



unlock your heart

Barrier Two:

Too Empty, Too Full, Generally Closed

It's one thing if I have the opportunity to go to the Kosel or Kever Rochel, and cry and talk and say Tehillim for three hours. When I've done that, I'm often left with an incredible uplift. Everything inside washed away and a good kind of emptiness remains — like I'm an open vessel, waiting for renewal. It's beautiful and uplifting.

But in daily life, with limited time and concentration, I don't get anywhere near that place. As a matter of fact, most times I open my siddur and don't feel anything at all. I daven because it's a habit — a good kind of habit, because I believe if I keep doing it, I'll be able to generate some meaning sometimes.

Some days, I close my siddur feeling like I missed out on something precious; other days, I just feel apathetic. I'd love to take everything that's going on inside of me and translate it into words of prayer. I just don't know how.

Open Heart

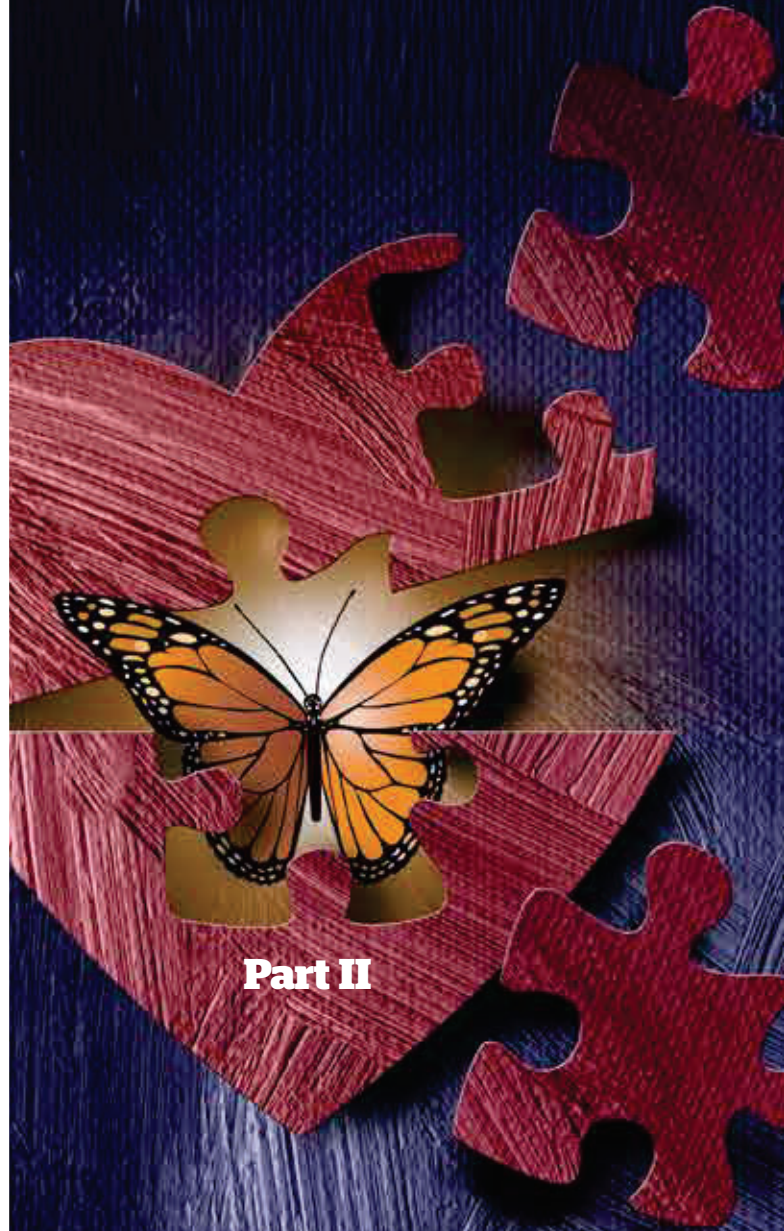
Most times, when our hearts feel empty, they're not empty at all. They're too full. They're so full that there's a blockage. We're stuck. We don't know how to go about thawing what's inside, effecting movement and release.

The word *tefillah* is first found in the Torah when Bilhah, handmaiden of Rochel, gave birth to a son. Rochel declared, “*Naftulei Elokim gam niftalti.*” One of Rashi's explanations is that the word “*niftalti*” is derived from the word *pesil*, wick, and it means connection. A wick joins the oil with the flame. Without the bridge of the wick, there's no light, and the oil just sits there, without purpose.

Mostly, when we think we feel too little, we're feeling too much. There's an ocean inside: deep and vast, bewildering and disorienting. We face a frightening specter: open the spigot and the ocean will roil out. We'll be swept away by an endless wave of sadness and wanting and asking. Afraid, we close the spigot. But in doing so, we're cut off from our life force. No wonder we can't daven.

Let's return to the candle. By lighting the wick, the candle — which represents the physical stuff that makes up our lives — becomes fuel for the light that's produced. But the candle doesn't burn all at once. Instead, a small pool of melted wax forms at the top of the candle. It's this pool that translates into the candle's light.

There are special occasions — like a long-awaited trip to the Kosel — when we melt that candle. But most times, when we daven, we can't and don't want to melt the candle all at once. We'll become flooded.



Part II

But we can try to attain a small pool of melted wax. Just that day's worries. That day's desire for clarity and connection. When we open our siddur and try to access our hearts, we can do so in a measured way, that feels safe and yet still provides fuel for genuine connection.

Open Thoughts

Gan Eden was a paradise of waterfalls, trees, springy moss by the riverbank. Well, actually, no.

Vegetation was created on the third day of Creation. But it was created in potential. Everything was suspended, until Adam Harishon came and davened for rain.

So what did Adam Harishon see when he first opened his eyes to the world? Bare earth. No grass. No trees. No flowers. A great nothingness. An overwhelming *chisaron*, a place of desolation, deficiency, lack.

A vastly different setting from verdant grass and luxuriant fruit trees.

Let's turn to our own lives. Deficiency and darkness are everywhere. Worldwide, as a glance at the news will testify. In our communities, schools, neighborhoods, families. And in our very selves. It's painful and disturbing.

We long for the beautiful waterfalls and the trees heavy with fruits, and the contrast between what we want and bleak reality can close our hearts. Rav Moshe Cordevero in *Pardes Rimmonim* (*shaar* 21, chapter 3) asks this very question:

If the purpose of the world is that we recognize Hashem and acknowledge His kingship, why did Hashem create a world that shows the opposite of His kindness? The whole world hides Hashem's presence. People do not recognize Him, and nations deny His existence. Looking inside, there is a yetzer hara. Everything is in a situation of deficiency. One person doesn't have children, another struggles for livelihood, everyone has some lack.

This is his mind-blowing answer:

Hashem desires a dirah b'tachtonim, a dwelling place in the Lower World. Through the deficiencies of This World, and through asking again and again, we reveal Him through the concealment.

There is so much we need, so much we want. When life doesn't unfold the way we expected, hoped for, we may feel angry and cheated.

But the Remak, quoted by Rav Yitzchok Meir Morgenstern, tells us something life-altering. The purpose of our lives is not to get the kids happy and intact through school, teenagehood, seminary, and shidduchim. It's not simply to pay off the mortgage or finally find some peace of mind. *The purpose of our lives is to find Hashem in the places we can't seem to see Him.*

This isn't the message we receive from society. Western culture

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is hyper-focused on results. So much so that when we encounter difficulties, we desperately think of ways we could have foreseen and prevented them, and mentally beat ourselves up over our perceived failure. (It doesn't help that we often equate failure with worthlessness.)

Of course, none of us want difficulties. But our goal is not simply to avoid getting bruised. The natural state of This World is *chisaron*, deficiency. It's the bare earth of Gan Eden before it sprouted. Why?

"There is no other reason for creation, and Hashem has no other desire in the lower worlds, other than that man should know and thank his G-d Who created him, and this is why we raise our voice in prayer." (Ramban on Shemos 13:16)

It was the desolation and emptiness Adam Harishon saw that brought him to *tefillah*. And when his prayer was answered, when rain fell and Gan Eden blossomed, Hashem's *malchus* was revealed in the world. His kindness, His beneficence, His presence became apparent even in a place where He appeared to be absent. In our lives, too, the absence can bring us to yearn for, seek, ask for, and want Hashem's presence. *And when we do this, we show that*

OPEN LIPS

Women have an incredible and deep connection to informal tefillah.

Formal tefillah, though, can fluctuate and shift at different stages of life, as we may abridge the *nusach* and make it work within the demands of our circumstances.

Adon Olam may not make it into our rushed ritual of tefillah — but it can be part of our song, and the words can impact our hearts.

Adon Olam expresses the synthesis between the awesome greatness of our Creator, and the personal nature of our relationship with Him.

Adon Olam asher malach b'terem kol yetzir nivra

Master of the world, Who ruled before any creature was created.

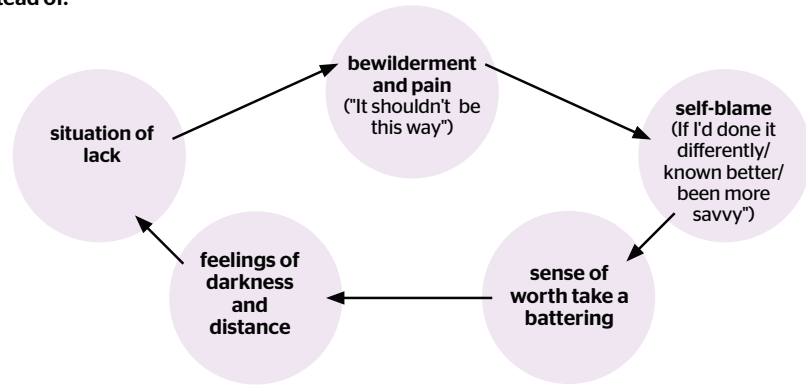
The first person to call Hashem by the name Adon was Avraham Avinu. Avraham Avinu used a lens of *chesed*; his prism was the harmony of the world. Who is the source of this goodness, he asked. And he discovered HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

One can't daven to a theoretical concept or an intellectual idea. We relate to Hashem in the way we experience Him. Avraham taught us to love Hashem, to feel secure in His care, to acknowledge Him, to trust in Him, to think of Him, to daven to Him.

Adon Olam. At the beginning of each day, we commit to discovering the *chesed* of Hashem in each day, in each gift, in each breath. And when night falls, in the darkness, we hold onto our *emunah* that Hashem is our loving Father, and all that He does is for our ultimate good.

CHANGE THE PRAYER PARADIGM

Instead of:



We can try:



there's no place where He cannot be found.

How can we open our hearts in prayer when they're so messy? If our problems are personal failures, then we don't want to acknowledge or face them, let alone use them as the fuel for prayer.

And how much harder it is to acknowledge the internal lack — the dark places inside of us. The feelings of abandonment or anger, the loneliness or apathy. We try to hide them from ourselves and we try to hide them from Hashem. But then we end up blocking the very channel we have to connection: our hearts.

Hashem wants a *dirah b'tachtonim*. A dwelling place in the lower worlds. What does this mean?

OPEN EYES

Visualize the top of your heart slowly thawing, The warmth of the words softening the hard whiteness. Just aim for a little pool of emotion. Usually, that's going to consist of today's struggle, this week's work of integration, this moment's desire to find Hashem in our lives. The words of the siddur are so multifaceted that they provide a scaffolding we can use to express our deeper desires and emotions, without being overwhelmed by them.

It doesn't just mean that Hashem wants us to find Him in the awe of Niagara Falls, the peace of a sunrise, the drama of a desert landscape. It's not simply in the humdrum details of our lives. And it's not only in those times of big challenges. A *dirah b'tachtonim* means even in the darkness, even in our inadequacies, even in the emotions we try to subsume, the small parts of ourselves.

It turns our lives into a story of wanting and looking and finding and crowning Hashem as king in every detail and every place. When we do this, "the concealment and the light unify, for the *hester* has become a conduit for the light."

We're in Elul. *Ani v'dodi v'dodi li*. There's a relationship of reciprocity. Of friendship. We may present our best face to the world, but a real friend is someone with whom you can be vulnerable. A *yedid* (yud-daled-yud-daled), a true friend, will hold your hand — *yad* (yud-daled) and *yad* (yud-daled) — no matter what. It's in those very human places of inadequacy that Hashem wants a relationship with us.

And that shows how very real it is. Hashem is saying, come to Me, talk to Me, make Me part of your mundane lives. Open your conflicted heart to Me, because this is all I seek: a home in your world, a home in your heart. ☺