוציא משם גם כן איזה נקודה טובה: וכן יחפש וילקט עוד הנקודות טובות, ועל ידי זה נעשין נגונים . . . ואזי הוא יכול להתפלל ולזמר ולהודות לה'.

And similarly, he needs to keep searching, and to find within himself another good thing. And even if that good thing is also mixed with many impurities, nevertheless he can extract some good point from there as well. And thus he should search for and collect more good points, and by this means melodies are made . . . and then it is possible for him to pray, and sing to and praise Adonai.

As the process progresses, and we learn more and more about ourselves, the points of

goodness that we find begin to form a pattern. We can even string them together into a kind of song: the song of the soul. This is teshuvah in love and joy. And what happens is that when we begin to sing the song of the soul -- made from all these good points strung together in a song -- we don't want to stop singing. We need more notes. So we need more mitzvot, more points of goodness within.

And this is the way to pray and to serve God. We pray from our most loving selves, searching our souls, releasing all that is negative and strengthening all that is good. Asserting our faith in each other and ourselves, giving each other, and ourselves, a second chance. Singing the songs of our souls.