



A CHOSSID IS A FREILICHER!

Reb Chaim Binyomin Brod was a Breslover *chossid* who escaped from the Soviet Union and made it to Israel in the 1960s. When he got off the airplane and put his feet on holy soil, he began to dance. Word traveled back to Russia, where two KGB officers discussed his *chutzpah*.

The first agent said sourly, “A Jew leaves our utopia and lands in some foreign, miserable place and he dares to dance?” The other agent consoled him. “Don’t worry. He used to dance over here also.”

We don't say, "Life is good, so I am joyous."
We say, "I am joyous, so life is good."

JOY IS A PREREQUISITE FOR AVODAS HASHEM

To be *chassidim*, we need to be joyful. The definition of a *chossid* is a *freilicher*.

Chassidus explains that joy is a powerful energy stemming from the highest elements of the G-dly soul. We can tap into that internal reservoir no matter what is happening around us. Joy is not a result of our reality; it is the source of our reality. We don't say, "Life is good, so I am joyous." We say, "I am joyous, so life is good."

In Chapter 26 of *Tanya*, the Alter Rebbe explains why joy is an essential weapon in our arsenal against the *yetzer hara*. He brings a simple analogy: Imagine two people are engaged in a wrestling match. One is stronger and bigger, but not in the mood, and the other is smaller but highly motivated. Who will win? The Alter Rebbe says the smaller wrestler. Because if you approach a wrestling match without energy or motivation, you're bound to lose.

If this is true on a physical level, it is even more apt in matters of spirituality and emotion. When we wrestle with our *yetzer hara*—with our personal vices and temptations—we need energy to triumph. If we are lethargic and uninspired, our chances of victory are slim to none. But if we are energized with inner joy, we can win, over and over again.

In the early days of Chassidus, many people disagreed with this revolution of joy. They equated joy with *yeshus* (an exaggerated sense of self-importance) or *holelus* (frivolity). It was disturbing for them to see rabbis and scholars dancing and singing without inhibition. Yet the Baal Shem Tov insisted that true joy is the opposite of *yeshus*. It is losing yourself, not being caught up in yourself. It is a very serious part of serving Hashem, and a prerequisite for genuine connection with Hashem.

There is a letter from the Baal Shem Tov to one of his greatest *chassidim*, the Toldos Yaakov Yosef. It is the only known manuscript we have today written in his hand. In stark contrast with the rabbis of his time, the Baal Shem Tov advised him to stop fasting and to serve Hashem with joy, because...

SHECHINAH DOESN'T REST WHERE THERE IS NO JOY

Joy comes hand-in-hand with three other fundamental attributes.

The first attribute is *anivus*—humility. Humility and joy both require the abandoning of *yeshus*. We can't be

preoccupied with ourselves. There is a common misconception that the humblest person in the room is the quietest or most serious. In fact, the humblest person in the room is probably the one who is most genuinely joyful.

The second attribute is *bitachon*—trust in Hashem. Fears and anxieties in life naturally drag us down. But the mandate to serve Hashem with joy does not only apply to people with perfect lives. It applies to me and you. So, in order to rise above the challenges of life, and serve Hashem with joy, we need to cultivate a deep *bitachon* that we are safe and secure in Hashem's Hands.

The final attribute is *ruach hakodesh*—divine inspiration. The Baal Shem Tov wrote that every human being needs to serve Hashem with joy because “the *Shechinah* doesn't rest where there is no joy.” Of course, this statement means different things for different people. For holy *tzaddikim*, it means that they need to be *b'simchah* in order to experience prophecy and revelation. For regular people, *ruach hakodesh* refers to the spirit of holiness inside all of us. We each have a G-dly soul, but we cannot experience its inspiration unless we are joyful.

BUT IT ISN'T EASY...

You might be thinking right about now: Okay, joy sounds wonderful, but it isn't easy.

You're absolutely right. And you're not the only one who feels that way.

Rabbi Zvi Steinmetz wrote a poem for the Rebbe's 80th birthday. In the poem, he described the contradictions that somehow merged perfectly in the Rebbe's character. One stanza went like this: “Everybody in the world reports to him their anguish and suffering. Therefore, his fountain of joy is inexhaustible.”

The Rebbe looked up when he read this line and said, “*Halevai*—if only.”

The Rambam wrote, “Serving Hashem with joy is an *avodah gedolah*—a great service.” Great means two things: 1) It's very important, and 2) it's very difficult.

Human nature is to be afraid. Scientists say

that fear is a survival mechanism. Yet Chassidus tells us to fight that basic instinct. Even though it's natural to be afraid, we shouldn't be, because we are in Hashem's world and we can trust Him. Chassidus argues even further that the more joyful and optimistic we are, the more supernatural our world will be. Our *bitachon* brings out Hashem's revealed miracles.

Practicing joy takes courage and hard work, but it is real and important.

Reb Mendel Futerfas is the epitome of a *chossid* who radiated magnetic joy and optimism. Wherever he went, people became happy by osmosis. I grew up going to Reb Mendel's *farbrengens*; he is one of the few *chassidim* from that generation whom I merited to see. He always started with a serious message but then he got everyone laughing and we would laugh until six in the morning. He didn't tell us about the importance of *simchah* through his words, he showed it to us with his essence.

Later in my life, I saw the value of Reb Mendel's joy in a deeper light. When I think about the life Reb Mendel had, I have to ask myself: Where did that joy come from? The man had ten children; he was survived by one. He spent years in the gulags of Russia, and was forced to be apart from his wife for two decades. If anyone had an excuse to be miserable, it was Reb Mendel. Yet wherever he went, he lifted people up.

When Reb Mendel was finally allowed to leave Russia, he joined his wife and children in England. He managed to establish himself there and built a successful business. After living in the West for almost a decade, his daughter was killed in a car accident. At the *levayah*, he was crying. Then *chassidim* heard him mutter to himself, “Mendel! For this you learned in Tomchei Temimim?”

THE HIGHEST FORM OF JOY

There are two distinct types of joy. There is *simchah shel mitzvah*—the joy of doing the right thing. And there is the joy of a *baal teshuvah*, who makes a mistake and comes back stronger.

Which is higher? The Alter Rebbe argues that the joy of the *baal teshuvah*, which comes “after the sadness,” *haba’ah achar ha’eitzev*, is greater.

This is true on a mystical level, because when we do *teshuvah* we elevate the *klipah* of the sin—which would not have been elevated otherwise. We get to experience the joy of transforming darkness into light and bitterness into sweetness.

But it is also true on a human level: No one is more joyous than he who felt defeated by life spiritually and gained his life back. The idea that we can mess up and nevertheless fix it, and that Hashem always gives us this opportunity, is incredibly exhilarating.

Reb Mendel shared a story that illustrates the second form of joy.

Two *eltare chassidim* of the Alter Rebbe were sitting together and recalling the winding journeys of their lives. The first had become a *chossid* as a relatively young man while the second went through many trials and errors before finding Chassidus.

The first *chossid* asked, “What did you do your entire life before you came to the Alter Rebbe?”

The second *chossid* responded, “I can summarize my entire life with four translations of the *Ashamnu* prayer.

“When I was young, I said ‘*Ashamnu*—we have sinned.’ But I thought to myself, I’m not a sinner, I study Torah all day. *Ashamnu* is referring to the simple people who need to toil in this physical world and are therefore sinning.

“Then I started to learn a bit of *mussar* and realized how judgmental it was of me to assume that those who weren’t able to learn Torah all day were sinning. So then I said ‘*Ashamnu*’ but thought to myself, I’m not a sinner and neither are the other Jews. *Ashamnu* is referring to the fact that we *could* have sinned.

“Then I did even more introspection and came to face the bitter truth. I said *Ashamnu* and meant it. I thought, I have sinned, and I will continue sinning. No matter what happens, I will keep making the same mistakes.

“Then I came to the Alter Rebbe and learned the fourth definition of *Ashamnu*: I have sinned.

But I won’t sin again.”

That is the *simchah* of the *baal teshuvah*. Chassidus empowers us to break free of the *yetzer hara* permanently by harnessing its power.

UNCONDITIONAL JOY

The Rebbe adds that there is an even greater level of joy not discussed in the *Tanya: Simchah b’taharasah*—pure (or unconditional) joy. This level of pure joy doesn’t come from doing a *mitzvah* or doing *teshuvah*, but simply from existing. It is sourced directly from the *yechidah*, the highest level of the soul, and it is uniquely available to our generation.

The Rebbe proves this through contrasting how the Rambam and Rama discuss *simchah*. The Rambam mentions *simchah* in *Hilchos Sukkos*, in connection with the *halachos* of Yom Tov. The Rama mentions *simchah* at the end of *Ohr Hachaim*, not in connection to any Yom Tov. The Rebbe explains that the Rama lived later in *galus* than the Rambam. As we approach the end of exile, the *giluyim* of the *neshamah* (mind, heart, and senses) have become more concealed, while the *atzmus* of the *neshamah* (the *Yechidah*) has become easier to access. As a result, people in later generations of *galus* can tap into a dimension of *simchah* that simply wasn’t possible in earlier days. During the times of the Rambam, the maximum joy a person could achieve was *simchah shel mitzvah* or the *simchah of the baal teshuvah*. Today, we can experience joy unconditionally.

METHODS FOR ACHIEVING JOY

The question remains: How can we achieve joy?

There are various techniques for this, and each person needs to find the one that works for them.

Participating in *chassidische farbrengens* serves this purpose quite well.

Another method is outside-in: Fake it 'til you make it. Joy is one of the few emotions where it's okay to bluff. If you walk into a wedding hall in a terrible mood, put on a pretend smile, and join the dancing circle, it won't take long for your bad mood to be swept away by the music and energy.

Surround yourself with joyous people and their joy will affect you.

We can also achieve joy from the inside out, through inner meditation. The Rebbe says that when we contemplate the fact that our lives have meaning to Hashem, and as small as we are we can do something for Him that He cannot do for Himself, we naturally experience *simchah*.

And one final thought on joy: A *Poilisher chossid* once came to the Rebbe for dollars, and asked the Rebbe how he is expected to be *b'simchah*. The Rebbe exclaimed in surprise, "*Voss haist? Bist duch a Yid!*" What do you mean? You are a Jew!

That is reason enough. ❄

This article is based on Tanya Chapter 26. Read more on achieving joy through times of hardship in the next installment of (Inside) Chassidus Unwrapped.

Women are invited to come learn Chassidus with Rabbi Yossi Paltiel in person! Rabbi Paltiel gives two Chassidus classes Sunday mornings in the 770 women's section, one beginning at 11 a.m. (Tanya) and one beginning at 11:50 a.m. (Hayom Yom).



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