

# Rabbi Nachman of Breslov

Copyright © 2012 Avraham Sutton

## Hitbodedut and Bitul to Ein Sof Running and Returning

It is impossible to remain in a state of complete *bitul* (self-nullification, ego-death) for long, lest one's existence in this world become nullified completely, God forbid. Rather one must always return from there in the same way that the angels in Ezekiel's vision were "constantly running and returning" (Ezekiel 1:14). One is then able to receive his life-force from the impression that is left from the *bitul* (nullification) which is the source for the revelation of Godliness [in this world].

In the Zohar, it is explained that, when *dinim* (judgments) are hanging over the world, it is best to seclude and hide oneself, in accord with the verse, "Go, my people, into your rooms, and close your doors behind you; hide for just a while until the rage passes. For Hashem is going forth from His place to recompense the sins of the inhabitants of the land" (Isaiah 26:20). When judgment dominates, it is especially important to nullify oneself to Hashem to the greatest possible extent. One should even close his eyes very tightly, both literally and figuratively, to overcome the *chizu d'hai alma* (the illusion of this world).<sup>1</sup> In this way [i.e., when one overcomes the illusion that anything can happen without God], all judgments are sweetened.<sup>2</sup>

Even in the midst of the deepest darkness, when you are walking, God forbid, through the valley of the shadow of death, you can draw down upon yourself the light of Ein Sof by closing your eyes and nullifying yourself to Him for a short while. This is the category of "even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me" (Psalm 23:4). For, as the Baal Shem Tov has taught, a *kav* (ray) of the light of *Ein Sof* extends down even into the lowest levels of the physical world. It may be concealed and occluded within numerous garments, but it is here. Therefore anyone who wishes to bind himself to His blessed name can do so at any time and in any place. He must do this, however, with tremendous exertion of being, as per the prayer,<sup>3</sup> "Happy is the man who does not forget You; the mortal who exerts himself [to bond] with You" [which can be re-read as "happy is the man who does not lose his connection with you in times of *yeridah*, in the merit of having exerted himself in times of *aliyah* and *devekut*"].<sup>4</sup>

Precisely when the *choshekh* (darkness of this world) and the *dinim* are strongest, whether you are involved in serving Hashem [in prayer or in Torah] or in some physical pursuit, this is the main time to close your eyes and nullify yourself to the endless One who is absolute oneness and absolute goodness. In this way [i.e., by overcoming the illusion that anything can happen without God], all judgments are nullified.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This expression is found in *Zohar* 3:169a. See also a powerful parable from the Baal Shem Tov about the king who purposely blinded his chief musician to remove from him the *chizu d'hai alma* (optical illusion of this world) in order to give him the *chizu dehahu alma she'hu le'maalah* (true vision of eternity) (*Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Amud HaTefillah, ot mem-beit* in *Mekor Mayim Chayim*, pp. 125-126).

<sup>2</sup> *Likutey Halakhot, Tefilat Arvit* 4:17.

<sup>3</sup> *Tefillat Mussaf Rosh Hashanah*.

<sup>4</sup> *Likutey Etzot, Bitul El Or Ein Sof, ot beit*; from *Likutey Halakhot, Netilat Yadayim Shachrit* 4:11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, *ot gimel*; from *Likutey Halakhot, Kriat Shma* 1.

After you have been worthy of truly nullifying yourself completely to Hashem, you must return from *bitul*, as it is written, “*vehachayot ratzo vashov*—the angels constantly run and return” (Ezekiel 1:14). [Transcending our limitations is called running, while coming back with an impression of the light is called returning.] It is from the *reshimu* that remains from the shining of the light of *bitul* to *Ein Sof* that one draws Torah down into the world.<sup>6</sup>

This is the essence of ***Shma Yisrael Hashem Elokenu Hashem echad***. This is when we truly nullify ourselves to Hashem and merge into His unity with complete *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice) for the sanctification of His name. This is why we close our eyes when we say *Shma*, in order to merge ourselves into the unity that is all one. For it is impossible to merge into that unity without closing our eyes to the *chizu d’hai alma*.

After this we say, “*Ve’ahavta*—love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). We do this in order to bind the light of the *reshimu* of *bitul* to *Ein Sof* in our heart, in our soul, and in our connection to our possessions. To the extent that we nullify everything to our love for Hashem, the *chizu d’hai alma* no longer exerts any influence on us. We can thus remain truly bound and attached to Hashem, and to the fulfillment of His holy Torah [even in the midst of our everyday lives].<sup>7</sup>

The whole reason for the creation was for this, namely, to return it back into the infinite *Ein Sof*. The main goal of everything that exists is to consciously return back into their first source. For Hashem brought creation forth from *ayin* to *yesh*, so that Israel, the holy nation, through the power of its service and its attachment to His blessedness [even in the midst of this lowly world that conceals His light], would bring all creation back to its infinite source and become merged in the infinite *Ein Sof*.

Until then, as long as the world exists as it does now, this return to the source must be done in the manner of the holy angels who are constantly running and returning. For Hashem wants the world to exist so that we can serve Him precisely in this lowly world. He thus derives tremendous pleasure when we serve Him despite all that pulls us away from Him...

However, it is impossible for anything to return to its first source and become nullified in the light of *Ein Sof* and be renewed there in the category of running and returning except through man. All was created for man...Hashem has thus given him such wisdom that he can divest himself of all his physical and material concerns and bind himself to Him, to the extent that he can totally nullify himself and thereby become merged in the light of *Ein Sof* in the category of running and returning every day of his life. In this way the entire world is also included with him in *Ein Sof*.<sup>8</sup>

### **Likutey Moharan I, 52**

It is written in the Mishnah:<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Chaninah ben Chakhinai says, “One who is awake at night, and who goes out on the road alone, and *mefaneh libo lebatalah* (turns his heart to idle thoughts), behold, he becomes *mitchayev benafsho* (liable for his own soul).”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, at *zayin*, from *Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Milah* 5:4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, at *tet*, from *Likutey Halakhot, Hilkhos Milah* 5:9, 5:11, 5:12, 5:14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, at *yod-gimel*, from *Likutey Halakhot, Kilaey Hakerem* 2:1.

<sup>9</sup> *Pirkey Avot* 3:5.

All other commentators interpret this Mishnah in a negative light. With expressions like “*mefaneh libo lebatalah*,” which can be translated “empties / turns his heart to vanity / nothingness,” and “*mitchayev benafsho*—becomes liable for his own soul,” it is hard to see it otherwise. Rabbi Nachman is the only one who sees every expression in this mishnah as a necessary aspect of serving Hashem. He does this by connecting the phrase *mitchayev benafsho* with *mechuyav hametziyut* (the necessary or absolute existence),<sup>10</sup> and by re-framing the expression *mefaneh libo lebatalah* as an exact description of *hitbodedut*, the practice of emptying one’s heart in order to attain a state of complete *bitul*. We thereby attain *chiyuv hametziyut* (necessary or eternal existence) by re-uniting with our source and root, the absolute being beyond all existence, the ultimate *mechuyav hametziyut*.

(1) There are *apikorsim* (non-believers, and the non-believer in each of us) who say that the world is *mechuyav hametziyut* (is or has necessary or absolute existence, as opposed to relative existence).<sup>11</sup> According to their misled and confused opinion, it seems to them that they have proofs for this and empirical evidence, God forbid, from the way the world runs [i.e., that the world operates according to seemingly natural laws]. The truth is, however, that the world and all that is in it has only *efshari hametziyut* (possible or relative existence), for only the Blessed One is *mechuyav hametziyut*, whereas all the universes [even the highest] with all they contain are merely *efshari hametziyut*. For since the Blessed One created them all from nothing, it was in His blessed power to create them or not to create them. It is therefore clear that the entire world is merely *efshari hametziyut*.

The non-believer perceives only the façade of nature and natural laws and thinks that these are reality, whereas in truth the entire mega-system of universes that God created has no existence separate from Him, and cannot exist without His constantly energizing it.

The question is, however, where does their mistake originate? How could they be so misled to think, God forbid, that the world has absolute or necessary or intrinsic existence in and of itself?

Know that this is possible because, now, after the souls of Israel have already been emanated and brought forth into full existence, the world certainly has an aspect of necessary existence. For the whole world in its entirety was created for the sake [of the souls] of Israel, as is known.<sup>12</sup> The nation of Israel was also to play a dominant role in world history. Therefore, after the souls of Israel were already emanated and created, Hashem was, as it were, forced to create and [since then is forced] to maintain the universe, for it was for this very reason that He emanated the souls of Israel, namely, to create all the worlds for them [as a stage upon which to attain, through their own efforts, the very gift of eternal existence that He wished to give them].

<sup>10</sup> This is an expression that medieval Jewish philosophers used to describe God. See, for example, Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, 1235-1310) in *Sheelot u'Tteshuvot, chelek heh, siman 52*: “There are two principles that are the foundation for everything [that we know about Hashem]. The first is to know that He is ***mechuyav hametziyut*** (the necessary or absolute existence behind everything, as opposed to the world which is only *efshari hametziyut*, possible or relative existence). There must be no doubt concerning this, for it is self-evident, as should become clear. The second is that *amitato yitbarakh* (the true reality of God’s absolute existence) is not knowable/graspable except to Himself. Only *metziyuto* (the fact of His existence) is *nigleh* (revealed) to all, whereas *amitat mahuto* (His true essence) is *nistar* (hidden) and *neelam* (concealed) from all.” See *A World of Infinite Blessings*, Appendix B, “Hidden and Revealed.”

<sup>11</sup> See Rambam, *Yesodey HaTorah* 1:2-4.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Vayikra Rabbah* 36:4; Rashi, Genesis 1:1.

Thus the origin of their mistake lies in the fact that, after the souls were emanated, the world indeed has necessary existence, in that it serves as a stage for all souls to attain their perfection.

Still, in truth the souls of Israel themselves, with all the worlds that depend upon them, were all *efshari hametziyut* (possible or potential or implicate existence, or “existence in a state of non-existence”) [until He decided to bring them forth into full explicate existence]. For [since God was not forced to create them] it was still in His power to create them or not. Only after He decided to emanate the souls of Israel was He then forced, so to speak, to create the worlds in such a way that they now partake of or have an aspect of necessary existence.

Understand this well, for it is from this that the mistake of the *apikorsim* originates and they say that the world has, God forbid, necessary and intrinsic existence [in and of itself]. In truth, however, only the Blessed One Himself is *mechuyav hametziyut*, the necessary existence. Everything else has only possible or relative existence.

(2) The principal reason why God created the world was for the sake of the children of Israel—i.e., so that they would fulfill His will and thereby once again bind themselves to their root [but this time, through their own efforts]. That is, so that they would become re-united in Him, may He be blessed, for He is *mechuyav hametziyut*. And it was for this reason that the entire world was created. Such that the more [the souls of] Israel fulfill His will and thereby become re-united in their root, the necessary existence, in this way the entire world will also be re-incorporated back into His absolute existence. It is for this alone that Hashem, if it can be said, was forced to create and [is continually forced] to maintain the worlds—so that [the souls of] Israel fulfill His will...

(3) The only way, however, to become re-united back into the root, that is, to return and become re-united into the absolute existence of the divine unity, is through *bitul*. You must nullify your ego completely until you are re-united back into His blessed oneness.

But it is impossible to attain true *bitul* except through *hitbodedut* (self-isolation). For it is only when you *mitboded* (engage yourself in the process of dissociating yourself from what you have hitherto identified with as yourself), and articulate your deepest yearnings to your Maker, that you can nullify your physical cravings and your negative character traits. And it is only then that you can nullify your physicality and merge with your root.

As Rabbi Nachman teaches elsewhere, our most basic desires and needs were implanted in us by our Creator for the purpose of arousing in us the realization of our dependence on Him. It is only when these desires and needs become fallen, i.e., dissociated from our godly missions, that they become antithetical to those missions.<sup>13</sup> When this happens, it is necessary to reconnect them to their true root in holiness. Thus even the most mundane desires are rooted in holiness. The question is how to re-elevate these fallen desires back to their root. Rabbi Nachman teaches that the first step is to dissociate ourselves from them, indeed from any identification with them or the physical body of which they are expressions. In this sense dissociation is the best translation of the word *hitbodedut*.

Now Rabbi Nachman is ready to bring together everything he has said regarding the original mishnah quoted at the beginning:

<sup>13</sup> *Likutey Moharan* I 54, s.v. *nimtza al yedei histalkut ha'daat*.

The most preferred time to *mitboded* is at night, when people are *panuy* (disengaged, released) from the concerns of this world.

The emphasis on nighttime fits well with the motif that this world is likened to night, and that it is within our ability to wake up in the midst of the night to realize the true nature of our existence.

During the day, because they are busy pursuing [the fleeting pleasures of] this world, they are confused and prevented from binding and uniting themselves with the blessed Hashem. Even if you yourself are not so harassed, other people being caught up in pursuing the illusions of this world make it hard to come to true *bitul*.

Even if there are no people there now, the impression of their thoughts lingers, and interferes with true *hitbodedut*, preventing us from nullifying ourself and becoming re-included in Him. For this reason we must go to a place where we can be alone at night:

A special place must be found and set aside for *hitbodedut*. A place outside the city is preferable, away from the road, on a lonely path; a place where people never go. For a place where people who are pursuing this world go during the day, even if they are not there at this moment, also causes you to become [unfocused and] confused in your *hitbodedut*. This then prevents you from attaining total *bitul* and becoming united in His blessed oneness.

You must therefore go to a place where you can be all alone, where there are no other people around. Go there and *mitboded* [do the work of dissociating yourself from all that you consider your self]. Empty your heart and your consciousness of all worldly cares and concerns. Nullify all [dissociate from all attachments to your concerns, desires, emotions, most cherished attainments, your own body], until you are worthy of attaining true *bitul*.

How is this done? Begin by praying to God and talking to Him, dissociating yourself in stages from this and that trait, this and that desire, [this and that problem in this and that relationship]. Then dissociate even more until you nullify another trait and another desire [at ever deeper layers of the personality]. Continue this for an extended period of time, every night, in the same location, until everything is nullified. And if anything [any identification] still remains, dissociate from it as well, until nothing is left.

Even then, you must continue, for nothing is still something. That is, even after you have dissociated from all desires and negative character traits, a trace of ego might still remain. That is [as in any serious system of meditation], you might consider yourself special for having succeeded in doing all the above. The process must therefore be continued until even this little bit of ego disappears [and true humility in the face of God's awesome love and greatness sets in].

It is important to go to the end. Although it sounds frightening, and it definitely takes effort and persistence, the effort is well worth it. This is truly one of the most pleasurable experiences we could ever want to have. We must go to the end, dissociating or extricating ourself from the complex system of external and internal relationships that constitute our world.

This ultimate stage of *bitul* is called the level of *mah* ["what am I?"<sup>14</sup>]. When you merit to attain this, your soul will become re-incorporated in its root, namely, in the absolute existence of the blessed ONE. Then [your whole world, and by extension] the whole world, whose entire existence depends upon you, will be included with you. For everything depends on Him.

By knowing that our existence is totally dependent on Him, the whole world, which was created for the sake of Israel, will automatically be seen as being totally dependent on Him as well.

(4) Now you may see how all this is wondrously alluded to in the above mishnah: "One who is awake at night" should be understood literally. It refers to one who wakes up in the middle of the night to pray and to pour out his heart to God. "And who goes on the road alone" means, as we said above, that it is important to go off on a lonely road where others never travel. This is the essence of complete *hitbodedut* [i.e., *hitbodedut* that includes not only physical isolation but isolation and dissociation of the mind and heart from all extraneous thought]. "*Umefaneh libo lebatalah*" means that he disengages and empties his heart of all worldly pursuits and concerns, until he attains complete *bitul* (nothingness). He then can be worthy of becoming nullified in God's absolute existence, along with all the worlds that depend upon him. This then is the deepest meaning of "behold, he becomes *mitchayev benafsho*."

Rabbi Nachman sums up:

Know that *hitbodedut* is the only way to attain *bitul*, that is, to nullify your personal existence and become *ayin*, and be reunited in Hashem's blessed oneness.

*Hitbodedut* as dissociation of the self from the ego is the way up and in to the most intense and fulfilling experience of attachment to the Divine. This is not to say that we must remain in some disembodied state. On the contrary, after the liberating experience of *bitul*, we return to our senses and reestablish a new kind of relationship with ourself and the world in a far healthier way. This is the secret of going up and in during prayer, and then coming back down and out into our life with greater understanding, power, and inspiration to fulfill our mission here on earth.

All this does not contradict the simple meaning of this mishnah, which contains more than one message in its short and terse formulation: Rabbi Chaninah ben Chakhinai also refers to a person who wakes up in the dead of night, when the world is sleeping and no human sounds are heard; when the mind is at complete rest and the body is free of the sluggishness of the evening meal. What better time can be found for the study of the holy Torah? But if instead of contemplating the deepest meanings of the Torah at that time, one uses it for nonsense and meaningless pursuits, he is certainly liable for his own soul.

Copyright © 2012 Avraham Sutton  
www.AvrahamSutton.com

<sup>14</sup> Based on Moshe and Aharon's exclamation, "*Nachnu mah*—what are we?" (Exodus 16:7-8). According to the Talmud (*Chullin* 89a), this indicated that Moshe attained an even greater level of humility and self-effacement than Avraham who only exclaimed, "*Ve'anokhi afar va'efer*—I am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27).