

Dear Chavraya,

In a class that I have been teaching for some time, a student who is always present was absent last week. Concerned, I sent a note to him later that evening. In his response he explained that it was not easy or comfortable for him to acknowledge that he had been very depressed and could not muster the energy to come to class. I understood his feelings, conditioned by the lack of sympathy, the “dis-ease” in our society, for those who suffer illness of the soul and mind, of psyche. I encouraged him to see his struggle as no different than our struggles with any other type of illness or malady.

As I reflected on this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, I thought about my student. A central *mitzvah* of this portion is the bringing of first fruits, *bikkurim*. In the Talmud, the offering of first fruits develops into a ceremony of great pageantry. As a raising-up of the best fruits of one’s labor, the best of oneself, it comes to be required that this offering be accompanied by song. But what if one is not in a mood to sing? What if one is depressed, unable to bring the song of her or his heart to the altar, or to the table of a classroom?

As the one making the offering arrived at the Temple Court, the Levites offered greeting of song, singing from Psalm 30, *I will extol You, God, for You have drawn me up/ki dilitani*. The Hebrew means to “draw up,” as water from a well. From the well of my soul, God will draw up the living waters that sing of my gifts, of who I am. Of similar sound, *dal* means one who is low or weak. If I can only begin to sing the song of my soul to God, that will be the essence of my offering, the very first fruit, and so shall my song be a prayer to raise me up.

In Chassidic tradition, a *nigun* has great power. A *nigun* is a wordless tune. Every person has his or her own *nigun*, a soul tune. Along the journey of our lives, it is for each of us to discover and listen to the *nigun* that is our own, and to bring its unique beauty out into the world. In joy, song comes easily. In sorrow, it can stick in our throats. To open our mouths, even if a little bit at first, is to give an opening to the soul to sing. Each one’s *nigun* is a ray of light along the varied paths we tread. As the first steps of a journey, so the first notes are the hardest.

When King Saul suffers with depression, the young David is called to come with his lyre. Saul is told, *he will play with his hand, and you shall be well*. Of the song that is to accompany the *bikkurim*, there is a beautiful comment in the *Ein Ya’akov*, a rich and warm collection of the *aggadah*, the stories and lore of the Talmud: *and so the soul is awakened through nigun and song to rise up and ascend from the material world to the Heavenly dwelling of the Creator*.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great Chassidic master who was himself tormented by depression, in very similar language offers the healing power of song as a way of life: *A nigun and musical instruments have the great power to raise a person up to the Holy One. Therefore it is good for a person to make it a regular practice to revitalize her or himself through a particular nigun, and in this way to gladden the soul and cleave to the Holy One*.

As we bring the offerings of the week that is past into Shabbos, may it be with a song. However quavering the first notes; may our singing raise up both soul and spirit to God.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor