



SHOSHANA JUDELMAN

TORAH TIDBITS CONTRIBUTOR

This Year Let's Be Onions

This year, I am working on being an onion. Because that is the way of hope.

Allow me to explain.

In the early years of Chassidus, before telephones, the internet, or any form of mass communication, chassidim who traveled to the Rebbe were expected to share the Torah they had learned when they returned home. In this way, those who could not travel themselves could still connect to the Rebbe and grow in Chassidus.

The Mittlerer Rebbe of Chabad, R' DovBer Schneuri, was particularly insistent on this practice. One chassid who travelled frequently developed a gift for teaching. His explanations were clear and engaging, and people along his journey would thank him and compliment his delivery. Over time, he noticed that he was beginning to enjoy, and perhaps even crave, the praise.

He went to the Mittlerer Rebbe and asked to be excused from his responsibility. He was afraid that continuing to teach was feeding his ego.

The Rebbe's response became famous: "An onion should become of you," he cried, "but teach others what you must teach them!"

What did he mean? How would becoming an onion solve the problem of ego?

The answer is 'bittul'. I have struggled for years to understand and internalize this concept.

Bittul is often translated as self-nullification, but it does not mean becoming nothing. It means using our talents while recognizing that they are not ultimately ours. They flow through us from the Source of All Things, Hashem.

How can we practice this?

In Parshas Kedoshim, we are warned:

אַל־תִּפְּנוּ אֶל־הָאֱלִילִים וְאֶל־קִי מַסֵּכָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם
אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

"Do not turn to idols or make molten gods for yourselves: I am Hashem, your God."

The Ishbitzer, R' Mordechai Yosef Leiner, teaches that we can make a 'maseichah', an idol, out of almost anything. Anything can become 'avodah zarah' when we become attached to the thing itself rather than the Divine purpose within it.

Even Torah and Tefillah.

We can become so invested in how we daven, how we teach, how we perform, or how spiritual we feel, that the activity itself becomes the object of our attention, rather than the One we are meant to be serving.

The Ishbitzer asks us to check in: Am I davening to serve Hashem, or to feed my ego? Am I teaching Torah to bring Hashem's light into the world, or because I enjoy being the one who teaches it?

What happens if the answer is uncomfortable? Should we stop? Chas v'shalom.

We don't throw away the gift because it can feed our ego. We peel away the layer that is



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getting in the way.

The Ishbitzer and other holy tzaddikim teach a beautiful understanding of קְדוּשָׁתִי תְהִי: “You shall be holy” not as a command, but as a promise. At our deepest level, each of us is a *chelek Eloka mima’al*, a piece of the Divine above. The work is to access that inner reality.

“Be an onion,” is the path forward.

Just like an onion, each of us has a core surrounded by many layers. The core is our G-dliness. The layers are everything we have accumulated around it: ego, fear, habits, expectations, insecurities.

The work of bittul is not to destroy ourselves. It is to peel.

To keep using the gifts Hashem has given us while continually asking: Is this revealing my inner self, or blocking it? And when we discover a layer that is no longer serving the Divine purpose, we gently let it go.

That is the path of hope.

Peeling is not an act of self-erasure. It is an act of revelation.

May Hashem give us the courage this year to recognize when a layer needs to be removed, the koach to peel it away, and the emunah to trust that beneath every layer is a soul that has never stopped being connected to Him.

Shana Tova U’Metuka! ■

Shoshana Judelman is passionate about learning and growing through Chassidus. She gives shiurim to women in many communities around Israel, including Efrat, Elazar, Raanana and Jerusalem as well as at Midreshet Rachel V’Chaya. Shoshana also guides groups at Yad Vashem and leads journeys to Poland and other countries around Europe for JRoots.

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