

Merits and Melodies

An interpretive translation of a teaching by Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav

וְעוֹד מֵעֵט וְאִין רָשָׁע וְהִתְבּוֹנֵנְתָּ עַל-מְקוֹמוֹ וְאִינְנוּ

In a little bit there will be no wicked one; when you consider his place—he is gone. (Psalm 37: 10)

Know: One must judge each person in the scale of merit. And even if that person is very wicked, one must seek out and find in him a little bit of good. For within that little bit, he is not wicked. And because one has found in the other a bit of good, and therein regarded only his merit, one has actually elevated that person in the scale of merit enabling him to find his way to teshuvah. In this way, the verse means: *Within the little bit the other is not wicked; in terms of that wicked place—he is gone.*

Within the little bit of good, the evil person vanishes. And, after all, how is it possible that there not even be a little bit of good within someone? By virtue of your finding this little bit of good within which he is not wicked, esteeming him according to merit, you actually do raise him from a sense of guilt to a sense of self worth that makes teshuvah possible. One might also understand, *in a little bit/v'ode m'at*, as *another/v'ode little bit*. For, if one can find yet another little bit of good to add to the first then, *when you consider his place—he is gone* from an even wider space.

Understand: Just as one must find a bit of good in another, so one must find a little bit of good within oneself. And one must be very careful to be joyful and to stay far away from melancholy especially when one first begins to look into oneself and sees no obvious bit of good. For then one might surrender to depression, God forbid. One must resist this impulse and steadfastly search out a little bit of good. For how is it possible that he has never done some mitzvah or good deed? Now, when he carefully examines the little bit of good that he has found he invariably sees that even this is flawed and imperfect—even that little good was not done for pure motive. Yet, certainly this flawed little bit of good contains a smaller, irreducible bit. And one must seek out and find in oneself that little bit of good in order to invigorate himself that he might optimistically look for yet another bit of good truly breaking free of encumbering guilt and soaring to merit, esteem, and hopeful teshuvah. Let him continue to search out and find within himself other little bits of good, seeing in them patterns, making of them a melody as if each dense bit of good were a musical note, the total of those notes producing a melody of his best self—a melody that carries prayer, praise and opens him to teshuvah.

Now, one who is able to fashion such melodies—who can collect the good notes found in every one of the community—as well as for himself—that person is fit to be the prayer leader—the one called *shaliah tzibbur*, the community's representative. For everyone in the community trusts the *shaliah tzibbur* to offer a melody that contains his own.

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