



THE WINGS OF THE SUN

Traditional Jewish Healing in Theory and Practice

By [Rabbi Avraham Greenbaum](#)

Chapter 11

The Great Mitzvah

Mitzvah gedolah lihyot besimchah tamid! - "It's a great mitzvah to be happy always!" (Likutey Moharan II, 24). These famous words are among the most quoted of all of Rebbe Nachman's sayings. But few are aware that they are the opening words of one of his most important teachings on healing. (For the full teaching, see [Chapter 12](#).) It is a short teaching - no more than three paragraphs - but its implications are most profound and far-reaching. In the current chapter and the two that follow it, we will explore some of the worlds of thought that lie behind this teaching and seek to understand the power of [simchah](#) - happiness and joy - to bring health and healing.

But first of all, what is simchah? Rebbe Nachman gives us a vivid picture of a truly joyous personality in the figure of the Simpleton in his story of the "Sophisticate and the Simpleton."

"The Simpleton had learned the trade of a shoemaker. Being simple, he had to study very hard to master it, and even then he was not very expert in the craft. He married and earned a living from his work. But he was simple and not expert in his craft, so his livelihood was very meager and limited. With only limited skill, he had to work constantly. He didn't even have time to eat. He would eat as he worked: he'd make a hole with his awl, draw the thick shoemakers' thread in and out, and then take a bite of bread and eat it.

"Throughout this he was always very happy. He was constantly filled with joy. He had every type of food, drink and clothing. He'd say to his wife: ' My wife, give me something to eat.' She'd give him a piece of bread, which he would eat. Then he'd say, ' Give me some soup with groats.' She'd cut him another slice of bread, which he'd eat and praise highly. ' How nice and delicious this soup is!' He'd then ask her for some meat and other good food. Each time she would give him a piece of bread. Each time he would savor it and praise the food very highly, saying how well-prepared and delicious it was. It was as if he

were actually eating the food he'd asked for. And in fact, when he ate the bread, he really did taste in it any kind of food he wanted. This was because of his simplicity and great happiness.

"He'd say to his wife: 'Bring me some beer to drink.' She'd bring him some water, but he would praise it and say, 'How delicious this beer is! Now give me some honey wine.' She'd give him water, and he would speak most highly of it. 'Give me some wine...' or other beverages. Each time she'd give him water, but he would enjoy it and praise it as if he were actually drinking what he'd asked for.

"The same was true of clothing. Between them, the only overcoat he and his wife possessed was a sheepskin. Whenever he wanted to go to the market he'd say to his wife, 'Give me the sheepskin,' and she'd bring it to him. When he wanted to wear a fur coat to go visiting, he'd say, 'Give me my fur coat.' She'd give him the sheepskin, but he would enjoy it and praise it, saying, 'What a nice fur coat this is.' When he needed a caftan to go to synagogue, he'd say, 'Give me the caftan.' She'd give him the sheepskin, and he would praise it: 'What a beautiful caftan this is!' Similarly, when he needed a silk coat, she would also give him the sheepskin. He would enjoy it and praise it: 'What a gorgeous, comfortable silk coat!' This was true no matter what happened. He was always filled with happiness and joy.

"Since he had not completely mastered his trade, when he finished a shoe, it was usually triangular in shape. But he would take the shoe in his hand and admire it, deriving the utmost enjoyment from his handiwork. He'd say: 'My wife, what a beautiful, wonderful shoe this is! How sweet this shoe is! This shoe is as sweet as honey and sugar!' Sometimes she'd answer him: 'If that's true, how come other shoemakers get three gulden for a pair of shoes while you get only a gulden and a half?' 'What do I care about that?' he'd say. 'That's their work, and this is my work! Why must we think about others? Let's think about how much clear profit I make on this shoe. The leather costs such and such, the glue and the thread cost such and such.... I have a clear profit of ten groschen! As long as I make such a clear profit, what do I care?' He was thus always filled with joy and happiness" (Rabbi Nachman's Stories pp. 168-73).

Wholehearted with God

The Simpleton is the perfect example of the joy that leads to health and healing - which is why he tasted all the tastes in the world in his bread and water. Rebbe Nachman told the story of the "Sophisticate and Simpleton" in the late winter of 1808-9, just a few months after giving his teaching in Likutey Moharan II, 1, "Sound the Shofar - Dominion". There he taught that someone who attains perfect prayer grasps the "Word of God," which is the root of the entire creation. There, all is unity: there is no difference between bread and water and plants and herbs, and this person can therefore channel curative

powers into simple bread and water. This clearly connects with the Simpleton's ability to taste anything he wanted in his bread and water.

It is a pity that the English word "simpleton" carries a suggestion of someone foolish and gullible, because Rebbe Nachman's hero is far from being so. In Hebrew he is called טמ (tam), sincere and wholehearted. He is the perfect example of fulfilment of the mitzvah to "be wholehearted (טמ, tamim) with HaShem your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13). As the story develops, it becomes clear that the Simpleton has complete faith in God - without doubts or questions or any need for elaborate proofs and explanations. The entire Torah opens with the utmost simplicity, without any philosophizing: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1 and see Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom #5). The Simpleton takes this at face value. He accepts that God is the source of everything in life. And since God is perfect goodness and beneficence, everything must be for good.

It is this faith that is the foundation of the Simpleton's simchah. He knows that the life and circumstances God has given him are the very best possible - and he is overjoyed. To the outside world he may seem to be poor and struggling, but in fact he's the richest person on earth, because "Who is rich? The one who is satisfied with his portion" (Avot 4:1). Rather than lamenting what he lacks, the Simpleton looks at how much he has - and rejoices. He relishes his "soup," "meat" and "honey wine" as delicacies fit for a king. He luxuriates in his "silk" coat. By other people's standards his income is meager. But far from worrying about it, he makes a simple calculation, sees that he's more than surviving, and rejoices.

One of the main reasons many people are so unhappy is that they look at what they have - their mental and physical endowments, their financial and social standing, their academic, career, spiritual and other accomplishments, their domestic, family and other circumstances - and they grieve, because what they see does not match up with what they think they deserve. They compare themselves with others (or at least, with the way other people seem to them), and this just rubs salt into their wounds. Essentially this unhappiness is self-inflicted. It stems from their using the wrong standards to evaluate their lives, and then torturing themselves for having fallen short of them.

We are all under great pressure to adopt the prevailing cultural standards of success and failure as reflected in the approval or disapproval of those around us. But who says these "standards" apply to us? There's always a nagging voice that says, "Why do other shoemakers get three gulden for a pair of shoes while you only get a gulden and a half?" "Why is he or she so bright, good-looking, wealthy, successful, etc. etc. while I am only so so?" But the truth is that what others are or have is quite irrelevant. "That's their work, and this is my work!" Each person is totally unique. Each one of us has his or her unique role in the scheme of creation. The hallmark of God's greatness is that He creates not mass-produced, standard items but unique individuals, each one of whom is precious in His eyes - and never more so than when we quit trying to be what we aren't and concentrate on being our true selves to the very best of our abilities. And so the Simpleton would take his triangular shoe in hand and say,

"What a beautiful, wonderful shoe this is! It's as sweet as honey and sugar!"

Whether our lives are good or bad depends largely on the way we look at them. Many things in this world are negative and painful. The reason is that in this world God conceals His true goodness from us in order to create an arena of challenge in which we have to earn our share of this goodness through our own efforts. Our task is to search for God's goodness by stripping off the veils. We have to "know this day and put it into our hearts that HaShem is Elokim...." (Deuteronomy 4:39). Today, at each of the different turns in life, we have to know, not only in our minds but in our very hearts, that "HaShem is Elokim." Even when faced with hardship and suffering, we must understand that they stem from God's justice, alluded to in His name of יהוה, Elokim, and this is in perfect unity with His lovingkindness, alluded to in His name of יהוה, HaShem. Seen as a preparation for the enduring goodness of the world to come, even the harshness of this world is ultimately for good.

There are many times when it's far from easy to feel wholeheartedly that our pain and suffering are good. Faith is not a magic wand that instantly turns everything into sheer delight. If it were, there'd be no challenge. Sometimes we can see it, other times it takes deep heart-searching and repeated efforts to penetrate beneath the surface in order to accept that what God has sent us is ultimately for the best. At the outset faith may be no more than a signpost pointing in the right direction in which to search for the answers. It can take years of steady work on ourselves to refine our faith, resolve our doubts and clarify our understanding of how to find God in this most confusing world. But in the end, "It is as if the believer actually sees with his very eyes the thing he believes in" (Likutey Moharan I, 62:5). This was the level of faith that the Simpleton attained. He knew not just that everything will be good, but that it already is good now - very good - and he was overjoyed.

We have to slough off the part of ourselves that takes a jaundiced view of our endowments and circumstances, as if somehow they do not benefit us. We have to depose the cruel King Ego who spoils the look, taste and smell of everything we have in our lives by keeping us focussed on what we think we lack. Instead we must enthrone God as the King over the entire universe and everything in our lives, and search for the goodness in all He has given us. The life of faith is a joyous quest to find and know God ever more fully in every detail of life: intellectually, through deepening our knowledge of His Torah; emotionally, through setting aside our selfishness, anger, and other negative traits, opening our eyes and hearts to the loving flow of blessing all around us; and practically, through acts of charity and kindness and carrying out the other mitzvot, all of which come to manifest God's kingship over the world.

The Mitzvot

The mitzvot are the royal road to simchah. The Torah path consists of six hundred and thirteen mitzvot, each of which applies at one of the various junctures of life. Every mitzvah is a unique pathway that enables us to forge a connection with God at and through the particular juncture to which it applies, be it at a given point in the life cycle (e.g. circumcision, marriage, mourning,

etc.), during the course of the daily, weekly and yearly cycles (tzitzit, tefilin, Shabbat and festivals, etc.), when we eat and drink or make a living (e.g. tithes, blessings, laws of honesty in business etc.), in our family and other interpersonal relations (teaching our children, kindness and charity, avoiding slander, grudge-bearing and revenge, etc.), spiritual growth (prayer, Torah study, personal sanctity, etc.) and so on.

God's purpose in the creation was to bestow His goodness upon His creatures. In order that they should truly possess it as their own, God created this world of trial in which man is placed between perfection and deficiency, with the task of earning his perfection through his own free will. Man comprises two opposites: his pure, spiritual soul and his unenlightened physical body. Each is drawn to its nature: the body inclines towards the material, while the soul leans towards the spiritual. Man's environment and everything in it are physical, and his physical nature forces him to engage in worldly pursuits. But God in His wisdom so arranged things that man should be able to attain perfection through his worldly activities in the physical realm.

God arranged and circumscribed the ways in which man should make use of the world and all it contains according to their intended purpose. When man abides by these limits and arrangements, his mundane activities themselves become acts of perfection by means of which he incorporates excellence within himself. These patterns and restraints are the 248 positive mitzvot and the 365 prohibitions. The purpose of each one is to allow man to earn and incorporate in himself a particular kind of excellence, or to remove an area of deficiency. Being God-given, the mitzvot have infinite depth and can be fulfilled on higher and higher levels, leading to ever stronger connection with God. The very word מצוה, mitzvah, is related to the Hebrew-Aramaic root צוה (tzavat) denoting "attachment." The various mitzvot have a unique meaning for each individual soul, and each person has his or her unique way to connect with God through the mitzvot.

What is Simchah?

"At every stage in a person's spiritual growth, there is an aspect of Torah and mitzvot which is 'revealed' to him - a level he can understand and practice - and then there is a higher level that is as yet 'concealed.' Through prayer, the level that was previously 'concealed' becomes 'revealed,' leaving an even higher 'concealed' level to aspire to. Simchah is when one constantly advances from level to level, turning the 'concealed' into the 'revealed'" (Likutey Moharan I, 22:9).

When we carry out the mitzvot not as burdensome obligations but as joyous outreach to God on every level of our being - thought, emotion, speech and action - we give God joy and delight, as it were. This is because His whole purpose in creating the world is fulfilled when we, His creatures, receive the

divine goodness He wants to bestow upon us. And so too our fulfillment of the mitzvot brings us to the greatest joy, because they are our connection with God's supreme goodness. Thus "God rejoices in His works" (Psalms 104:31) when "Israel rejoices in his Maker" (ibid. 149:2). This reciprocal joy of God and man is the innermost "point" - the ultimate purpose - of each and every mitzvah. The mitzvah is the interface of God's joy and man's, which are ultimately one. And thus the words of Rebbe Nachman's famous saying can be rearranged to read: "The greatest happiness is to be always engaged in a mitzvah!"

"All Your mitzvot are faith!" (ibid. 119:86). The basis of this whole path of connection with God is, and can only be, faith - since God cannot be grasped or fathomed by the puny human intellect. The mitzvot must be accepted and fulfilled on faith alone in order to "taste and see that God is good" (Psalms 34:9). It is through practice of the mitzvot that we are able to "know this day and put it into our hearts that HaShem is Elokim..." (cf. Deuteronomy 4:39) - to know that everything is for good. Faith is the foundation of our search for God's goodness, while simchah is actually enjoying it.

Faith and joy are what the Simpleton attained to perfection. It took him a long time to master his craft. Even then he was not an expert: he had to work constantly. But he tried his best. Things didn't always turn out right: his "shoes" were usually triangular in shape. But they were his own, his unique form of self-expression. He would look at his handiwork and derive the utmost enjoyment from it: "What a beautiful, wonderful shoe this is! How sweet this shoe is! This shoe is as sweet as honey and sugar!" Perfect joy.

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)

[BACK TO WINGS OF THE SUN HOMEPAGE](#)

[AZAMRA HOMEPAGE](#)

By Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Greenbaum
© AZAMRA INSTITUTE 5767 - 2007 All rights reserved