



Barrier: Can I be both needy and joyful?

Succos is a time of joy, which brings me to wonder about joy in tefillah generally. What emotional space should I be in when I daven? Is there a place for calmness, or should I feel like I must beg and plead? Can I ever find joy in davening, or is that a contradiction in terms? After all, if I daven, that means I need something. And then, how can I be in a state of joy?

Open Thoughts

HalleluKah. Sing to Hashem a new song, His praises in the congregation of the faithful.

Let Yisrael rejoice in its Maker; let the children of Zion exult in their King.

Let them praise His Name in dance; with timbrel and lyre let them chant His praises.

For Hashem delights in His people; He adorns the lowly with victory.

—Tehillim 149: 1–4

Like the scent of the *hadassim* wafting through the air, Succos is redolent with hints of *yemos haMashiach*. It has associations that fill us with joy: the Leviim singing Hallel in the Beis Hamikdash; our own Hallel of love and gratitude.

The words of Dovid Hamelech seem to come alive: “*V’hisanag al Hashem, vayiten lecha mish’alos libecha*, And you shall delight in Hashem and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Tehillim 37:4). What does it mean to delight in Hashem? And how does this lead to our hearts’ desires being fulfilled? Isn’t prayer an act of begging and pleading? Where does delight fit in?

On a day-to-day level, how can we pray with serenity and happiness when we’re in a constant state of need? How can we sing in the midst of *galus*?

To untangle this, let’s examine the idea of singing to Hashem. Ten songs punctuate our history; nine have already been sung, and the final, ultimate song will be sung when Mashiach arrives. A fascinating midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 22:11) tells us that the nine *shirahs* took the feminine form — *shir-ah*, with a hei. The ultimate song will be *shir*, in the masculine form.



Part VII

What's the significance of singing to Hashem? And what's its connection with the feminine?

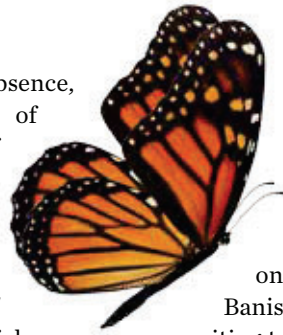
Hashem created this world with the letter hei and the World to Come with a yud, the Gemara teaches, as it says, "*Ki v'Kah Hashem tzur olamim* — with a yud and hei Hashem fashioned worlds."

The letter hei represents the work of This World — infusing the four dimensions of physicality, of absence, with the point of spirituality, of Presence. It's entering a place of concealment while remaining true to the five (the *gematria* of hei) levels of soul that distinguish every Jew (the highest being the *pintele Yid* that can never be sullied, which we touch on Yom Kippur). Hei is also the letter that represents teshuvah — its very shape, which opens at the base and provides an entrance a little further up, is a pictorial expression of the journey as we fall into the gray dusk, emerging with the dawn.

We live in a place of darkness, of unfulfilled promises, of fragmentation. We're far away from truth and peace and clarity of revelation. But nine times in history, the darkness was suddenly lifted, and Hashem's Divine plan unveiled.

At Kri'as Yam Suf, even a maidservant was able to point with her finger at the magnificence of G-d's justice and the poetry of His love. The result? Song. Happiness. Wholeness. The Kli Yakar explains (Shemos 15:11): "All songs of This World are in the feminine form, because it

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is accompanied by distress, just like women who have distress in childbirth."

For there to be revelation, there had to be darkness. To find clarity, the Jews — then, and now — work through confusion. How, then, do they find the strength to sing? How can they raise their voices in love and longing, in trust and faithfulness?

The answer lies in the secret of the hei.

The world was created with hei. It began in darkness. Chaos. The narrow straits that precede expansiveness. Every day starts with night. And from that place, we find the light that was concealed on the very first day of Creation.

Banished, but not annihilated. Hidden, and waiting to be found. There are times when we find it, whether through miracles, or through a seminal moment in our own lives.

Our response? Song. That moment of sudden serenity, when past, present, and future merge into each other, from within the despair emerges salvation. There's the knowledge that even within the pain, we're being held by Hashem. There's the understanding that my words, whether they emerge from the siddur or from my heart, will form a connection with the Creator of the world, who loves and cares for me, right here, right now, and waits for me to reach out to Him.

Have you ever had your young child run over to you, face lit up, and begin to recite: "An Israeli, an Arab, and a Chinaman were all on an airplane. The airplane started to shake..."

He's so excited to tell his joke. It's a joke

you've heard so many times before. You have to bite back the punchline. But still, it tickles you, and you have to stop yourself from laughing as he carefully recites his lines. Because inside, you're already smiling.

One of the praises given to the *eishes chayil* is "*vatis'chak l'yom acharon.*" Everyone else sees death. The *eishes chayil* sees a transition to a new and higher sphere. Everyone else tastes mourning. She sees the culmination of her

life's accomplishments. With her insight and wisdom, she sees the punchline, while everyone else is plodding through the joke.

This is a uniquely feminine ability. It's women who know both the agony and ecstasy of pregnancy and birth — and who would give up on neither. For she understands the pain, sees the pain, but in her heart and soul, there's something deeper — belief in the process taking place.

And this is what gives women a special connection with tefillah. She can daven, ask, beg, need — for her essence is to be in touch both with the wanting and the knowledge that whatever she is going through, whether she'd have chosen it or run from it, is part of the process of birthing herself.

"*V'hisanag al Hashem*" even within difficult times, women know how to access a feeling of satisfaction, of safety, and security. She looks inward, finds center — and at the center is Hashem. This very serenity leads to our prayers being answered.

We know the pain of This World — we've felt the hei in our hearts, on our skin — and yet even within it, we can find the happiness of meaning, the joy of reaching past the pain and detecting the light. We can hear the punchline even as the joke is spooling out.

This joy finds its ultimate expression in the Yom Tov of Succos. *Galus* may be closing in on us, but we can already taste the ultimate light. Not by doing anything special — we eat and sleep and conduct our everyday activities in the shelter of this little hut. There's nothing extraordinary going on in our Succos. But there is. There's a mindset that encloses everything within a shelter of *emunah* — knowing that all that we do is for Him and all that we experience is there for us to find Him.

This is what brings us to Hallel and this is what brings us to song. The joy of knowing that no matter what my present reality, I can catch a scent of something deeper taking place. The uplift that comes from grasping that even in the smallness of our lives, there's the expansiveness of being connected to Hashem's presence.

Open Lips

Every prayer contains a paradox. We daven because we're in a situation of need. But how can davening also be done with joy, with serenity?

OPEN EYES

Water is a central theme of Succos: not only do we have the *nisuch hamayim*, with its attendant Simchas Beis Hashoeivah, we also say Tefillas Geshem, asking that Hashem send bountiful rainfall.

The very first tefillah uttered was Adam Harishon's prayer for rain. It was the start of the cycle of need, ask, receive, that forms a relationship between man and his Creator. Prayer and rain form a circuit of life. Even more, prayer and rain show us how to become a *mekabel*.

It's scary to be a *mekabel*. It means we're in touch with that tender place inside that's yearning for connection. That's fully conscious of our needs. It takes courage to put ourselves in that place. But being a *mekabel* not only acknowledges the ultimate truth — that we're dependent upon Hashem for every breath — it puts us in the sphere of a relationship. It enables us to live with gratitude and humility, and enjoy the cycle of closeness that comes from acknowledging our needs and asking for them.

The water for *nisuch hamayim* flowed down through a shaft that was dug by Dovid Hamelech when he established the foundations of the Beis Hamikdash that Shlomo would build. Dovid, whose name is comprised of daled-vav-daled. Two daleds, which connote the *dal*, someone in need, who reaches out and asks. Both daleds are joined by a vav, the letter of connection.

Dovid is represented by the moon: his kingship will wax and wane, and like the moon, it receives all its light from the sun, by reflecting the ultimate kingship of Hashem. Asking, seeking, reflecting, the moon — all of these are related to the sphere of being a *mekabel*. And being a *mekabel* is the specific energy of a woman.

Next time it rains, walk outside. Tip your head back, and watch the clouds. Hold out your hands, and feel the droplets, cold, wet, nourishing, life-giving. Imagine them penetrating the soil, and allowing hidden seeds to begin germinating.

Now imagine standing in prayer and opening yourself up to receive Hashem's love. We may not always feel the droplets, but they nourish a place deep inside. Allow yourself to feel the ache, the pain, the need, the distance. Whisper a word. And then imagine droplets of love showering down upon you from above.



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The Mishnah explains the structure of the Shemoneh Esreh: in the first three brachos we praise, like a servant praising his master. Then comes the request, "like a servant asking for a prize." In the last three, we praise, "like a servant who receives a prize from his master, and takes his leave."

Let's look at this structure in terms of the emotional and spiritual mindset we can adopt in each section.

We start Shemoneh Esreh, and the words we say connect us to a sphere of reality. "*Hagadol, hagibur, v'hanora... Mechalkel chayim b'chesed* — The great, the strong, the awesome... Who sustains life with kindness." We make those words real in our hearts, appreciate Who we're addressing: we're standing before G-d, the ultimate power, Who bestows life, the ultimate good, upon the word and upon us.

And then what? Then we can allow ourselves to feel our needs. We can plead and beg and ask, intensely conscious of the places inside that feel broken and weary and filled with sorrow. We ask for health and parnassah and clarity and leadership and that our voice be heard.

This passionate unwrapping of our inner needs is followed by another shift. *Modim*. Thank You. *Sim shalom*. You, Who bless us with peace. The atmosphere changes once more: I take leave of You with full confidence that everything You do is for the good. I have my ideas of the way I'd like things to be (sometimes, in typical Jewishchutzpah, I even tell You a few of these options).

But I relinquish control, and I do so not out of desperation, but out of confidence. I know Who is driving this car, and He knows where it's going. I ask, and I put my all into my asking, but there's a part of me that's deeper than the asking, which knows that my job is to find Hashem in the here and now, even if the externals of my life don't change.

When we learn to do this, we can daven from a place of trust and even joy. For even as we feel the brokenness, we also feel something deeper: that all is from Hashem, the Almighty and the all-powerful, Who loves me unconditionally and Who is directing my life. ☺