

Keep It Spiritually Simple

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October 25, 2021



“The greatest wisdom of all is not to be clever at all. It is simply to be pure and straightforward.” –*Advice, Rebbe Nachman*

We live in a world of extremes. Extreme immorality and extreme violence. Extreme cynicism and extreme ignorance. Extreme fear and extreme hopelessness.

Sometimes it seems the only antidote to such powerful negativity is extreme asceticism and discipline in the form of stringent or complicated religious practices.

But Rebbe Nachman’s teachings reveal that to combat all the extreme negativity in the world, [we must begin from a place of joy](#). Simplicity opens the door to joy. And complicating mitzvah observance with stringencies, can leech the joy right out of us.

“Besides simplicity and purity, you should understand that there is no need to search for especially strict practices to take upon yourself. To think that you should is an illusion; it’s simply one of the devices of the Evil One to deter you from serving God.”—*Advice, Rebbe Nachman*

But What’s Overly Strict?

The Rebbe encourages us to follow *halachah* (the path of Jewish law.) Although he does tell us to choose one mitzvah to master particularly well, there is generally no need for embellishment. A good rule of thumb: If a stringency goes above and beyond the *halachah* (and especially if it is making you depressed or anxious), perhaps it is too intense and unnecessary.*

Another rule of thumb: If upon honest reflection you find yourself engaged in an extreme practice and it ends up leading you to feel superior to others, or you find you have a desire for others to admire your religiosity, then you might want to reassess what’s going on. Take some time to meditate on how best to stay centered and balanced. True humility includes the understanding that some practices might even be suitable for someone else, but not you.

A chassid named Reb Dov of Tcherin once came to the Rebbe, distraught because he was having trouble waking up for Tikkun Chatzos, the midnight prayers. It was affecting his well being. The Rebbe told Reb Dov that he should wake up for Tikkun Chatzos a couple of hours later than the other chassidim (but still within the correct time-frame), allowing him to get the rest he truly needed.**

Avoid Cleverness and Sophistication

“Also, one has to greatly distance oneself from the cleverness associated with service of God, itself. This is because all the cleverness of those people who are just entering into and beginning in the service of God is not wisdom at all, it is

nothing but great illusion, foolishness, and befuddlement. Such cleverness greatly undermines a person's service of God, that is, he wonders, examines and over-scrutinizes whether what he does is right."—*Likutey Moharan II*, 44

In other words, avoid being too sophisticated in your service of Hashem or it can lead to obsessive meticulousness and self doubt. Hashem knows you are human and doesn't expect you to be perfect. He wants you to be Yourself, the way He made you and just wants you to do the best you can. He loves you with a Great Love, one that can even stand strong in the face of your flaws and imperfections.

Know Yourself

If joy is vital to your service of Hashem, then you have to figure out what kind of spirituality paves the way for joy. Naturally rigid or overly-strict people might want to try to add more singing and dancing into their service of Hashem. People who are used to giving in to procrastination and material desires might find deeper joy in reaching for a touch of self-discipline.

Like doesn't always cure like, but then again, sometimes it does. For example, trying to corral a naturally free-spirited person into a very strict schedule may have negative repercussions.

The key is to know yourself and take time each day, even as little as 5 or 10 minutes, to assess where you're holding. Remind yourself of your strengths and also where you could stand some improvement—but don't beat yourself up. (One of the many benefits of this is that it makes you much more tolerant and forgiving of others, too.)

This process can be part of your *hisbodedus*, the essential meditative personal prayer where you talk to Hashem in your own words each day. Or you can take a few minutes before *hisbodedus* to reflect on where you are and where you'd like to

be. *Hisbodedus* can help you get there.

But I Want To Improve

If you have the urge to intensify your service of Hashem, you might want to begin with prayer. Consider intensifying your commitment to *hisbodedus*. Opening your heart in prayer is a deceptively-simple goal, but one that is very lofty—it's between you and Hashem. It's all about your relationship with Him. And your relationship with yourself, too.

You might also want to try and concentrate more when you are praying from a text, such as the siddur or Tehillim.

Improving the quality of your prayer is the kind of improvement that generally won't make you depressed or anxious. Praying wholeheartedly is not stringency, it's a necessity.

The evil inclination recognizes that prayer is so vital it'll even try to turn prayer into a problematic, overly-stringent practice. For example, you might worry that you concentrated enough or doubt that Hashem heard your prayers. This is a trick! Don't be fooled, just try again tomorrow, and let it go.

Changing the way you think about serving Hashem and serving Him with simplicity and joy is a powerful step in the right direction.

*Speaking to a mentor can be beneficial.

** It is true that the Rebbe advised some of his followers to adopt certain stringent practices such as personal fasts. However, the Rebbe knew exactly what their particular soul needed in order to complete their tikkun in this lifetime. Today, it is rare to find someone who is able to advise us in the matter of stringencies.