



# Ruach Chaim Living with Spirit Lifting Up our Lives in Trying Times

Mussar Gathering - January 26, 2025

## Text Study

### “Experiencing Life”

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## Invocation



***Neshama – Ruach – Nefesh***



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### Text 1: “Three Essential Experiences”<sup>1</sup>

#### A. Harmony

An “experience / *chavaya*” is an event we feel has added “life” to us.

There are three essential “experiences:” nature, community, and introspective seclusion (*hitbodedut*<sup>2</sup>). In other words: the beauty of nature, the “other” and the “I” ...

In experiencing nature, we are moved / stirred by the harmony permeating it: In every natural scene, whether a mountain view or the ocean view, a wondrous harmony overflows. The light, the shapes / contours, the colors, the majesty. In the depths of the experience lies the feeling that there is an elevated presence, a revelation of Godly wholeness.

The experience of connecting with community also entails a feeling of harmony, because each individual within the community is different from the other, [as the Talmud Berachot 58b says,] “just as their faces are different, so are their opinions / viewpoints (*dei'ot*).” I see in my friend a completely different person than me, **and still** there is bonding and friendship between us. And within a full community – many are completely different from me, nevertheless, there is a harmony which unifies all of us, similar to an orchestra of many instruments, each of the instruments has its own melody and sound, and it is specifically the differences that create the harmonious orchestral effect / impact.

The experience of community [connection] is different than the experience of nature: In nature, we are moved by the harmony that is **opposite / facing** our eyes, **outside** of us. In [experiencing] community [connection], **we ourselves** are a part of the orchestra and harmony. Thus, from within the experience of the “other” – we find ourselves and become aware of our place in the world, and at the same time we recognize the larger community that surrounds all of us, and we see that we are only a small part, one point among the general harmony. Surrounding us are people with differing viewpoints, differing and often conflicting characteristics – and still there is harmony!

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from “*B'tzeil Ha'Chochma – In the Shadow of Wisdom*,” a pamphlet published in 1987 by the Beit Ha'Mussar of Jerusalem established by Rav Wolbe. This piece is an original (and direct) translation of selections from an essay entitled, “*Shlosha Ha'Chavayot Ha'lkariot – The Three Essential Experiences*,” pp. 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, *hitbodedut* means seclusion, and here refers to silent, meditative, self-reflective and introspective thought.



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The most elevated experience is the “I” that is revealed in moments of introspective seclusion. In this experience we become aware of the different and conflicting qualities / forces **within us**. Soul-traits and bodily forces, diverse and contradictory *middot*. Nevertheless, we feel (experience) that all these qualities create a harmony; all can “serve one goal” and can be an inner harmony within us.

These are the three foundational [“life”] experiences, all three are experiences of harmony; **outside** of the self, one that we are a **part** of, and **within us**. And in each such experience – a feeling of elevated presence, whether the splendor of nature, the divine presence (*Shechina*) of community, or the elevated experience of introspective seclusion.

### Reflection Questions

1. How do you understand or perceive the connection between harmony and having a “life” experience?
2. How do you experience harmony in your life? Nature? Community? *Hitbodedut*? Other?

### B. Experiencing the “I”

“One who studies Mussar is called ‘alive, alive’ to feel what is lacking in one’s soul and to desire with all one’s strength to repair it (*Ohr Yisrael*, letter 10).” Mussar study is an experience of introspective seclusion (*hitbodedut*) with ourselves, and in the experience we are called “alive-alive,” the life experience of feeling the self, seeing where we are deficient and an awareness of our elevated qualities (strengths), because one without the other is impossible (i.e., one can only grow and rectify what is lacking when one also is aware of one’s strengths and elevated qualities).

### Reflection Questions

1. In what way does this description of Mussar study resonate with you?
2. In what way has your Mussar study and practice allowed you to experience your inner harmony?



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### Text 2: The Source of the Elevated Life: Connection to Presence from Above<sup>3</sup>

What is the source of life? “For with You is the source of life, by Your light may we see light” (Tehillim/Psalms 36:8). The source of all life is the Blessed Creator ... all of life, even the worm or the fly, is a spark of Godliness! If a person contemplates this [just] once, they would be in awe of what it means to be alive!

And light is life, as the verse says, “... the light of life” (*Iyov* / Job 33:30) ... life is “light,” revelation (i.e., the ability to see / experience Godly Presence).

When the Torah and the rabbis (*chaza*l) speak of “life” – the intention is always to life which is Presence from Above, not to bodily life.

The Talmud (Berachot 18a-b) says, “The righteous are called alive [even] in death, and the wicked are called dead [even] while alive.” .... The righteous merit Presence from Above, which doesn’t end even when their physical body becomes null. The wicked person loses a connection with this Presence from Above, even as they are still within this world. And it is this Presence from Above that is true life, and the removal of this Presence is death.

Alexander the Great asked the rabbis of the south, “What shall a person do and live?” They answered “deprive (lit., kill) oneself” (Talmud Tamid 31b-32a) and Rashi explains, “humble oneself.”

We take life for granted; we see it as self-understood and lack appreciation that in every moment our lives are a present from God. This is the arrogance that reverberates within us. The moment we humble ourselves before the Blessed Creator, come to appreciate that we have no claim on eternal life, and that all our life is a gift of love from God, we can also come to understand that there are thousands of levels to “life” (above just physical living) that we can merit experiencing ...

The moment we **distance ourselves from arrogance** ... and see the elevated life before us, we come to appreciate that our physical existence is a great gift from God, and that upon each moment of life we must **give thanks** to the Blessed Creator.

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<sup>3</sup> Selection from the essay entitled, “*Madreigot Ba’Chaim* – Levels in Life,” pp. 14-16.



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### **Reflection Questions**

1. In what way does a definition of “life” as being Godly Presence resonate with you?
2. What might be needed to experience a spark of Godliness in all living things? In all of life?

### **Conclusion: *Ruach Chaim***

### **Reflection Questions**

1. How does what we have studied together give you insight into the soul dimension of *Ruach*?
2. Based on these lessons, how do you understand the connection between *Ruach* and *Chaim* - Spirit and Life?
3. How might these lessons inform your life? What might you do differently? How will you experience *Ruach Chaim* – The Spirit of Life?