



## *Barrier: Offering Emptiness*

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*The last few months have been difficult for everyone, but all I seem to have felt are my inadequacies. I'd love to say that I used the challenges to strengthen my emunah and invest in my family, but honestly, I just struggled through it.*

*And now another year is on the threshold and my disappointment in myself is reflected in the way I feel about the impending Yom Tov, and in my davening. How can I even try to come close to Hashem when I feel so empty?*

## *Open Thoughts*

An old Chinese tale tells of an emperor who loved flowers. To choose a successor, he distributed seeds to all the children of his realm. "Whoever grows a beautiful plant will become the next emperor," he told them. The children lined up excitedly, including one little boy with green fingers. The boy tried everything to make his flower grow, but no matter what he did, he could not coax the seed to life.

When the day came for everyone to present their plants before the emperor, all the children paraded the streets, beautiful plants in their hands. The boy took a little flower pot, containing the shriveled seed and some bare earth.

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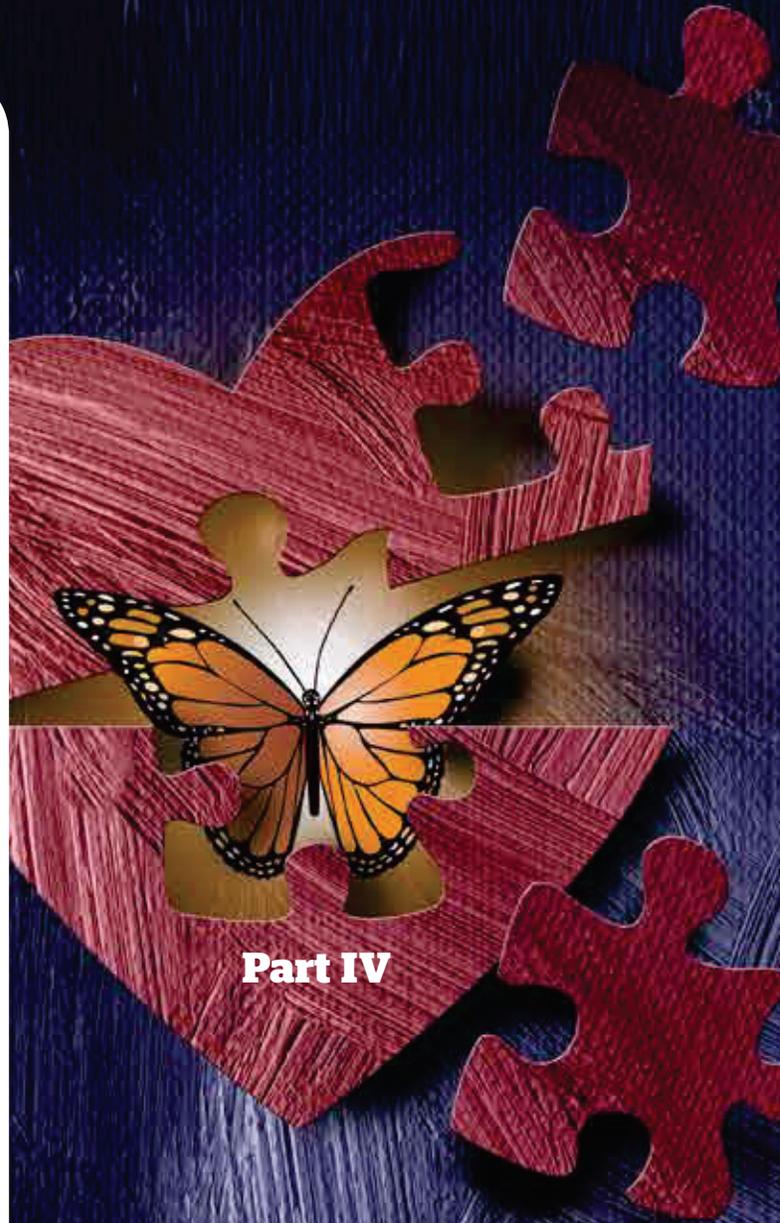
"Why have you brought an empty pot?" he asked.

"I planted the seed and watered it every day, but it did not sprout," the boy answered. "I tried everything, but I couldn't make it grow."

The emperor heard the boy's words, and declared: "This boy will be the emperor! None of the seeds were capable of sprouting, but the only child in all the kingdom who had the courage to come before me with his emptiness, was this little boy."

It's just a simple child's tale, but it poses a question: Will we allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to take our truth all the way to the King's throne?

We come before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah feeling so inadequate. Here's the seed that You gave me. I tried to make it grow, but I didn't succeed, at least not in the way I expected.



**Part IV**

And what does the King say? I value the emptiness. I value the fact that you came before me today with your honesty. With your lack of growth. With your lack of success and achievement.

Western culture makes this tricky. Not only is success something that we want internally, it's become a measure of our self-worth. Success is flouted, publicized, it's in the spotlight. Successful people take their place high on the hierarchy of our communities.

But when it comes to tefillah, something different is required. Not to come and introduce ourselves to Hashem with our achievements: Hi, I've got six kids, a house with a nice backyard, tutoring sessions and speech therapy for the kids who need it (tick the mothering box), and a successful profession. Instead, we can turn to Hashem, and say, I feel distant, I don't really want to even be talking to You right now, because I'd prefer if I wasn't so needy and didn't feel all these uncomfortable feelings.

But *that* is the point.

It's hard to feel distant and empty. It's hard to feel depleted. But that's the perfect emotional space for prayer. We're feeling vulnerable, we seek clarity and closeness. And then we're ready and waiting to be filled up by Hashem's blessing.

Our daily tefillos are connected to the movement of the sun.

People used to worship the sun. Not surprising: The sun rises and the world wakes, basking in light and warmth. It dictates the days, seasons, years, and agriculture. But the *shemesh* is only a *meshamesh* — it merely helps us tap into the mindset we need to serve Hashem.

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## OPEN LIPS

Man's limbs each correspond to and derive their energy from a different mitzvah. The *Sefer Chassidim* explains that tefillah corresponds to the spinal cord. Interestingly, the spinal cord is not a limb. It's the connection between the brain and the body. The spine enables our body and mind to work in sync. It's the place of connection. And the place that facilitates movement.

Among the many acts of integration we can achieve through tefillah is bridging the gap between our ideals and where we're actually holding. The very act of asking — and the things that we ask for — have a profound effect on who we are. Even if we're not holding there yet, by asking, we shape who we are and what we really want. Instead of saying, "I don't identify with these words," we can say, "I'm saying these words in order to become a person who identifies with these words — and these ideals."

*Chaneinu m'it'cha de'ah, binah, v'haskel.* Help me be a person who strives for wisdom instead of apathy.

*Hashiveinu Avinu l'Sorasecha.* Help me be sensitive to the ups and downs of our

relationship, and strive for vibrancy, help me want to always get close to You.

*Selach Lanu.* Help me be a person who wants to purify her heart, to come before You and ask for another chance.

*Re'ei v'onyeinu.* Help me connect my personal difficulties with the broader reality, which is that we're in *galus*, and Your Name is not recognized.

*Teka b'shofar.* I have so many things on my mind right now, but I'm still going to look beyond my individual circumstance and think of the bigger picture: I want the Geulah, and the revelation of Hashem.

*Modim.* Help me become a person who spends time each day in a place of gratitude.

There are so many things in our hearts and our minds, and sometimes we feel fragmented and empty so we can't even identify them. But the siddur forms a spiritual anchor. When we can't identify the strivings of our souls, the siddur identifies them and gives them words. And in giving us words, it formulates our ideals — and what we really want on the deepest level.

feel energized, fulfilled, ready to grapple with whatever is sent our way. Minchah — while man is occupied with his plans and wishes and desires. When we are preoccupied, when life demands all of our attention, when our head and heart-space is taken up by our concerns. And then Maariv, when he feels weak or uncertain, when it's dark and his strength is spent. When the crown of creation is absent, when our ability to control or create is diminished — we turn to Hashem.

There are times when we feel empty and depleted. We're in the realm of Maariv, when the sun and clarity and energy are hidden. But there's a special tefillah to be said at this time. We can use this place to turn to Hashem with our emptiness, knowing that if we have the courage and honesty to do so, Hashem will welcome our offering.

### *Open Hearts*

It's hard to daven when we feel inadequate and unworthy. For those who think that this is a 21st-century problem, let's quote the words of Rav Tzadok HaKohein, who was born nearly 200 years ago: "Just as a person needs to believe in Hashem, he needs to believe in himself" (*Tzidkas Hatzaddik*, 154).

It's not always easy to have *emunah*. Sometimes, events conspire to hide Hashem's Presence in our lives. And it's not so different with our feelings of self-worth. Old stories we've told ourselves, traps we fall into again and again, relationships that continually disappoint us — all these coalesce and make us feel inadequate and unworthy.

So what can we do?

Approach #1: The more we recognize, identify with, and own our strengths, the more we will believe in ourselves — and in Hashem's belief in us. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov addresses those who find themselves "sad and heavy because they see how far away they are from Hashem." In such a state, it's very hard to daven. It's hard to even open your mouth.

In *Likutei Moharan* (288) he advises: "A person should look for and find his good points, so as to revive himself and come to a place of joy. Even if he finds just a small amount of good... this will strengthen him and he will revitalize himself... for he has identified in himself... an aspect of the essence of a Jew."

When we do something good, we can identify with that good. Let's stop and ask: What does it say about me that I did that?

## **OPEN EYES**

Every bus station has its share of homeless, but the scene is particularly poignant at the Central Bus Station in Jerusalem, as they're our brothers. Some are mentally ill, some are survivors of the stormy winds that have buffeted us a nation.

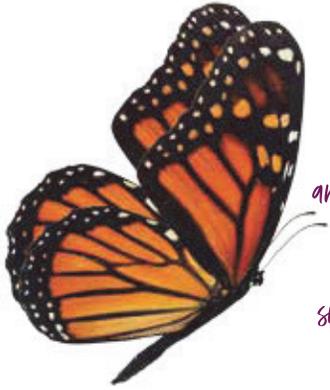
While there are some who sit, jangle a cup for coins, and ask for money, there are others who make a more tragic sight. They lay with a cardboard over their heads and a tarp over their bodies, and simply hold out a cup, wordlessly waiting for strangers to drop in a penny. They don't have to say a word. Their situation is so dire that just one look and we know that they are in desperate straits.

"*Va'ani tefillah*," said Dovid Hamelech. I myself am prayer. Rav Tzadok HaKohein (*Divrei Sofrim 17*) explains that Dovid felt himself to be so broken that he was a walking, talking, wordless tefillah. He may not have been dressed in rags, he may have had a roof over his head, but inside he felt so much pain and yearning and grief that he didn't need to even formulate the words.

So many of us have had a year that has left us shaking and trembling. And we're scared. What will the coming year bring? And how can we daven when we're in a place that feels so rough?

"*Va'ani tefillah*." Hashem sees through it all, straight to our *neshamos*. And He knows that we're begging Him for a good year, for brachah, for encouragement, for solace.

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The siddur forms a spiritual anchor. When we can't identify the strivings of our souls, the siddur identifies them and gives them words

What kind of person does this type of action? The fact that I bit back a comment means that I can look at the relationship, not just the irritation. The fact that I davened brachos with thought means that I'm growth-oriented and want to bring gratitude into my life. Even the fact that I feel gnawing regret means I know I can do better — and I want to be a person who develops her best self.

Approach #2: We can look at our life circumstances and gifts as a message from Hashem. I'm a daughter/wife/mother/sister/worker/neighbor. All these roles are gifts from Hashem because He believes I can fill them. He wants to bring something out of me and placed me in complex situations because He believes I can succeed at them. At a foundational level, the fact that we've been given the mitzvos means that Hashem wants a relationship with us. The word mitzvah is related to the words *tzavta*, accompaniment. Hashem wants us — simple us — to accompany Him as we walk through This World. Life itself — the fact that today, Hashem is giving me the biggest gift of all — is the greatest proof of His belief in me.

Approach #3: As a member of Klal Yisrael, we live not only a personal life, but a communal life as well. The more we reach out to others, the more we will be buoyed and bolstered by the web that holds us all together. According to the Mabit, this is one of the reasons why Perek Shirah is such a powerful *segulah*. By bringing out the individual *shirah* of each creature, we connect to them all, and thus bring a level of unity to creation. If this is true on an abstract form, how much more so when we connect to the people around us. No wonder our tefillos are mainly couched in the plural form — we daven from a place of connectedness.

## Summary

Emptiness and inadequacy can lead us to:

- Refine what Hashem wants from us as we stand before Him. We don't need to approach with our successes — rather with the inner workings of our hearts.
- Work on our belief in ourselves. Hashem believes in us, and we need to, as well.
- Reconnect to the ideals behind each brachah in Shemoneh Esreh. ☺



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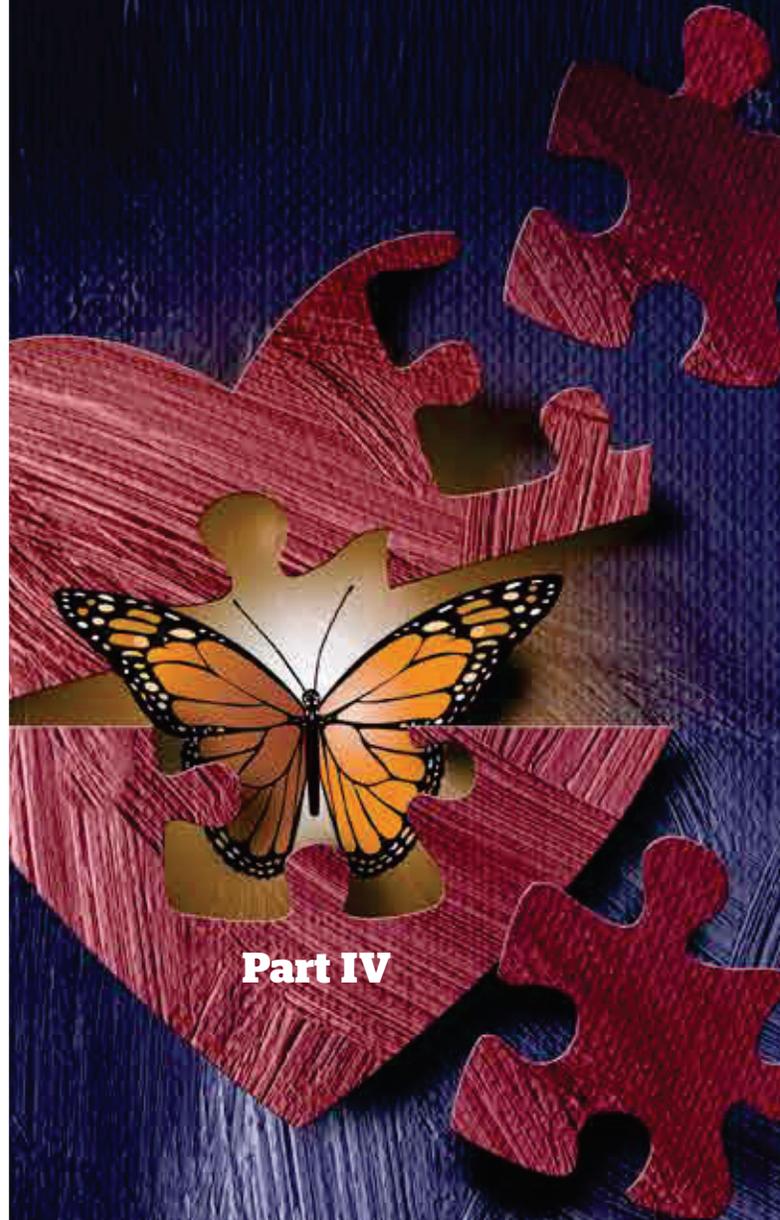
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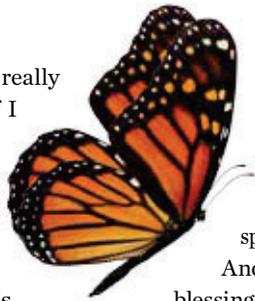
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