

WHAT IS SIMPLICITY? (PART III)

written by Chaim Kramer
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In short, simplicity means not seeking complexities, not reading extra meanings into whatever we encounter. It involves taking things at face value. However, it should be emphasized that this doesn't preclude searching for deeper understanding in one's life. On the contrary, throughout his teachings, Rebbe Nachman praises those who actively seek that inner meaning. In fact simplicity – in life generally , and in serving God in particular – is the first and foremost tool for ultimately achieving the depth of wisdom which underlies all of existence.

Nor does simplicity mean we must believe whatever anyone tells us and foolishly fall victim to dishonesty and falsehood. This would be gullibility, not simplicity. Our Sages warned us in this regard: Respect, yet suspect that which is unfamiliar to you" (cf. *Derekh Eretz Zuta* 5). More than we care to admit, we all have tasted the bitterness which follows having been taken in and charmed by others. In this regard, Rebbe Nachman points out how one must be very careful in financial matters (see *Likutey Moharan* I , 69; cf. *Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom* #281), and

how wary we must be of placing our physical well-being and/or emotional welfare in the hands of “reliable” professionals and “tried-and-tested” solutions (*Rebbe Nachman’s Wisdom* #50). How much more so need we be cautious when it comes to our spiritual prosperity! (*Aveneha Barzel*, p. 43 #64). False leaders and false advice are anything but simple and straightforward. The veil of mystery is very often their sole attraction (cf. *Rebbe Nachman’s Wisdom* #6).

What does simplicity demand of us in these cases? The Rebbe explains: It is forbidden to be foolish, even in your simple sincerity. But sophistication is totally unnecessary (*Rebbe Nachman’s Wisdom* #51). Thus, while the simple person leaves his mind open, neither forming an immediate opinion nor trying to second-guess the “true” motives of another, he also will not gullibly subscribe to the latest advice, technique, trend or fad that comes his way. And, although by taking things at face value he may well open himself up to dubious and possibly even harmful influences, Reb Noson quotes a proverb of King Solomon (Proverbs 10:9), “He that follows the simple path goes securely.” “Surely,” Reb Noson insists, “such a person will never stumble. And even if he does err, even if he does inadvertently transgress one of God’s commands, he will undoubtedly repent and remain firm in his devotions – secure in the knowledge that there is a process in heaven through which all is set right” (*Likutey Halakhot, Devarim Min Ha Chai* 4:49). Or, as King David said (Psalms 116:6), “God protects the foolish.”

During one of his conversations, Rebbe Nachman also pointed to a proverb of the wisest of all men: “A fool believes all things” (Proverbs 14:15). “It’s good to be such a fool,” the Rebbe said. “This is because, while you will believe in that that which is false and foolish, you will also believe the truth. In this you are better off than the person who is sophisticated and skeptical of everything. He begins by ridiculing foolishness and falsehood, but eventually ends up

ridiculing everything- denying even the truth" (Rebbe Nachman's Wisdom #103).

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The rule, therefore, is: accept, but be careful. To paraphrase my Rosh Yeshivah, "It is a pleasure dealing with people. They are trustworthy; they are honest; they are decent people. But remember to count your change!"

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Another aspect of simplicity is illustrated by the following story:

"What is the nature of free will?" someone once asked Rebbe Nachman. "Simple!" the Rebbe answered. "If you want, you do. If you don't want, you don't do."

Reb Noson adds: I recorded this, because it makes a very important point. Many people are confused. They see themselves caught up in their habits and helpless to change their ways. They feel that they no longer have the power of free choice. It's just not so! Everyone has free will to do or not to do as he chooses. Understand this! (*Likutey Moharan* II, 110).

Most people think of themselves as creatures of habit. Their response in any given situation is predictable. The Rebbe taught that we need not be slaves to impulse and conditioning. We can respond differently. We can exercise discipline. This is true of thoughts, speech and deeds. Rebbe Nachman likened this self-control to a rider on a horse that has gone astray. All he has to do is grab hold of the reins to return it to the path (*Likutey Moharan* II, 50). As long as we keep life simple, we can maintain control over many facets of our lives.



Reb Noson expands this idea and shows how it applies in the service of God: A person's mind is constantly moving from thought to thought. Even so, it is impossible for two thoughts to occupy the mind at once. We know that evil thoughts must be rejected. However, there are times when good thoughts must also be rejected. It is well known that people have a tendency to become absorbed in their own train of thought, acknowledging only their own perspective of things. This can prove self-deceptive and misleading. Sometimes a person's goals and desire for holiness are beyond his capabilities. Therefore, he must control himself. He must limit his yearnings and fulfill – *simply* – whatever service to God he is capable of at that moment. Then he must cry out to God for guidance by praying that he be led on the proper path for *his* level and by serving God with simplicity and joy (*Likutey Halakhot, Bet K'neset* 5:24).

(taken from the book: Crossing the Narrow Bridge – A Practical Guide to Rebbe Nachman's Teachings, Chapter 1: Simplicity, pp. 11-13)

