

Explore

written by breslov.org

December 26, 2013



On a recent visit to Manhattan, I was on my way to meet a friend for lunch. As I walked, I relished the spectrum of humanity that I saw: old, young, male, female, working, running, in-line skaters, strollers, serious, conservatively dressed, outlandishly attired, vacationing, Black, Oriental, “white bread” Americans, Europeans and, of course, Jews. I thought to myself, “What would the world be like if all these people each spent an hour a day talking to God? What would it do for their personal lives? What would it do for the condition of the human race?”

From my own experience, I had a fair idea of some of the things it could do for their personal lives. It would encourage them to be more generous, guide them to make more reasoned, calmer and wiser decisions, and help them to determine what was truly valuable about life and how to live a genuinely valuable life.

What it would do for the human race I wasn’t sure, but multiplying the personal results by 10,000 or 50,000 was a good start. I knew that at a certain point, at the critical mass, the results would be exponential and the world would become unrecognizably good.

The idea of talking to God in your own language and your own words is a key teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, a chassidic master of the early nineteenth century. Rebbe Nachman calls this practice “hitbodedut”—unstructured, spontaneous, individualized prayer—and recommends it as the highest path to self-awareness and God-consciousness. Reb Noson, his main disciple, recalls how Rebbe Nachman first introduced him to the idea:

Rebbe Nachman put his arm around my shoulder and said, “It’s very good to pour out your heart to God as you would to a true, good friend.”

This is the power of hitbodedut, that one hour a day of talking to God: It makes you more human, and the world more humane.

What is Hitbodedut?

There is no single or simple answer to this question. Hitbodedut takes many forms, moving easily and naturally from one to another, often imperceptibly, and so cannot be described as being only one thing.

That said, hitbodedut is raw, unadulterated prayer. Rebbe Nachman points out that historically, prayer referred to the communication between a person and God, spoken in one’s native tongue and one’s own words. No prayer book, no formalized or ritualized service—just straight talk from the heart. Hitbodedut.

Now, straight talk from the heart is not always going to be about only one thing, nor will it always be expressed in the same way. We can see this when we talk with a good friend. Sometimes we share our grief, sometimes we express a complaint and sometimes we confide a secret. Our grief may be wet with tears, our complaint painted red, and our secret conveyed in hushed tones. If our good friend is also a significant other,

our straight talk will often be lined with love.

Whatever expression our straight talk may take, it must be straight—that is, honest, sincere, genuine and true. Formalized prayers, however extraordinary, are only scripts. The biggest challenge presented by a script is that of reading it as if its words were yours. (Even for one who is fluent in Hebrew and wellversed in the sources of the siddur, and who can appreciate the genius and the poetry of the obligatory prayers, there still exists the danger of being lulled into the unthinkingness of routine.)

However, prayer is not theater. Prayer is real life. It is a serious mistake, if not a spiritually fatal one, to think that the goal of hitbodedut is piety or “to be more religious.” The goal of hitbodedut is to plant, nourish and grow your awe, joy and love of God. □

Steps to Jewish Meditation or Hitbodedut

1. [Hitbodedut & Jewish Meditation: How To?](#)
2. [One Minute Hitbodedut](#)
3. [I can't find the words!](#)

Breslov Research Institute Publications:

1. [Outpouring of the Soul](#)
2. [Where Earth & Heaven Kiss: A How To Guide](#)