

HITBODEDUT ANECDOTES

written by Chaim Kramer
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Why should we pray to God to draw us closer to Him? Doesn't this defeat the purpose of free will?

When Rebbe Nachman mentioned the importance of *hitbodedut* to Reb Noson, the latter asked: But surely man has free will?! The Rebbe did not answer explicitly, yet indicated that even though he might not be able to explain this to him completely, it was still necessary to follow this practice. Reb Noson understood that the same question might be asked about the formal prayers compiled by our Sages (*Tzaddik* #436).

Reb Noson's question was this: Why should we pray to God to draw us closer to Him? Doesn't this defeat the purpose of free will? By asking Him to determine what we do, aren't we essentially asking Him to remove our free choice? The Rebbe answered him: although this may be hard to understand, the

best way to exercise our free will is to ask God that we submit to His will. As the Mishnah teaches: "Make your will His will" (*Avot* 2:4).

When Reb Noson first became a follower of Rebbe Nachman, he would spend an occasional Shabbat in Breslov. On Friday night, after everyone had gone to sleep, he would descend to the bank of the Bug River and spend the night crying out to God. He would say, "God! There is a fire burning in Breslov. Enflame my heart with that fire!" (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 1-689).

After Rebbe Nachman's passing, Reb Noson moved (from his birthplace, Nemirov) to Breslov. At first, he rented a one-room apartment in someone else's house. However this soon proved inconvenient, and he prayed to God for better accommodations. His prayers were answered and he was able to move into his own quarters. Yet even this new apartment had no private room where Reb Noson could practice *hitbodedut* and study Torah. Having no better alternative, he erected a room divider in the corner of the kitchen. It wasn't perfect, and he was often interrupted by his children, but at least it was "his own four ells." Things stayed this way until many years – and many prayers – later, when Reb Noson was finally able to add on an attic to his house. He praised and thanked God for having found him worthy to have his own room after all those years (*Aveneha Barzel*, p. 62 #30).

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Reb Noson once stopped at an inn together with a friend. While eating, a small bone became lodged in Reb Noson's throat. Opening his mouth wide, as though he were choking, the bone became unstuck. "Did you see," said Reb Noson to his friend, "when the bone was stuck I opened my mouth and looked upward? There is nothing else we can do but look to Heaven for all our

needs – even when we cannot speak, but only moan” (*Kokhavey Or*, p. 71 #8).

Before departing Europe for the Holy Land, Reb Elchonon Specter went to visit the man responsible for almost singlehandedly introducing Breslover Chassidut to Poland, Reb Yitzchak Breiter. When Reb Elchonon arrived, Reb Yitzchak was engaged in *hitbodedut*. Reb Elchonon waited for six hours. After Reb Yitzchak emerged from his room, Reb Elchonon said to him, “You must have really felt an arousal!” Reb Yitzchak replied, “I haven’t even begun to speak my heart!”

When Kalev went to Hebron to pray at the graves of the Patriarchs, he was in considerable danger of being caught by the inhabitants of the land (Numbers 13:22, *Rashi*). He went anyway, because a person under pressure and in desperate need of something doesn’t take danger into account. He knows only that he must act (*Zohar* III:158b). Reb Noson taught the same is true in serving God, especially in practicing *hitbodedut* in the fields. We should feel the pressure from the Evil Inclination, and not make an accounting of all the so-called dangers involved in serving God (*Kokhavey Or*, p. 71 #9).

When discussing this point and the practice of going out to the fields at night, Reb Noson told of the time the Haidemacks [a band of Cossacks] fell upon a town and forced its inhabitants to flee. Among those running away was a man known to be afraid of literally everything. While fleeing, this man found himself alone in the town’s cemetery and having no choice, he spent the entire night there. The next day, when the inhabitants returned to the town, they asked him, “How were you able to stay alone in the cemetery?” “I was too afraid to be afraid!” he replied (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 1-555).

One of the six questions put to a person by the Heavenly Court is: “Did you hope for the Redemption?” (*Shabbat* 31a). Rabbi Nachman Chazan said that this refers not only to the redemption of the Jewish Nation, but also to each individual’s

personal redemption. Did you lose hope and give up? or, did you hope and pray for God's salvation to bring you out of all your troubles? (*Aveneha Barzel* p. 80).

(Taken from the book [Crossing the Narrow Bridge: A Practical Guide to Rebbe Nachman's Teachings](#) chapter 9 – Hitbodedut)