

I am very interested in lesser-known but traditional Jewish spiritual practices. These practices can be life-changing. And introducing North American young Jews to these alternative yet classic ways of expressing Jewish life helps them to see that the Judaism they know and that didn't engage them isn't all there is. In the following pages I will introduce you to a practice that you may or may not have heard of, and I'll try to demystify it. It's called *Hitbodedut*.

Hitbodedut is a Hebrew word that means "self-solitude", or making time for oneself (the Hebrew root-word B-D-D means "alone". The "*hit*" makes the word reflexive.) In Hasidic circles it has other names: *sicha* (conversation), *yishuv haDa'at* (settling the mind), and more. Since those are easier to pronounce, you can call it any of those, or even "speaking meditation". It requires only a heart and a mouth, a set amount of time and space to be alone. There are no other rules. Because there are no other rules, it represents an approach to Judaism that can be summed up in one word: *unscripted*. We need more unscripted Judaism, room for the spontaneous expression of each of our unique style and voice. Finding a traditional practice that actually celebrates this was life-changing for me.

I believe the Jewish community needs "unscripting" because this will open many new doorways for Jews and their loved ones to engage, as well as inviting all of themselves to enter those doors. Imagine if no one ever had to leave anything at the door of Jewish life ever again, but could bring all of themselves inside. Judaism is suffering from an unnecessary poverty, as we ask people to conform to social norms (often functions of unnamed class dynamics), and as creative ways of being Jewish continue to be marginalized in many of our institutions. We can do better: lighter, more colorfully, with more tones and songs and fashions, unafraid of questions, new ideas, stories and creative rituals. At Sinai we were promised that every single one of us belongs in Jewish life, and Torah belongs to every one of us. Until we make that

promise a reality – until every one of us who wants to be on the inside of Torah and Jewish life can be – we are failing. So Hitbodedut for me is more than just a practice with personal benefit; it is a way of hacking Jewish life, and creating a shared language around doing so.

Rooted in Hasidic life (Hasidism was a spiritual revival that started in the late 1700s in Eastern Europe), Hitbodedut differs from the prayer familiar to us from synagogue. Unlike liturgical prayer, Hitbodedut is your personal conversation with God and/or self. I choose this language with care: Hasidic texts describing the practice puts the I-God conversation at the center, but there is a lot of material that suggests that Hitbodedut can work for an agnostic or atheist. Judaism is less concerned with theology than with practice and the experience of growth that comes through it. If you are comfortable exploring the idea of conversation with God, great. If not, you can speak to your heart (a practice I find deeply moving), to yourself as a child, even to parts of your body – all of these approaches are great to play with.

According to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), the teacher who wrote the most about this practice, Hitbodedut was *the* main mode of spiritual activity from our earliest days. Adam and Eve engaged in Hitbodedut, as did our fore-fathers and -mothers, and every spiritual leader in Jewish history. According to the medieval commentator Rashi (an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo ben [son of] Yitzchak), the Jews at the Red Sea, surrounded by the Egyptian army and facing a turbulent ocean, “held onto the art-form of their ancestors”: spontaneous prayer. The great legalist Maimonides introduces his discussion of prayer with the same idea: what began as spontaneous expression became, over time and due to the slow loss of our ease and comfort with spontaneity, a series of fixed prayers composed by rabbis for the people. But what was meant as an assistive device – liturgy – over time became stifling. Contrary to what many of us were taught, the truest form of prayer is natural and free. We are pray-ers at our core, children often

talk to God (or to themselves, or to an imaginary friend) without any instruction or self-consciousness, and unscripted conversation with God and/or self is an essential Jewish practice. And though we have lost this type of prayer in mainstream Jewish life in America, we can get it back.

Some Basics: Time, Space and Volume

The first thing to know about this practice is also the simplest: your theology, identity and affiliation aren't relevant to this practice. You just need to reach for your heart and connect it to your mouth. The only "rules" for Hitbodedut are: speak out loud, set aside a certain amount of time (more on this in a bit), in a place where you will be left alone. Let's unpack these three elements.

Speak out loud: it is essential to speak out loud, for at least two reasons. First, it allows you to connect your inside – your preverbal thoughts, feelings, and intuitions – with your outside – expression in the space you're in. And this interface is important, it keeps the conversation from being amorphous, forces you to articulate what you mean to say. Often I will say something in Hitbodedut and feel immediately that I didn't say exactly what I meant, and this pushes me to become clearer about what exactly I am feeling and what precisely I want to say. So speaking out loud is helpful in clarifying my own thoughts and feelings. Second, by speaking out loud I become a witness to my own words. I am the speaker, but I am also a listener, and there is a dialogue between me and myself that is powerful. So speaking out loud is essential, loudly or quietly, at a consistent and regular time of your choosing and in a solitary space or with creative solitude while with others.

Before you begin, I suggest you sit or stand or walk quietly and tune in with yourself. As you begin, speak slowly, and notice what you feel, and how your feelings move and develop during the time you've set aside. You may notice that some words capture your attention more than others, or that there's a spike in your awareness at certain moments. While you speak, notice these movements.

You can speak loudly – shouting, jumping, freely expressing – but you can also speak quietly. When you are in a room with other people, Rebbe Nachman says, you can hold a book as if you are reading it but really do Hitbodedut quietly. Nowadays we have cell phones – you can put your ear buds in and talk (I think cell phones were invented for this purpose!) The author of the ancient Psalms describes speaking to God in bed at night under the covers. You can even let your family know that you need a few minutes of privacy in the same room, or invite them to try the practice as well, giving each other space to speak without overhearing one another. My children know I do Hitbodedut, and sometimes I tell them I need to take my time for it, and I go to another room. And sometimes I do Hitbodedut while they're nearby, in a quiet corner of the room.

A note about self-consciousness: it is very natural to feel awkward at first. We are not used to speaking out loud (though some of us did so quite naturally as children, and you might have observed your children doing so). We may feel we are talking to ourselves, generally a sign of mental imbalance in our society (though not in some others). It's ok to have those feelings, and any other feelings that come up – they are all welcome inside this set-aside space. You can speak about this: “I feel so weird talking to myself, or to you, God – are you even here, listening? I'm not sure what to talk about. I'm tired and I'd rather lie down for a quick nap....” It's all

good, it's all practice. The main thing is to keep some level of awareness and to keep talking. Over time Hitbodedut will feel more natural, and like any practice, it will work on you.

Here are some specific ways you might do Hitbodedut:

Begin with thanks, something or several things for which you are grateful. Keep your attention on this and try to speak about how and why you are grateful. Feel the feeling of gratitude permeate you. When you are ready, move into yearning. What do you deeply want or wish for? You can begin with "I wish" as a prompt. Spend some time here, noticing how you feel as you express a desire. It's good to want, and saying what you want is a gift. When you are ready, return to gratitude, this time for the moments you just had.

Try to list as many things as you can that you appreciate about yourself. Be as specific as possible. If it helps, you can write these down first, then read them and reflect out loud. You can try to write down 50 good things about yourself, what Rebbe Nachman calls *nekudot tovot*, or good points. Then shift to someone close to you and talk about what you appreciate about her or him. The main thing is to go slowly so that you have a chance of feeling the appreciation. You can do the same thing for a particular day – things I appreciate or am grateful for that happened when I was a child, or at work, or last Thanksgiving.

Talk to a part of your body. Rebbe Nachman encouraged one his students to do this over time, expressing support for each limb and asking for its cooperation in living an ethical life. For example, you can speak to your eyes and say something like, "Thank you for serving me so well and making sure I find my way. We're a team, and I'd like to support you to see the good in people, to let go of overly-critical ways of seeing." Or: "Legs, we are going to build our strength

to run the 10K, and it's going to be great. And while we're at it, let's respond quickly to anyone in need, let's run to be of service wherever we can."

Move your body. Dance, sway, jump while you speak. Let your body speak, listen to what it's saying and translate that into words. Let your body lead you.

Focus on an area you want to work on. We all have areas of improvement, like being more present, or working on anger, or having more fun. If you slow down and feel how important this aspiration is to you, you can begin to awaken real longing for it. By talking it out and requesting help, or expressing how much it means to you and the depth of your hopefulness you can raise the volume on your wanting. And this may give you deeper focus as you go through the rest of your day.

Tell jokes to God. Knock-knock jokes work well for me. For one of my friends, dirty jokes work better. Rebbe Nachman said to talk to God as if you are talking to your true best friend. The traditional religious imperative to cultivate awe needs to be balanced with being at home in your spiritual life. I experiment a lot, seeking a balance between reverence and casualness, and Hitbodedut is the best laboratory I know.

Talk about where your joy is. When have you felt joyful? What would you do not for a Klondike bar, but for enduring joy in life? Talk about where you find joy and where you struggle with it, and express your desire for more. Rebbe Nachman's main student, Reb Noson, wrote that you can borrow joy from the future – if things are tough now there's a storehouse of joy at the end of time, and it's inexhaustible. What are you looking forward to, and can you feel the happiness waiting for you there, now?

Repeat a word or phrase over and over as a mantra. Rebbe Nachman invited his students to say “*Ribono shel Olam*”, which is Hebrew for Master of the Universe, a nickname for God, over and over. Finding a phrase is very helpful for those moments when you’re not sure what to say, when the words dry up. Any word or phrase is good. “My heart”. “Hope”. “I wish”. “*Hineni* (I am here)”. “Mommy.” I’ve tried these and others too private to share; the words simply need to resonate with you, to feel like something that can open your heart.

There are dozens more specific practices, and they are not more legitimate or authentic than those you will come up with for yourself. They do give a good start, a sort of runway as you build comfort and momentum.

One more note: Hitbodedut by definition is a solitary practice, but it can be supported in community. I mentioned going out with a friend to do it, and to this day, Rebbe Nachman’s students will often go out together as a group, separate so that each person has privacy, and then come back together to sing and dance. They often sing “*Ashrenu*”, how fortunate are we to have direct access anywhere, anytime, to the deep and intimate conversation that is Hitbodedut. If you’d like, you can pull together a small group for weekly Hitbodedut in a park, or in a home with enough rooms, or a synagogue. You can partner with a friend or your spouse/partner, to support one another’s solitude, as the poet Rilke recommends (“Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other”). When community supports individual experience we can go deeper; safely held and anchored, we can jump off into unexplored territory. And when we do access and unleash our unique unscripted expression, I see a day when our communities will access the breadth and depth of Jewish wisdom, and will welcome difference and express thirst for the unique song of every one of us. It will be a place of unscripted Jewish life, where we need leave nothing behind.

