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**IF YOU HAVE AWARENESS,  
WHAT DO YOU LACK?  
IF YOU LACK AWARENESS,  
WHAT DO YOU HAVE?**



— **TALMUD, NEDARIM 41A** —

— 3 • SINGING THE BLUES —

What hurts you? What's frustrating you? What mountains seem made of fire? What people look to you like monsters? You don't want to go down the road feeling bad. You don't wanna be treated this-a way. You hurt! You've got things to get off your chest and complain about. "Is there anyone in charge here?" you want to know. "Where's customer service? I'm dissatisfied!"

Relax, you're in hitbodedut. It's your opportunity to sing the blues.

"What? Are you telling me it's OK to sing the blues? Jewish blues? Diaspora blues? My own personal blues?" Absolutely. That's a primary function of hitbodedut.

Rebbe Nachman never suggests (as is commonly misunderstood) that we should deny or avoid our pain. Quite the contrary. Rebbe Nachman tells us that we have to be proactive to confront our difficulties and our hurt<sup>26</sup> in order to transform them into sources of joy. Allow me to introduce you to a person who did just that—he was a Jew who sang the blues, and with good reason.

As a youngster, he was sent out of his home by his father and brothers. When he was a young man, his father-in-law dispatched law enforcement officers to murder him. After he was married with children, one of his sons raped his daughter. Another son fomented a rebellion against him, turning loyal assistants against him. This harried individual was King David.

Throughout the psalms, as throughout his life, King David sang the blues. Who wouldn't have? Rebbe Nachman, too, suffered a number of personal tragedies (he lost several children as well as his first wife) and cried to God many times. As he puts it:

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<sup>26</sup> This doesn't mean looking for trouble. It means being brave enough to deal with the problems you already have.

The world is full of constant pain and suffering. The natural reaction is to be upset and depressed.

Stuff happens in life. Little things, annoyances. Big things, tragedies. Obstacles. Impediments. It is to be expected that you will want and need to sing the blues at various points in your life. You should ask yourself, however, what's the source of your blues? Not what's *causing* them, like your faucets give nuthin' but muddy water, or your stomach hurt so bad it feel like a lead belly, but from which part of your guts your blues are coming? Are you singing from the spleen or from the heart?

Traditionally, the spleen is seen as the seat of depression. Rebbe Nachman was once asked to explain the difference between a broken heart and depression. "A broken heart comes from the heart; depression comes from the spleen," he replied. "God loves a broken heart because it's holy. He hates depression because it's not."

There's nothing wrong with singing the blues. What you have to be careful about is sinking into the blues and letting them take over. Songs of heartbreak and despair, of viewing life through the bottom of a whiskey glass, from an abandoned shack or a jail cell, too often leave a person at the bottom of the glass, in the shack or in the cell.

Rebbe Nachman often spoke about how music can uplift a person and bring him to a frame of mind in which the possibilities of life seem almost unlimited. Rebbe Nachman also spoke about the potentially detrimental effects of music. Singing the blues or any other type of sad music—which, he noted, attracts most, if not all, people—can draw you in the wrong direction.

Because when you're suffering, when you've got troubles, you're in deep spiritual danger. When King David—King David!—was running for his life, he entertained the notion of abandoning Judaism. If you let yourself be drawn after the sadness, you draw yourself away from the Jewishness that hitbodedut can bring you to. You have to decide. Do you really

want to let go of your problems, or do you want to turn them into alibis for failing to reach your potential? Worse, do you want your suffering and problems to be a pretext for abandoning Jewishness altogether?

If you start off in a minor key, don't get stuck there. Make sure to move to a major key. That means if you start out singing:

Some folks say my blues ain't bad  
Must not have been my blues they had

Make sure to finish:

Yeah, but that's OK  
Cause I'll be up someday

Now it's time to pull back the curtain and take a good look at yourself. Don't be afraid. You're not that ugly. In fact, you're really not ugly at all. Truth is, you're really pretty good-looking. ✿

## AVRAHAM

In a sense, it's much easier to pray for strangers than to pray for someone you know. There's nothing to hold against a stranger, no reason to wish him any harm. But when it comes to someone you've had dealings with, someone who has tried to harm you—that good-for-nothing bum, he can drop... No reason to finish the thought and every reason to change it, as Avraham our first patriarch did.

The holy Zohar teaches that there are two areas of life in which one must excel in order to be a tzaddik. One is sexual

morality and the other is the giving of tzedakah. Avraham was a champion of both. God rewarded him with the gift and privilege of brit milah because Avraham understood that without being chaste, one cannot achieve the quietude of mind necessary for experiencing God's presence.

Avraham also understood that in order to experience God, one has to behave like God. So he raised a tent, open to all four directions—north, south, east and west—and invited in any and all comers, providing them with free food, drink and lodging. The Sodomites who lived down the road a stretch behaved in quite the opposite fashion. They were excessive and abusive in their sexuality. Wayfarers who blundered into Sodom did not always leave alive. If they did, they certainly had no desire to return.

Even though the lifestyle and philosophy of the Sodomites was directly opposed to that of Avraham, when God told Avraham that the Sodomites were to be destroyed, Avraham argued strenuously that they should be spared. He tried again and again to have them acquitted. Although his prayers did not save the Sodomites, they provide protection for Avraham's descendants until today.

Later, Avimelekh stole Avraham's wife, Sarah. Yet when the king returned Sarah to her husband, Avraham prayed for Avimelekh and all the members of the royal household. With his prayer, Avraham was able to "untangle the tangle" of confused principles caused by Adam's sin.

For those of us who like to start the day early, Avraham did some of his best praying at the "top o' the mornin'," as night turns into day. ❀

## — 4 • JUDGE THY SELF —

**I**n hitbodedut, you are judge and jury. You are prosecutor and defense attorney. And, you are the defendant.

The judgment of hitbodedut is somewhat like ordinary judgment in a courtroom: Claims are made, arguments presented, and evidence produced. There is a crucial difference, however. In a courtroom, the verdict is in doubt until it is delivered. In hitbodedut, the verdict is almost beside the point. In hitbodedut, the *process* is the point.

Hitbodedut is an opportunity to settle your mind and take a long, honest look at your deeds, your dealings with your fellow human beings (and others that share your planet), your words, your thoughts and your desires. It is a time when you can sit down and seriously evaluate your motives to see if they live up to the goals or values you subscribe to. You can even give careful thought to why you are alive, and whether you could be doing more with the talents and tools God has given you.

Why do we need to go through this judgment? The answer goes back to two historical events, one pre-Creation, the other at Mount Sinai. Before God created the world, He knew that the crux of Creation, the human being, would most enjoy the eternal good that God wanted to give if he, the human, earned it. Therefore, God created the world with *midat hadin*, the attribute of judgment (or entitlement). This means you get only what you earn. The flip side is that you get what you deserve.

However, God also knew that mankind could not survive if there was no margin for error. There had to be some wiggle room, some allowance for mistakes. “After all,” said the Creator, “it’s not for nothing that I’m called ‘tender-hearted’” (*Tanchuma, Pikudei* 3). So God also created the world with *midat harachamim*, the attribute of compassion. Even so, when He was ready to create man, the angels objected. They predicted that the human experiment would