

18

Joyous
Teachings
of the
Baal Shem Tov

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Baal Shem Tov

Compiled and translated by

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In Context

Happiness at happy times shines bright and clear, but the joy wrestled from the abyss of despair can transform the world. For it says, “I too was there. I was born from the thick of night, wrought from its bitterness and suckled by its dark earth. And from that power, I became light. I am the Light of the Six Days of Creation, the boundless, infinite light that knows no darkness.”

Let me attempt to paint for you a portrait of the Jewish soul when the Baal Shem Tov¹ arrived on the scene: The terror of the Cossack and Tartar massacres of 1648–49 that destroyed entire communities still reverberated throughout Jewish Poland. The grand disappointment of the false messiah, Shabtai Tzvi, had left many faithful Jews heartbroken and disillusioned. The infrastructure of Jewish life had been corrupted, as the Polish princes routinely sold appointments as community rabbi to unworthy characters, making a mockery of the position. A schism had formed between those who could afford Talmudic scholarship and those who, in their struggle to survive, had neither the time nor the head for books and study.

Especially demoralizing was the standard fare of popular sermons. So obsessed were some preachers with their themes of guilt, punishment and despair, they would castigate their congregants over matters for which they were neither obligated, nor could reasonably be expected to achieve—such as failing to take upon themselves a sufficient number of voluntary fasts, then for failing to suppress the desire to manage one last meal before such a fast, and then for failure to devote the entirety of the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to fasting, mourning and weeping. The forms of divine retribution elaborated upon for such crimes are better left unrepeatd, success being measured by the tears, dread and trembling instilled in the audience.

If you live with something long enough, you begin to believe it’s a member of your family. Such was the case with misery: Jews had begun to see depression as a mark of piety and a Jewish duty. To fight it was not just futile, but outright heresy, for any trace of joyousness was suspect as sin.² In synagogue sermons, ladles of despair stirred in a pot of self-pity made up the soup du jour, often without a trace of consolation:

*Live with misery long
enough and you
begin to believe its a
member of the family*

At all times and at all hours, the gentiles come and fall upon us... often we say, “Death is preferable to life”...Behold, G-d is testing us to determine whether we truly cling to Him, and He abandons us to the gen-

1 Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer of Medzibuz, b. 1698. Active in Medzibuz as founder of the chassidic movement from 1740 until his passing in 1760. The title Baal Shem, meaning “master of the Name,” was a common appellation for those who healed and performed miracles through kabbalistic means. Baal Shem Tov means “master of a good name.”

2 To us this may seem absurd, but in fact this formed the basis of many of the accusations of heresy and blasphemy against the chassidim. See J. I. Schochet’s introduction to Tzava’at Harivash, “Target of Opposition to Chassidim.”

tiles, for in these times we are abandoned, and anyone who wishes may lay claim to us...³

And now a traveling preacher stands on a crate in the town square, extolling the virtues of the simple Jew, describing G-d's interminable love for each and every one "as a father would love an only child born to him in his old age," relating tales of simple folk such as themselves and citing Talmudic passages to lift the peoples' spirits and breathe joy into their souls. A mighty uprising had sprung forth, that of Chassidism, one which would transform forever the Jewish landscape.

It wasn't as though the Baal Shem Tov introduced joy to Judaism. Much to the perturbation of the preachers mentioned above, the Torah declares only one fast day and 16 days of joy—25, if we add Purim and Chanukah. The Book of Psalms, alongside its bitter laments, gushes with explosive, often euphoric songs enjoining us to "serve G-d with happiness!"⁴ The Talmud lauds those who perform mitzvahs joyously, informing us that prayer and study are meant to be joyous activities. Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, Maimonides, Bachya ben Asher all discuss joy as a divine service, even a vital one.⁵

But for the Baal Shem Tov, joy was more than a detail of Jewish life; it was a path of its own—the key and central path.⁶

There can be no circumstance in which you cannot connect with the Infinite

Yet further: The Baal Shem Tov didn't limit joy to prayer, study and performance of mitzvahs. Consistent with his guiding principle that G-d is everywhere and can be found in all things, he taught that every event that befalls a person, everything a person sees or hears, all presents an opportunity to know the Creator and to serve Him. There can be no time, no circumstance and no place in which you cannot connect with the Infinite. And if so, there is no excuse at any time to not be happy—since joy is the key to all divine service.⁷

And perhaps most fascinating: the Baal Shem Tov understood joy as a device to repair the world, as a key to redemption.

This last point is crucial to understanding the texts within this collection. So that you can grasp its meaning, I must ask you to discard the romantic fantasies painted by 19th century historians, and rediscover the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples within the true intellectual context of their times: as Talmudic scholars, as well as scholars of the Kabbalah, in particular, the Kabbalah of the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria⁸—as were, in fact, most Jewish scholars of the time.

³ From Shaar Hamelech, Zolkiew, 1769. Cited in Roman Foxbrunner, *Habad: the Hasidism of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyady* (University of Alabama Press, 1992), pp. 24–25.

⁴ Psalms 100:2.

⁵ See all of the above in translation in our document: *Primary Sources—Joy*.

⁶ See *Sichot Kodesh* 5726, Parshat Mishpatim.

⁷ See *Hitvaaduyot* 5746, vol. 1, page 601.

⁸ Kabbalist, born in Egypt, 1534. Taught in Tzfat from around 1570 until his passing in 1572. Also referred to as the Arizal.

In a sense, they were only drawing to its logical conclusion the revolution that the Ari had begun a century and a half earlier.

When the Ari came, wrote his protégé, Rabbi Chaim Vital, a new path was opened. New souls entered the world, souls of the World of *Tikun*. *Tikun* means *repair*. The human being had been empowered to repair his own world.

Until the Ari, the standard narrative scripted the human being into a passive role in his own redemption: G-d had made a magnificent world; human beings had messed it up. You now had a choice of doing mitzvahs, cleaving to G-d and being good, or continuing to contribute to the mess. Better to be good, because the day will come that G-d will take retribution from those who were bad and dispense reward to those who are good.

You may describe that redemption in apocalyptic terms, as had many of the mystics. You might describe it as an almost natural event, as had Maimonides, the rationalist. But in all versions, humanity had little to do other than keeping well-behaved.

The Ari stood all that on its head, providing humanity a proactive role: G-d made the mess, he said; we are cleaning it up.

*The Ari provided
humanity a
proactive role*

In the Ari's narrative of *tikun*, G-d first emanated a magnificent world—the world called Tohu. Yet this primordial world could not contain its own, unbounded light, resulting in its auto-annihilation. The fragments of that world fell to generate the artifacts of our own world, carrying with them a trace of that original intense energy. The human being was then placed within this shattered world to put the pieces back together, harnessing the energy of those sparks of unbounded light, by carefully following the instructions of the Torah. Once that job is done, redemption arrives.⁹

In effect, the Ari presented an activist theology of mitzvahs: Every Torah act is a device for returning that which had been lost, reuniting that which been torn asunder, and tuning the world to the harmony originally intended. For the students of the Ari, *tikun* was an endeavor that lifted every word of prayer, pervaded every concept of Torah, and guided their mental focus in every mitzvah they performed.

Few ideas spread as fast and extensively as these teachings of the Ari. Yet, conceptually, they remained in the carefully guarded cloister of mystic prayer and meditation, a world apart. There, often misunderstood and even abused and distorted, they awaited the epiphany of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov to clarify them and take them out into the street.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, the sixth rebbe of Lubavitch, describes the earliest such awakening in a tradition he had received from his teachers. He tells the story in the voice of the Baal Shem Tov himself:

On my sixteenth birthday, the eighteenth of Elul 5474 [1714], I was in a small village. The innkeeper was a Jew of quintessential simplicity. He

⁹ For a list of articles discussing the narrative of Tohu and *Tikun*, a crucial concept in the understanding of much Jewish thought since the Ari, see Chabad.org/k2354.

knew his prayers only with difficulty—he had no idea what the words meant. But he had a great awe of heaven, and for everything that would occur to him he would comment, “Blessed be He, and may He be blessed for ever and ever.” The innkeeper’s wife and partner had a different saying: “Blessed be His Holy Name.”

On that day, I went to meditate in solitude in the pasture, as had been taught by the sages before us, that on one’s birthday one should meditate alone for a period of time. In my meditations I recited Psalms and concentrated on the *yichudim* of the divine names.

[“Yichudim” are a form of kabbalistic meditation based on different permutations and combinations of the divine names and attributes of G-d—*Trans.*].

As I was immersed in this, I had lost awareness of my surroundings. Suddenly, I beheld Elijah the Prophet—and a smile was drawn over his lips. I was very amazed that I should merit a revelation of Elijah the Prophet while alone. When I was with the tzaddik Rabbi Meir, and also with others of the hidden tzaddikim, I had the fortune to see Elijah the Prophet. But to be privileged to this while alone—this was the very first time, and I was quite amazed. Understandably, I was unable to interpret the smile on Elijah’s face.

And this is what he said to me:

“Behold, you are struggling with great effort to focus your mind upon the divine names that extend from the verses of psalms that David, King of Israel, composed. But Aaron Shlomo the innkeeper and Zlata his wife are entirely ignorant of the yichudim of divine names that extend from “Blessed be He, and may He be blessed for ever and ever” that the innkeeper recites, and “Blessed be His Holy Name” that she recites. And nevertheless, these yichudim cause a tempest throughout all the worlds far beyond the yichudim of divine names that the great tzaddikim can create.”

Then, Elijah the Prophet told me about the pleasure G-d takes, so to speak, from the praise and thanksgiving of the men, women and children who praise Him—especially when the praise and thanks comes from simple people, and most specifically when it is ongoing, continual praise—for then they are continuously bonded with G-d, blessed be He, with pure faith and sincerity of heart.

From that time on I took upon myself a path in the service of G-d to bring men, women and children to say words of praise to G-d. I would always ask them about their health, the health of their children, about

their material welfare — and they would answer me with different words of praise for the Holy One, blessed be He — each one in his or her own way.

For several years I did this myself, and at one of the gatherings of the hidden tzaddikim they all accepted this path...¹⁰

The mystical unities of the divine names were no longer the exclusive domain of the mystic; they were out there in the mouths and deeds of every simple innkeeper and his wife, whether they knew of them or not. The job of the enlightened was to reveal them there, to fan their flames and carry them yet higher.

The most vital tool for repair and redemption was joy. In the last four of the teachings below, you will see how the Baal Shem Tov understood the effect of joy in a classically Lurianic way. Troubles, pain, evil decrees, all that is ugly and bad in this world, all are artifacts of constrictions of light. Evil is a kind of epiphenomenon that exists only as a result of the pre-cosmic catastrophe, the shattering of Tohu: since this spark of good has fallen, it has been severed from its origin, allowing its light to be distorted and even trapped within a coarse outer shell. Just as illness is caused by a constriction of the flow of life from one organ to another, so all troubles, pain, evil decrees and any ugliness of this world is caused by a constriction of the divine energy that vitalizes all things. (In kabbalistic terms, these are called *judgments*.)

Joy as a key to redemption

The cure, then, is to reattach the fallen spark to its origin. “Judgments can only be sweetened at their source,” goes the kabbalistic dictum. It’s up to Torah to guide us to find that origin and provide us a means to affect the reunion. The Baal Shem Tov found that connection in joy: Find the beauty within the ugliness, the spark of light behind the darkness, the beneficent Creator’s deeper intent behind whatever circumstance is disturbing you, and celebrate it. The celebration itself redeems the divine spark and carries it up to its origin. Reconnected, the evil is sweetened and transformed.

In truth, the Zohar says it all:

Come and see: The Lower World is always ready to receive, and is called a precious stone. The Upper World only gives it according to its state. If its state is of a bright countenance from below, in the same manner it is shined upon from above; but if it is in sadness, it is correspondingly given judgment. Similarly, it is written, “Serve G-d with joy!” — because human joy draws another supernal joy. Thus, just as the Lower World is crowned, so it draws from above.¹¹

The joy of Chasidim, then, is not a naive joy, nor the dizzy, unbridled enthusiasm of a crazed fanatic. It is joy with a purpose — because we see what is broken, therefore we search for the key to heal it. And the twist of that key is the sincere joy within our hearts.

¹⁰ Sefer Hasichot 5703, pp. 167-168; more of this story is translated at Chabad.org/2529.

¹¹ Zohar, volume 3, 56a.

In a famous letter to his brother-in-law, the Baal Shem Tov writes of his ascendance to the highest of all supernal realms, the chamber of the Messiah. He asks, "Master, when will you arrive?" The answer: "When your wellsprings will spread to the outside, and the common people will make yichudim as you do."

In our joy and celebration, we are achieving that destiny.

About This Collection

From the Baal Shem Tov's hand, we have only a number of letters, none of which discuss his cosmology or teachings. His students and students' students carried his teachings with them mostly orally, developing them yet further, each along his own particular path. In the generation after the passing of the fathers of the movement, it seems there was a popular demand to know what the Baal Shem Tov himself had actually said.

Two of the popular works from this period are Tzava'at Harivash¹² and Keter Shem Tov.¹³ In both, enigmas abound. In the Kehot Publications editions of these works, Rabbi Dr. J. Immanuel Schochet has fulfilled for us the arduous and erudite task of comparing these works to earlier sources, separating passages from one another to reduce confusion, and providing many welcome emendations to clarify their meaning. An appendix of valuable additional material related to the Baal Shem Tov's teaching was added to both books, from which I have borrowed as well.

Most of the eighteen teachings I have chosen here are from these two works. Where necessary, I examined the original context and translated accordingly. Although Rabbi Schochet has already provided a highly accurate translation of Tzava'at Harivash, I have provided my own free translation in a form that, while compromising integrity to the written word, I believe renders the intent of those words more accessible to a wide audience.



"All that I have written here are principles, greater and more precious than fine gold.

Each matter is on its own a major principle."

— anonymous author of Tzava'at Harivash (46)

¹² Kehot edition, first published 1975, fifth revised edition 1998. Available online at Chabad.org/145202.

¹³ Kehot edition, first published 2004, second print 2008.

~One

Sincerity, Mikvah and Joy

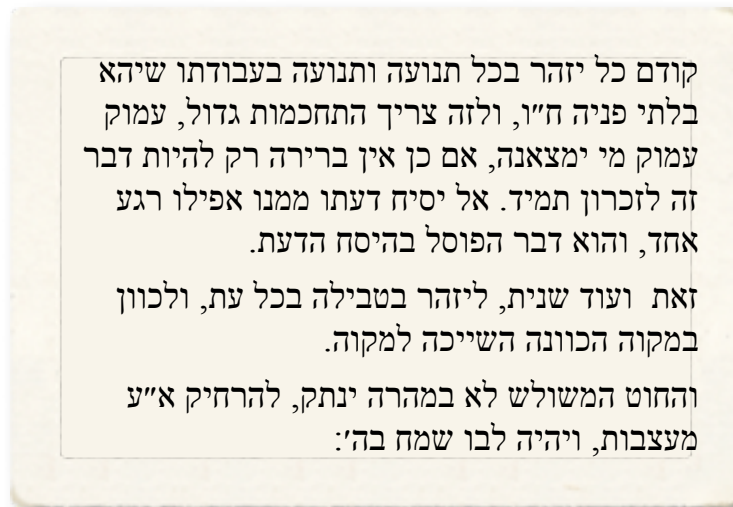
Above all, ensure that every nuance of your service to G-d be without ulterior motivation, heaven forbid.

To accomplish this requires great cunning, “so deep, so deep, who can find it?”¹⁴ If so, there is no choice but to keep this constantly in mind, not to allow your mind to leave this thought even for a moment. It is the sort of thing that can be spoiled by a single distraction.

Secondly, be careful about immersion in the mikvah at all appropriate times. When immersing, focus on the meditations that relate to immersion in a mikvah.

The “thread woven of three strands that is not easily broken”¹⁵ is complete with one last item: Stay far away from depression. Let your heart rejoice in G-d.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 15](#)



¹⁴ Ecclesiastes 7:24.

¹⁵ Ecclesiastes 4:12.

~Two

Trust and Celebrate

Envision that the Creator, whose glory fills the earth, He and His presence are continually with you. This is the most subtle of all experiences.

Tell yourself, "He is the Master of all that occurs in the world. He can do anything I desire. And therefore, it makes no sense for me to put my confidence in anything else but Him, may He be blessed."

Rejoice constantly. Ponder and believe with complete faith that the Divine Presence is with you and protecting you; that you are bound up with the Creator and the Creator is bound up with you, with your every limb and every faculty; that your focus is fixed on the Creator and the Creator's focus is fixed upon you.

And the Creator could do whatever He wants. If He so desired, He could annihilate all the worlds in a single moment and recreate them all in a single moment. Within Him are rooted all goodness and all stern judgments in the world. For the current of His energy runs through each thing.

And you say, "As for me, I do not rely upon, nor do I fear, anyone or anything other than Him, blessed be He."

—[Tzava'at Harivash 137](#)

יחשוב שהבורא מלא כל הארץ כבודו, ושכינתו תמיד
 אצלו, והוא דק מן הדק, והוא אדון על כל מעשים
 שבעולם והוא יכול לעשות כל מה שאני אחפוץ, ולכך
 אינו יפה לו לבטוח רק בו יתברך.
 ויהיה תמיד בשמחה, ויחשוב ויאמין באמונה שלימה
 שהשכינה אצלו ושומרת אותו והוא מקושר בבורא
 ית' והבורא ית' מקושר בו בכל איבריו וכחותיו, והוא
 מסתכל על הבורא ית' והבורא ית' מסתכל בו,
 והבורא ית' יכול לעשות כל מה שהוא רוצה, אם הוא
 רוצה מחריב כל העולמות ברגע אחד ובורא אותם
 ברגע אחד, ובו יתברך מושרשים כל הטובות והדינים
 שיש בעולם, שבכל דבר יש שפעו וחיותו, ואין אני
 בוטח ומתירא רק ממנו ית':

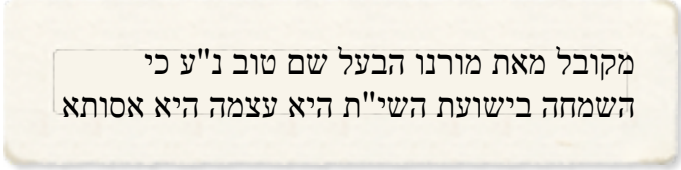
~Three

Rescue By Celebration

We have a tradition in the name of the Baal Shem Tov:

By celebrating that G-d will come to your rescue, you have already provided the remedy.

—From a letter of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchaak Schneersohn, printed in Igrot Kodesh Admor Moharayatz, vol. 7, page 290. Keter Shem Tov, Appendix, #234



מקובל מאת מורנו הבעל שם טוב נ"ע כי
השמחה בישועת השי"ת היא עצמה היא אסותא

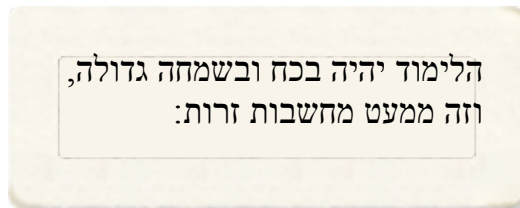
~*Four*

Joyous Studies

Study with energy and great joy.

That will reduce disturbing thoughts.

– [Tzava' at Harivash 51](#)



~Five

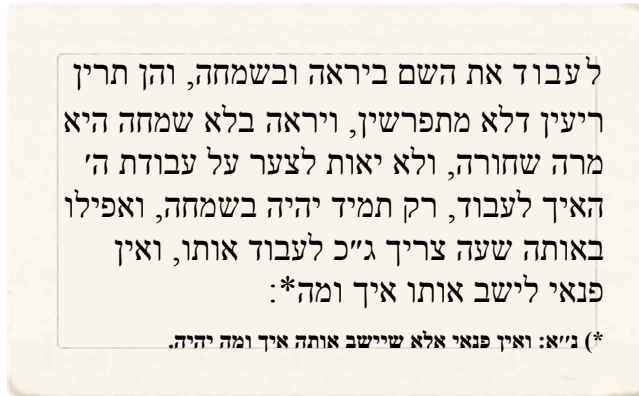
Reverence and Joy

Serve G-d with reverence and with joy. They are two companions that must never part.

Reverence without joy is a gloomy attitude. It is unseemly to torment yourself over the way you serve G-d.

Rather, always be joyful. Even at the time of your uncertainty,¹⁶ you still must be serving Him. Don't waste your time fretting over how and what.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 110](#)



¹⁶ The meaning of these words in the original remains ambiguous.

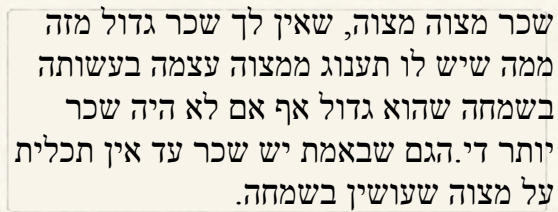
~Six

The Ultimate Reward

“The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah.”¹⁷

Meaning that there is no greater reward than the delight derived from doing a mitzvah with joy. It is a great reward, so great that even if there was no other reward to come beyond it, this would be enough. And yet, in truth, there is an unlimited reward yet to come for any mitzvah performed with joy.

—Keter Shem Tov 129; from Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Kedoshim, p. 336b



שכר מצוה מצוה, שאין לך שכר גדול מזה
ממה שיש לו תענוג ממצוה עצמה בעשותה
בשמחה שהוא גדול אף אם לא היה שכר
יותר די. הגם שבאמת יש שכר עד אין תכלית
על מצוה שעושין בשמחה.

¹⁷ Pirke Avot 4:2.

~Seven

The Happy Ascetic

Let's say a fantasy comes to you, a craving for something of this world. Take your mind far away from it. Despise this craving until it is hateful and repugnant to you. Enrage your urge for good against the urge for bad and against this craving, and conquer it in that way.

But don't allow that unfulfilled craving to make you depressed. On the contrary, celebrate that you are privileged to subdue your desires for the honor of the Creator, blessed be He!

This is one way to understand what our rabbis meant when they talked about "those who rejoice in their suffering."

—[Tzava'at Harivash 9](#)

ואם יבא לו הרהור תאוות עוה"ז ירחיק
 ממחשבתו, ויבזה התאוה עד שיהיה שנאוי
 ומאום אצלו, וירגיז יצר הטוב על היצר הרע
 ותאוותו, ובזה יכניעם.
 ושלא יהיה לו עצבות כלל כשלא יהיה לו
 תאוות עוה"ז, אלא אדרבא, ישמח מאד במה
 שהוא זוכה להכניע תאוותו לשם כבוד הבורא
 יתברך, כמ"ש חז"ל ושמחים ביסורים.

~Eight

Better Happy Than Strict

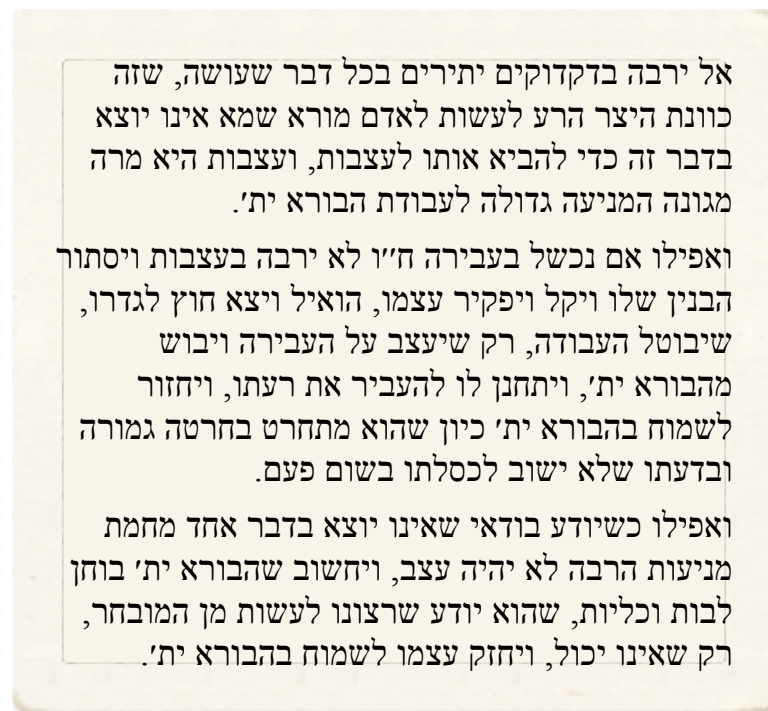
Don't get carried away with excessive details in everything you do. This is your evil impulse working against you. It intends to agonize you by insisting you haven't fulfilled your obligation, just to make you depressed. Depression is a reprehensible attitude, the greatest obstacle to serving the Creator, blessed be He.

Even if you stumble in sin, don't wallow in misery. That would destroy all that you have accomplished so far, rendering you an easy catch for the evil impulse, since you feel you are a lost cause anyway. Your divine service would fall apart.

Just be saddened over the sin, ashamed before the Creator, and plead to Him to absolve the bad you've done. And then get back to rejoicing in the Creator, blessed be He, since you thoroughly regret what you did and have resolved in your mind never to do foolish things like this again.

Even if you know with certainty that you haven't fulfilled your obligation in some area because there were so many obstacles, don't let that get you down. Consider that the Creator, blessed be He, examines all hearts and innards. He knows that you wanted to do things as best as possible, just that you were not able. And then strengthen yourself in joy in the Creator, may He be blessed.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 46](#)



~Nine

Better Smart Than Sad

Sometimes the evil impulse will deceive you, telling you that you've committed a major transgression — when really all you've done is neglect an extra detail, or perhaps no transgression at all. Its intent? To get you miserable, and in your misery you will desist from serving your Creator.

Be wise to its ruse. Talk back to that impulse and say, "I'm not going to pay attention to this extra detail that you are talking about. I know your intent: to stop me from serving my Creator, blessed be He. I know that you are speaking lies. Even if there is a bit of sin here, my Creator has greater pleasure if I pay no attention to a technicality — by which you are attempting to manipulate me into gloomy service — and instead serve Him with joy.

"After all, I'm not doing this for my own benefit, but to bring pleasure before Him, blessed be He. So when I ignore this detail of yours, my Creator will not mind — since I am ignoring it only so that I can continue serving Him! How could I lose even a moment from His service?!"

This is a first principle in serving the Creator, blessed be He, to be as wary of sadness as possible.

— [Tzava'at Harivash 44](#)

לפעמים מטעה היצה"ר לאדם ואומר לו שעבר עבירה גדולה אע"פ שאינו אלא חומרא בעלמא, או שאינה עבירה כלל, וכונתו שיהא האדם בעצבות מכח זה, ויבטל בעצבותו מעבודת הבורא ית'.
וצריך האדם להבין הרמאות הזו, ויאמר להיצר הרע איני משגיח על החומרא שאתה אומר לי, שכוונתך לבטלני מעבודתו יתב', ושקר אתה דובר. וגם אם הוא באמת קצת חטא, יותר יהיה נחת רוח לבוראי שלא אשגיח על החומרא שאתה אומר לי לגרום לי עצבות בעבודתו, אדרבא, אעבוד אותו בשמחה, כי זהו כלל גדול כי אין כוונתי בעבודה לצורך עצמי, רק לעשות נחת רוח לפניו יתברך, וא"כ אף שלא אשגיח על החומרא שאתה אומר לא יקפיד הבורא עלי, כי כל עיקר שאיני משגיח הוא מחמת שלא אבטל מעבודתו ית', ואיך אבטל מעבודתו אפילו רגע אחד.
וזהו כלל גדול בעבודת הבורא ית' שיזהר מעצבות כל מה שיוכל:

~Ten

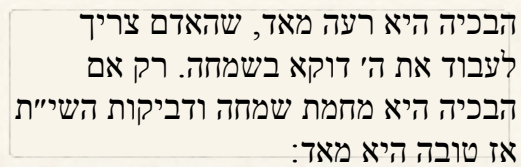
Bad Tears, Good Tears

Crying is very bad, for a person must serve G-d with joy.

The only exception is when you cry from joy and bonding with G-d.

Then it is very good.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 45](#)



הבכיה היא רעה מאד, שהאדם צריך
לעבוד את ה' דוקא בשמחה. רק אם
הבכיה היא מחמת שמחה ודביקות השי"ת
אז טובה היא מאד:

~Eleven

In All Ways

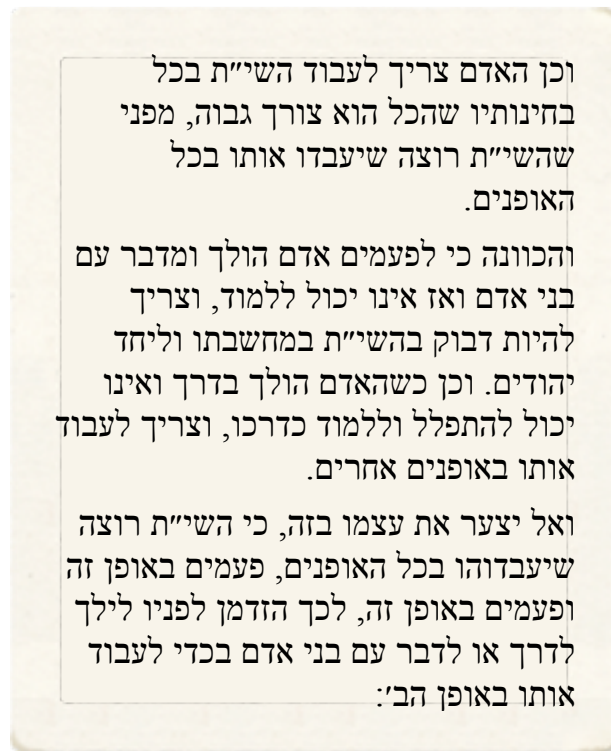
Serve G-d, may He be blessed, with every facet of your being. Everything is for the sake of On High, for G-d desires to be served in all ways.

Let me illustrate what I mean: Sometimes you may go and speak with other people, and at that time you are unable to learn. Yet your thoughts must remain connected to G-d, may He be blessed, creating supernal unities through your meditation.

Similarly, when you are traveling and unable to pray or to learn in the way to which you are accustomed—you must then serve Him in a different modality.

Don't get yourself all distressed when you are in such situations. G-d, may He be blessed, desires that you serve Him in all modalities that exist—sometimes in one way, sometimes in another. That is why you ended up in this situation where you must travel or speak with people—so that you can serve Him now in a different way.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 3](#)



~*Twelve*

Pray with Joy

Noah was told, “Make a *tzohar* for the ark.” The word ark in Hebrew is *teivah*, which also means “a word.” A *tzohar* is something that shines. So the verse could mean, “Make each word you say shine.”

The ark had a lower floor, a second floor and a top floor, which are the three levels of Worlds, Souls and G-dliness.¹⁸ The Zohar calls these “the three worlds that He has.” So too, within every letter of every word there are worlds, souls and G-dliness. These all ascend, bond and unite with one another and with G-dliness.

Beyond that, the letters themselves bond and form words, forming true unions with G-dliness. You must include your own soul in every one of these stages, so that all the worlds unite as one and ascend together, causing great joy and immeasurable delight.

It is necessary to listen to every word that you say, for the Divine Presence (Shechinah) is speaking. The Shechinah, you see, relates to the world of speech.

Yet that is only when each word has a *tzohar*—when the words come out shining because you say them to provide pleasure to your Creator.

Saying the words with such joy that the Shechinah speaks within them requires great faith, as the Shechinah is called “true faith.” But one who does not say them this way is called a “grumbler who alienates the Master of the Universe”—heaven forbid.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 75](#)

¹⁸ Each letter comprises three elements: an outer, seemingly finite container; an inner, infinite energy; and an intermediary element that effects the union of the two. The finite container is called World, the infinite energy within is G-dliness, and the intermediary that allows for the union of the two is called a Soul.

ריבייש ע"ה אמר צוהר תעשה לתיבה,
שתהא התיבה מצהיר.

על דרך כי יש בכל אות עולמות ונשמות
ואלהות, ועולים ומתקשרים ומתיחדים
זע"ז, עם אלהות, ואח"כ מתיחדים
ומתקשרים יחד האותיות ונעשה התיבה,
ומתיחדים יחודים אמתיים באלהות. וצריך
כל אדם לכלול נשמתו בכל בחי' ובחי'
מהנז', ואז מתיחדים כל העולמות כאחד
ועולים ונעשה שמחה ותענוג גדול עד אין
שיעור.

וזהו תחתים שנים ושלישים וכו', דהיינו
עולמות ונשמות ואלהות, תלת עלמין אית
ליה וכו', וצריך לשמוע בכל תיבה כל מה
שאומר, שהשכינה, עולם הדיבור, מדברת,
והוא שיש לה צוהר, שתצא בבהירות
ולעשות נחת רוח ליוצרו. וצריך אמונה
גדולה לזה, דהשכינה נקראת אמונה אומן,
ובלא אמונה נקרא ח"ו נרגן מפריד אלוף.

~Thirteen

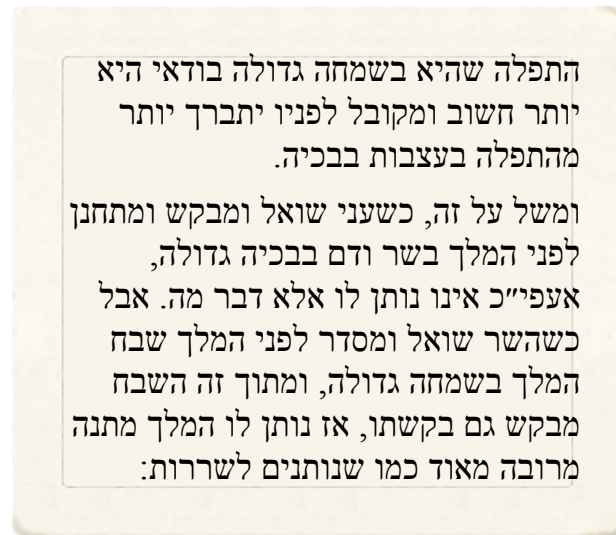
Ask with Joy

Prayer with much joy is certainly better received by G-d than prayer with sorrow and tears.

There is a parable for this: A pauper petitions a flesh-and-blood king with his requests, sobbing dramatically. Nevertheless the king only provides him a small morsel.

But when one of the king's administrators stands before him, he lauds the king eloquently and exuberantly. Then, in the midst of such praise, he slips in his request. To him the king provides a very generous gift, as befits nobility.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 107](#)



~*Fourteen*

G-d in Your Words

When you pray, visualize that G-d is invested within the letters of the prayers.

You see, words are clothing for thoughts. As fine clothes bring out the inner beauty of a person, so well-spoken words provide your thoughts with clothing so that they emerge from your personal world into the revealed world. And your words of prayer provide the same sort of clothing for G-d's presence.

If so, you should be thinking, "This is a great king, and I am making clothes for Him! If so, I should do this with joy!"

Put all your strength into those words, for this way you will attain oneness with Him. Since your energy is in your articulations of each letter, and in each letter G-d dwells, in this way you have become one with Him.

– [Tzava'at Harivash 108](#)

יחשוב כשמתפלל שבאותיות מתלבש
השי"ת, פי' דאין אנו יודעים מה אדם חושב
אא"כ ידבר, נמצא הוי הדיבור מלבוש
למחשבה, ויאמר בלבו מלך גדול כזה אני
עושה לו מלבוש, ראוי לי לעשות בשמחה.
וידבר בכל כחו, כי מזה נעשה אחדות עמו
ית', כי כחו בהאות ובהאות שורה הקב"ה,
נמצא הוא אחדות עמו ית'.

~Fifteen

The Two Jesters

The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Beroka, who stood with Elijah the prophet in the market and asked him, “Is there anyone here who belongs in the World to Come?”

Elijah pointed out two brothers. So Rabbi Beroka ran after the two brothers and asked them what their business was.

They replied, “We are jesters. We make depressed people laugh. And when we see two people in a quarrel, we use some humor to make peace between them.”

The Baal Shem Tov asked for an explanation of this, and this is what he was told in a vision:

These two jesters were able to connect every matter they saw in a person to its origin in the higher world. By doing this, any harsh heavenly decrees upon this person were automatically annulled.

But if someone was depressed, they could not make this connection. So they would cheer him up with some humorous words, until they were able to make all the connections necessary.

May G-d forgive me for having revealed this.

—Keter Shem Tov 272 (see also 37 and 58); from Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Parshat Nasso, p. 120c (451b)

שמעתי ממורי הבעש"ט זלה"ה פי' הש"ס
הנהו תרי בדחי שהם בני עוה"ב, שהיו
מייחדין כל עניני בני אדם שהיו רואין
בהם, והם ייחדו במלכות מעשה הזה
וקשרו אותה למעלה בשרשה, ומי שהיה
עצב שלא יכלו לקשרו למעלה שמחו אותו
בדברים עד שייחדו וקשרו כל המדריגות
שהן במלכות בשרשן כו' והבן, וע"פ
שאלה נאמר לו והש"י יכפר.

~*Sixteen*

Joy Sweetens Judgment

There are angels that wait to sing their song only once in seven years. Others sing only once in fifty years, or even once in a thousand years. Whatever they say is brief and to the point. Some say, "Holy!" Others say, "Blessed!" Some say a single verse—it is said about certain angels that each one says one verse from the chapter of Psalms that begins, "Give thanks to G-d for He is good."

Yet we Jews are permitted to say praises at any time or season, and to draw out the praises, songs and raptures as much as we wish.

The best way to understand this is with a parable of a king, to whom all his servants and officers come and recite hymns of praise. Each one has his appointment and quota of time to speak his praise, each according to his position and importance.

Yet this is only when the king is in a favorable mood. When the king is upset and angered, then all are afraid to provide him any praise whatsoever, as it is written, "Why are you praising the king at the time of fury?"

So, due to the concern that the king may, heaven forbid, not be in the best of moods, or that he may be angered due to something or other, they are accustomed to be as brief as possible at all times, and make a hasty exit.

Yet when the king's dear and precious son enters, he has no such concerns. For even if the king was in a state of anger, the very sight of his precious son brings him joy and delight. The anger dissipates of its own, and obviously never returns, all the time his son stands before him, as is human nature. The son, therefore, has no worries, and enters at any time he so wishes and exudes praise without end, for he knows that this brings the king, his father, joy and delight.

Why is it this way? Why do anger and fury disappear when joy and love enter? Yes, this is human nature, but nevertheless, we must try to understand how and why.

Possibly what occurs is that when love and joy dominate, they cause anger and fury to ascend upward toward their root. There they are sweetened—as it is known, that forces of strict judgment are sweetened only when they reach their root.

—[Tzava'at Harivash 132](#)

ולהבין זה נמשיל משל למלך שבאו כל עבדיו ושריו לומר
 הרמנין לפניו ולקלוסו, והנה לכל אחד ואחד יש זמן
 ושיעור לקילוסו לפי ערכו וחשיבותו, וכל זה הוא כאשר
 יש רצון לפני המלך. אבל אם פני המלך ח"ו זעומה ובכעס
 אזי יראים לקלמו כל עיקר, כמ"ש מה תקסלון למלך
 בשעת הזעם. ומחמת חשש זה שהם מסופקים אולי ח"ו
 המלך בכעס, או פן ואולי יכעס בשביל אתה דבר, לכן
 דרכם לקצר בכל היכולת ותיכף לצאת מאת פניו. והנה
 בבוא בן המלך חביבו ואוהבו לקלוס המלך, הנה הבן אינו
 חש לכל זה, כי אם אפילו המלך בכעס, כאשר רואה בנו
 חביבו נכנס שמחה ותענוג לאביו בלבו מחמת אהבתו,
 וממלא נסתלק הכעס, ופשיטא שלא יכעוס כל זמן שבנו
 עומד לפניו, כידוע בטבע האדם. א"כ אין חשש להבן
 בדבר זה, ולכך הוא נכנס בבל עת ומאריך בקילומו בלי
 שיעור, כי יודע שמוסיף בזה שמחה ותענוג לאביו,
 והנה אמרנו בבוא השמחה ואהבה נסתלק הכעס והזעם.
 וצריך להבין זה, אד נסתלק ולא יזה מקום נסתלק הכעס,
 הגם שהוא כך טבעיות מ"מ צריך להבין ענינו. וי"ל
 שכאשר האהבה והשמחה גוברות גורמות להכעס והזעם
 שיעלה למעלה אל שורשו ושם הוא נמתק, כידוע
 שהדינים אינם נמתקים אלא בשורשם.

~Seventeen

Embracing Pain with Joy

My master, the Baal Shem Tov, posed to us the following question:

G-d commands us in His Torah to love Him. What benefit does He gain from our love for Him, us tiny creatures? If you would have love for a great and mighty king, what difference would that make to the king?

Then I heard from him this wondrous explanation: The reason there is suffering and tribulation in this world is because the world was created through strict judgment—meaning through a restriction of light that is called *tzimtzum*. These troubles are therefore like a body to the soul and to the spiritual life within them, restricting the expression of that light as the body restricts the soul.

When you accept that suffering with the spiritual energy of love and joy, you draw close, tie and bond the body to the soul—meaning the physical affliction to that inner spirituality—and in this way, the ordeal vanishes.

On the other hand, if, G-d forbid, you do the opposite, you push the body away from that spiritual energy, causing yet greater restriction.

Therefore, the Torah provides us good advice: Love the L-rd your G-d. The name for L-rd [YHVH] is a name of compassion, while the name for G-d [Elokim] is one of strict judgment. So the statement means that through your act of love, accepting suffering with joy, you draw close G-d's name of judgment to His name of compassion, as the body is drawn close to the soul, allowing its light to shine.

Meditate on this. The words of the wise are delightful.

—Keter Shem Tov 412; from Toldot Yaakov Yosef, p. 630b

הַקְשָׁה מוֹרֵי ע"פ וְאֵהֲבַת אֵת ה' מֵה זֶה לּוֹ יִת' לְתוֹעֵלַת שְׂנֵאֲהַבְנוּ, יְתוֹשׁ כְּמוֹנוּ, אִם יֵאָהֵב לְמֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל וְנוֹרָא מֵה זֶה נֶחֱשֵׁב לְכֹלָם.
וְשִׁמְעֵתִי מִמֶּנּוּ פִירוֹשׁ נִפְלֵא עַל קוֹשִׁיא זֶה, כִּי בְרִיאַת הָעוֹלָם הִיא ע"י דִּין, שֶׁהוּא סוּד הַצְּמִצּוּם כְּנוּדֵעַ, לְכַךְ דִּינֵי וִיסוּרֵי הָאָדָם הֵם גּוֹף אֵל הַנִּשְׁמָה וְחַיּוֹת הַרוּחָנִיּוֹת, וְכַשְׂאֵדָם מִקְּבֵל הַיְסוּרִין בְּאֵהֲבָה וּבִשְׂמִחָה שֶׁהוּא בְּחִינַת הַחַיּוֹת וְהַרוּחָנִיּוֹת, הוּא מִקְרָב וּמִקְשֵׁר וּמִדְּבֵק הַגּוֹף אֵל הַנִּשְׁמָה, שֶׁהוּא הַחַיּוֹת וְהַרוּחָנִיּוֹת, וְנִתְבַטַּל הַדִּין.
וְח"ו בְּהִיפֹךְ דוּחָה הַגּוֹף שְׁלוֹ מִן הַחַיּוֹת.
לְכַךְ אָמַר עֲצָה הִיעוּצָה לְאָדָם וְאֵהֲבַת אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, שֶׁהוּא בְּחִינַת דִּין, לְקַבְּלוֹ בְּשִׂמְחָה וּלְקַשְׁרוֹ אֵל הוִי"ה שֶׁהוּא הַנִּשְׁמָה, ע"י וְאֵהֲבַת. וְהַבֵּן

~*Eighteen*

Medicine As Sweet As Honey

The Baal Shem Tov taught that in every word you speak, you should intend to subdue, distinguish and sweeten. Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka explained:

This means that you must let go of the harsh approach of finding fault with everyone and instead enter into a mode of compassion, seeking out the positive.

Even if you do see something repugnant in another person, you must realize that this is for your own good. The very fact that you noticed it demonstrates that there is some trace of this despicable trait in you as well. Now you can repent from even the thought of it.

If so, this is all for your own good: If you were alone in the world, you would think that you were pious. Now that you see these faults in another person, you are able to realize that they are in you as well.

It seems to me¹⁹ that this is one meaning of the verse, "It is not good that man is alone. I will make for him a helper against him."²⁰ The verse is telling us that G-d brings a person help from that which is against him. It helps him by allowing him to see that he also has a trace of the same.

Therefore, if you have a bad neighbor who is disturbing you from your prayers or from studying Torah, or any other sort of disturbance, speak to your heart, saying, "This is for my own good. It must be that my intentions were not sincere enough. This disturbance was sent to me so I will recognize this and work harder."

There are more examples, and every wise person should hear and add his own lessons.

The main thing is to understand that G-d is found in every place and in all your activities. When you think this way, you will be able to recognize the affairs of the Creator, blessed be He, in every anecdote of life—just as in your studies and in your prayer...

The key is to abandon sadness and embrace joy. Our master, R' Nachman of Horodenka, told me about the dream he had when he was in the Land of Israel. He was unsure whether to head back to the Diaspora for reasons known only to him.... But then he had a vision in a dream. He was told that although there are many doctors who medicate their patients with bitter potions, yet the better doctor heals through medicine as sweet as honey.

¹⁹ We were unable to discern who is speaking at this point.

²⁰ Genesis 2:18.

This is precisely what we were discussing, that through fasts, self-affliction and pushing yourself to relentless study, sadness prevails, and you fall into the trap of finding fault with everyone else who, instead of behaving like you, abandons the opportunity of eternal life for the transient life of the material world. Think of the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son when they left the cave, as mentioned in the Talmud, so that a voice had to sound from heaven, "Return to your cave!"²¹ This is medication with bitter waters.

And then there is the alternative form of healing, where even as you notice the faults of another, you realize that this is for your own self-improvement. This is healing as sweet as honey, awakening compassion for the world and for every person. It extends from an awareness that G-d is in every particular thing. Now you have a painless medicine, a path for yourself that is both delicious and aromatic.

The words of the wise are delightful!

—Keter Shem Tov 302; from Toldot Yaakov Yosef, p. 731b

כתב המחבר הרב הגאון החסיד הקדוש מ' יעקב יוסף הכהן זלה"ה וז"ל שמעתי מהרבני הוותיק מוהר"ן זלה"ה פירוש על דברי מורי הבעש"ט זלה"ה שיכוין בכל דיבור הכנעה והבדלה והמתקה, פירוש שיצא ממדת הגבורה שלא ללמד חוב על בני עולם רק שיכנסו ברחמים וילמודו זכות על כולם. גם שרואה דברי כעירות מחבירו, ירגיש שהוא לטובתו שיבחין בעצמו שיש בו שמץ מנהו וישוב בתשובה ממנה גם במחשבה, וזהו טובתו, שאלו היה יחיד היה סובר שהוא חסיד משא"כ עתה.

ונ"ל שזהו פי' לא טוב היות האדם לבדו מטעם זה, רק אעשה לו עזר מן כנגדו, שיבחין שיש בו שמץ מזה והבן. ולכך אם ע"י שכן רע מבלבל תפלתו או תורתו או שאר ביטול, יתן לב שהוא לטובתו שלא היה בכוונה ישרה ושלחו לו ביטול זה להרגיש ויתחזק יותר, וכיוצא בזה, ישמע חכם ויוסף לקח. והעיקר להבין שהש"י בכל מקום ובכל עסקיו, א"כ גם בסיפורי דברים יוכל להרגיש עניני הבורא ית' כמו בלימודו ותפלתו.

והעיקר להסיר העצבות ולאחוז בשמחה. וסיפר מה שחלם לו כשהיה בארץ ישראל והיה נבוך אם לצאת לחוץ לארץ מחמת טעמים הכמוסים לו כו', עד שראה בחלום שאחד סיפר לו שיש כמה רופאים הנותנים רפואות ע"י משקה מר, אך זה הרופא יותר טוב שנותן רפואה ע"י משקה מתוק מדבש, והוא ענין הנ"ל שע"י תענית וסיגופים והתמדת לימודו גובר העצבות ומלמד חוב על בני עולם שאינן עושים כמעשיו ומניחין חיי עולם כו', וכמעשה דרשב"י ובנו שיצאו ממערה הנזכר בש"ס דשבת, עד שיצאה ב"ק חזרו למערתכם כו', והוא רפואה ע"י מים מרים, משא"כ רפואה זו בדרך זה שיתן לב אף בכל דבר מגונה שרואה בחבירו שהוא לתועלת עצמו וידינהו לזכות וכנ"ל, הוא ע"י משקה מתוק מדבש לעורר רחמים בעולם ועל כל אדם שידע שהש"י הוא בכל דבר פרטי ויתנהג כנ"ל, אז הוא רפואה מתוקה בלי שום סיגוף, ויערב לו ויבושם,

21 Shabbat 33b.

~*Just one more:*

Wisdom, Joy & Enthusiasm

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi said:

I received a teaching from the grandfather,²² our teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, his soul is in Eden, that for chassidim, foolishness — not just acting foolish, but being unintelligent; sadness; and self-infatuation are cardinal sins.²³ Wisdom — what people call an intelligent person; joy — through finding something to celebrate in each thing; and enthusiasm with composure are for chassidim cardinal mitzvahs.

—Keter Shem Tov, Appendix, 205; Sefer Hasichot, Kayitz 5710, p. 52.



²² Rabbi Schneur Zalman considered himself to be a spiritual grandchild of the Baal Shem Tov.

²³ Literally: sins of Torah, i.e., non-rabbinic (hence more serious).