



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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# The Elegance of Simplicity

A verse in the *parashah* commands us, “You shall be wholehearted (*tamim*) with the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 18:13). There is perhaps no better way to illustrate what this means than with a Chassidic story about the founder of *Chassidut*, the Baal Shem Tov:

Once, at the Friday night *seudah* (meal), the Baal Shem Tov started to laugh after the fish course had been served. No one present could figure out the reason for this, and when he laughed again after the soup they were further puzzled. It happened a third time after the main course, and the Chassidim begged their rebbe for an explanation; the Baal Shem Tov promised that one would be forthcoming after Shabbat.

That *motza’ei Shabbat* (Saturday night) the Baal Shem Tov and his Chassidim set out for a certain village. They came to the house of Reb Shabsi Hopstein, an impoverished bookbinder, and the Baal Shem Tov said, “Tell us what happened on Shabbat!”

Replied the man, “Well it seems you already know that something happened; I will tell you what it was. This *erev Shabbat* (Shabbat eve) we had no food in the house. We had no wine, so

I thought we would make Kiddush on mead, but we had no mead either! I thought we could use *chalot* (bread), but we had none. In fact, we had no food at all! There was nothing I could do but go to the bet midrash to study; before I left, I cautioned my wife not to borrow from the neighbors.”

Of course, Reb Shabsi went on, his wife was despondent about the lack of necessities for Shabbat, but she was determined to do what she could in honor of the special day. Recalling that she had a beautiful dress left from her mother stored in the attic, she went upstairs to look for it. To her delight she realized that it had three gold buttons! Hurrying to the market, she sold them to buy food for Shabbat.

“When I returned from shul (synagogue) and saw the Shabbat table laden with food,” continued the simple bookbinder, “I thought my wife must have

broken her promise, but I decided not to say anything. Then she told me how *Hashem* had provided for us, by causing her to remember about her mother’s dress, so that she could prepare a beautiful Shabbat without having to accept any help from others. I was so overjoyed that I danced with my wife around the table! After the next course we danced again, and after the chicken once again.”

Said the Baal Shem Tov to the bookbinder, “When *you* danced, the angels in Heaven were so delighted, they danced as well! And when I saw this, I laughed... Tell me, Reb Shabsi, is



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there anything you wish for?”

Sighing, Reb Shabsi told the tzaddik that after many years he and his wife were still childless. The Baal Shem Tov told him that they would have a son that year who would grow up to be a great tzaddik, and so it was. They named their son Yisrael, after the Baal Shem Tov, and he became famous as the Maggid of Kozhnitz.<sup>1</sup>

This enchanting story possesses a certain elegance in its simplicity. Everything makes sense, everything works out. Both the style and the content of the tale reflect what Chassidic thought calls *emunah peshutah*, an unadulterated, wholesome, and steadfast faith in God. *Temimut* is a synonym for this same worldview rooted in the verse from *Parashat Shofetim*.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov was a famously vocal proponent of *temimut*: “The main purpose and perfection is only to serve God with absolute *temimut*, without any cleverness whatsoever.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, he urged simplicity in *avodat Hashem* (divine service): say your prayers with simple faith, jump at opportunities to do good, sing wordless melodies to lift your spirits. The sheer simplicity of it all is a necessary antidote to the overly complicated life we often find ourselves leading, and to the contortions of human reasoning. Needless complexity can be dispiriting, and overthinking things can trap us in the contorted corridors of our own minds. “Undoubtedly,” said Rebbe Nachman, “if a person has absolute faith and believes that God is attentive to them, listens to every word that they utter..., then with certainty that person would not be morose, apathetic, or sluggish....”<sup>3</sup> A person filled with wholehearted faith, said the rebbe, tends to be optimistic. Anything can be handled or overcome with God at one’s side.

1. Barash, *Gut Voch*, 248–249.
2. *Likutei Moharan*, II:19.
3. *Likutei Moharan* I:155.

The nuisances and setbacks of the daily grind do not overwhelm the *tamim*, because he or she can lean on God as needed. This ultimately produces a state of tranquility—bliss even—that modern existence sorely needs.<sup>4</sup>

The dangers of logical reasoning to one’s faith were pointedly illustrated by a parable devised by the founder of the Ger dynasty known as the *Chidushei ha-Rim* (Rebbe Yitzchak Meir Alter):

A ruler once had an astronomically expensive horse and kept a close watch on it at all times. One day, he rode to another city and led it into the stable. At the stable entrance he posted a guard to make sure it wouldn’t be stolen. So that the guard would not doze off, the ruler advised him to busy himself in thought over various things. In the middle of the night, the ruler rose and went to the guard, finding him deep in thought.

“What are you thinking about?” the ruler asked.

“I am contemplating the question of where the wood goes when one hammers a nail into it.”

“Great,” said the ruler, “you’re doing good thinking.”

A few hours later the ruler approached the guard again.

4. Although *temimut* is a state of mind to be cultivated, Rebbe Nachman taught that some environments, like the Land of Israel, are more advantageous to this pursuit.

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“What are you thinking about now?”

“I’m thinking about where the hole goes when you eat a bagel.”

“Wonderful,” said the ruler, and he went back to sleep.

In the early morning the ruler again found the guard lost in contemplation.

“What are you thinking about now?” the ruler asked him.

“I’m thinking about how it could be that with the stable closed and me sitting at the entrance with my thoughts, the horse could just disappear?”

When a person is caught up in their unnecessary ruminations, the evil inclination comes and steals their common sense.<sup>5</sup>

*Temimut* is so important that God commanded the very first Jew, Avraham, to pursue it: “Walk before me, and be *tamim*” (Genesis 17:1). According to Rashi on the verse, this means that Avraham should be wholehearted throughout the difficult tests God would give him. This is likely the highest degree of *temimut*, for it involves quieting the mind when one’s faith and trust in the Almighty are being tested.

Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, the rabbi of Aish Kodesh Congregation in Woodmere, New York, shared the following story:

There was a Chassidic Jew in Bnei Brak who had lost everything during World War II and was spiritually broken. One day he came to pour his heart out to Rabbi Elazar Menachem Man Shach, who was not at all Chassidic, but who understood full well the pain of a broken Chassidic heart.

This Jew told what happened to him and said, “I cannot even pray anymore.”

Rabbi Shach said, “What Chassidic group do you belong to?”

5. Greenberg, *Iturei Torah*, 5:123, s.v. ממים תהיה עם ה' אליהן.

The man told him, and Rabbi Shach began to hum a niggun, a tune, from that group. The Chassid closed his eyes and hummed the niggun together with Rabbi Shach, until he started to cry.

Rabbi Shach said, “For a Chassid, it’s not enough to sing a niggun. We have to dance.” So Rabbi Shach stood up and danced with this Jew for a long time.

Afterwards, this Jew could pray again. Rabbi Shach did not give him a theological explanation about where God was during the Holocaust. He knew that this niggun was still inside that Jew, hidden underneath the pile of ashes from Auschwitz.

At the depth of one’s heart and soul, the *temimut* is never extinguished.<sup>6</sup>

*Chassidut* teaches that the *temimut*, the *emunah peshutah*, is accessible to everyone. It is actually an innate divine gift, part of the organic bond we share with our Creator. Each and every soul yearns for its actual source of life. All that’s left for us to do is to tap into it. ■

6. Weinberger, *Song of Teshuva*, 1:110.



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