

It's Forbidden to Be Old! – Parshat Yitro

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Even if you are young, this sentence is aimed at you. There are old people who are very young, and there are very young people who are old. Old age is the main reason why people give up on themselves—they are already stuck in their habits, and do not believe in change and renewal. Instead of asking how to stay young, let's learn how to be young.

This week's Torah portion is *parshat Yitro*. The *parsha* opens with our standing at Har Sinai with the words: "In the third month after the Jewish people had left the land of Egypt, on this day, they came to the desert of Sinai" (Exodus 19:1). Our

sages asked: "It could have said only, 'on **that day**.' What is the meaning of 'on **this day**'? That the words of the Torah shall be new to you, as if they were given just today" (*Midrash Tanchuma Yashan* 13, as quoted in *Rashi*).

A central topic which is found in many of Rabbi Nachman's lessons is the importance of *hitchadshut*, renewal, i.e., starting each time anew. Rabbi Natan, in the famous book of his collected letters, *Alim l'Trufah*, mentions "*hitchadshut*" countless times and warns his sons and students not to become old, but rather to relate to *divrei Torah* as something completely new—as something that is being reinvented anew all the time. HaRav HaChassid Rabbi Shmuel Shapira and Rabbi Zvi Aryeh Lippel ztz"l, the Breslov elders of the previous generation, were a living example of *hitchadshut*. When they studied the book, *Alim l'Trufa*, they would say, "A letter has arrived from Rabbi Natan, let's study it"—as if the letter had just arrived in the mail.

What did Rabbi Nachman innovate in the concept of *hitchadshut*? If we contemplate, it seems that the main reason a person loses his determination, despairs, and gives up is due to the burnout which results from being in a fixed routine. "Burnout" and "routine" are fancy modern words for "old age." A person says to himself, "I became accustomed to it. This is how I am used to behaving. There is no chance that I am going to change my habits." And once he realizes that he is far from the right path and that he must change his habits, he despairs of ever drawing closer to G-d, and even the small amount of *avodat Hashem* that he can still do, he does in the fashion of "habitual mitzvos"—sleepily, and without any enthusiasm, vitality, happiness or desire. It is all because of the staleness that has captured him that he considers himself "old." This very thought itself is catastrophic, and regarding this Rabbi Nachman exclaimed: "It is forbidden to be old, whether an old *chassid* or an old *tzaddik*—it is forbidden to be old!" (*Sichot Haran* 51).

Let us understand Rabbi Nachman's saying in depth. What is meant by the words: "It is forbidden to be old, even an old tzaddik"? If it is forbidden to be old, it includes everyone, so why add "even an old tzaddik?" Rabbi Natan explains this concept in a remarkable way:

Everyone understands that when a person accustoms himself to negativity, resigning himself to such a habit is extremely dangerous, because he may, G-d forbid, come to completely lose his way if he does not wake himself up and refresh his approach for the better. This is the main meaning of "*teshuvah*": to renew and improve our actions. As in the verse: "Restore us to You, G-d, that we may return! Renew our days as of old" (Lamentations 5:21). The emphasis is on *hitchadshut*: "renew our days." Because the main *teshuvah* for those who have become accustomed to following a bad path is to renew it for the better.

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However, Rabbi Nachman is making a further point. Not only those who have become accustomed to following a bad path need to renew themselves for the better, but even those who are "accustomed" to walk in a good way only as a routine, that is, even those who are in the category of being a "tzaddik" should renew themselves for the better every day. A "tzaddik" who does his duty out of habit without vitality is not good! This is the meaning of the words: "Even an 'old tzaddik' is not good." The evil inclination is sometimes referred to as the "the **old** foolish king." He drops a person into feeling burned out, which is the aspect of old age. Our job is to renew ourselves for the good, as in: "But those who put their hope in G-d shall renew their vigor; they shall raise wings as eagles" (Isaiah 40:31). One should literally renew himself every day in serving G-d, even when we are in the aspect of

“tzaddik,” and we are already traveling on the correct path.

Rabbi Natan adds that one who strengthens himself to start over again and again will never feel this sense of despair. What makes a person fall spiritually is the experience of the past. We bear the burden of all the things we have done in the past, our actions of yesterday and previous times. We do not allow ourselves to start anew. Anyone who accustoms himself to renew himself at every moment, has no possibility of becoming “old.” Not only does he “remain young,” but he is actually “reborn” at each moment. This is the one and only answer: self-renewal. No matter how many times you try, no matter how many times you fail, you must continue to keep on renewing yourself each time anew.

Rabbi Nachman testified that the reason he merited to more than others was due to the secret of renewal. He would start anew several times a day. And even though he fell, he would put it all behind him and start all over again, as if he had just been born.

It’s always good to tell a story. Here, we will tell over a story that illustrates the concept of renewal at both the beginning and the end of the story:

One of Rabbi Nachman’s greatest students was Rabbi Shmuel Isaac of Dashiv. He was a holy and exalted person, and his *avodat Hashem* was done with tremendous *mesirut nefesh*. He would pray with so much *devekut* for so many hours with such supreme effort, that he would have to change his clothes because they would be ruined by his sweating from all the effort he put into his prayers. Someone mentioned to Rabbi Natan that Rabbi Shmuel Isaac had said: “If I were to merely recite the *Shema* today with no greater intention than the way I read it yesterday, what would be the purpose in remaining alive?! Rabbi Natan answered: Our Rebbe (Rebbe Nachman) led him on the point of a sword. However, he taught the rest of us that if we don’t do *teshuvah* on Yom Kippur, then do it on the

"Shem Hashem" (the day after Yom Kippur is referred to as *"Shem Hashem,"* as explained in *Likutei Moharan* II, 66).

This story is all about *"hitchadshut."* Rabbi Shmuel Isaac was constantly renewing himself. He felt that if he read *Shema* today the same as he read it yesterday, without increasing his concentration, then what would be the purpose in remaining alive. However, such is the behavior only of holy people on the level of angels, like Rabbi Shmuel Isaac. Rabbi Natan was teaching about how *hitchadshut* applies to the rest of us, that even if we, G-d forbid, lost control of ourselves and sinned—even if we were completely foolish and didn't manage to do *teshuvah* on Yom Kippur—then we could still try again the day after. It is never too late to start again.



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There is another dimension of depth to the idea we have learned. The Ari HaKadosh explains: "There is no hour which is similar to the next. One who contemplates the wisdom of the zodiac and the stars and the change of their state and status, can see how in one moment a person's *mazal* can completely change. All the galaxies change each and every moment. If a

person were to be born just a moment earlier, his mazal would be completely different from that of someone who is born a moment later. Thus, we can see the depth of Divine wisdom, how He created and guides the world, and that there is no moment like another moment in His directing of the world (*Eitz Chaim, Heichal Adam Kadmon, Shaar 1, Anaf 5*).

Rabbi Natan goes one step further and explains that all the awesome changes are intended for one purpose only: to allow man to improve himself and draw closer to the Creator, as Rabbi Nachman taught: "*Hashem Yitborach* contracts Himself infinitely and without limit." That is, HaKadosh Baruch Hu contracts Himself from being limitlessly spread out, from infinity, to a place of limitation and being defined. This world which we are living in, is limited in comparison with the infinite nature of G-d. From "infinity" to "limited," means that the Creator contracted Himself within the creation right down to the very smallest details, in a way which is appropriate for that particular generation, each person according to the place he finds himself at that moment. Everything is so that a person should be able to serve Him (*Likutei Moharan I, 54*).

The worlds change at every moment, and everything is intended for our benefit, so it may be that even though until now you were unable to change, now you will be able change, because at every moment a change is made for the better and everything is designed so that you will be able to improve. That you have not succeeded so far does not say anything about the moment you are situated in now. The previous moment is irrelevant. What matters is the moment you find yourself in now. Start over. Do what you can at this moment: Torah, prayer, or a mitzvah. If you do not have one of these, at least you can long for G-d and desire to come closer to Him. The desire and longing for holiness are more precious than anything.

This is why our Sages have emphasized the matter of *hitchadshut*, and how it was a condition and an introduction

for the acceptance of the Torah on Har Sinai. There is no way to receive the Torah without renewal. This applies to the entire Nation of Israel—both the sinners and the tzaddikim alike. If anyone has *chalila* sinned, he must surely renew himself in order to mend his ways and return in order to keep the Torah again, but even if he studies Torah properly, he still needs to renew himself so that he can serve the Creator as if he were now born anew again.

(Based on *Likutei Halachot, Basar v'Chalav* 4:1)