



Exclusively Compiled for the
NAVIGATING THE 4 ELEMENTS teleconference classes

INTRO TO 4 ELEMENTS

[WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE BEGINNING
THE RAV'S "FOUR ELEMENTS" SERIES]

3 chapters on
'Fundamentals of Middos Improvement'
plus Q&A With The Rav

[Translated from the original Hebrew shiurim
the author of "Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh"]

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1 | *Fundamentals of Middos Improvement: Part 1*¹

1) *Learning How To Think When It Comes To Matters of “Avodah”*

The first point we need to know [before we embark on this series of improving our *middos*] is to realize the fundamental way of thinking that is behind all of these methods we are presenting here.

When we learn Gemara, we are usually used to the way we were learning when we were younger. This is called our “*girsā d’yankusa*” – the way we learned as children. Those who have been learning Gemara since their youth have slowly learned more and more over the years, until they have arrived at a certain way of thinking. Comprehension in our Torah learning comes to you only after many years of learning. It happens slowly and in steps. This is how anyone grows in Torah learning.

When we learn *sugyos* of Gemara, when we learn the words of Abaye and Rava, it’s straightforward; the words are built upon one another. But when it comes to learning about matters of “*avodah*” (“serving G-d”, via spiritual self-improvement) all we know about it is certain general terms (*kelalim*). This is our “*girsā d’yankusa*” when it comes to *avodah*.

Compare this to a person who’s not immersed in Torah, who can certainly know a little Torah, but his knowledge of Torah is very general - because he’s not ‘*there*’ [he’s not “into it”].

When it comes to *avodah*, people usually know only the *kelalim*, the general terms of *avodah*. This doesn’t mean that those *kelalim* general terms are not true, but they are not more than a general understanding of the concepts.

In order to absorb anything when it comes to matters of *avodah*, one has to acquire a way to think. It takes a lot of time to acquire a way of thinking, just as we know from learning Gemara. It takes time to become aware of the *sugya* and its details. So too, when it comes to matters of *avodah*, it takes a long time to acquire the way to think about these matters.

Just as learning Gemara is a process that begins and continues throughout 5th grade, and then in 6th and 7th grade – with each grade being another step in the process – so, too, when it comes to learning about matters of *avodah*, it takes time to learn how to think of these matters. Even if a person didn’t remember the Gemara he learned in 5th grade, he retains the way to think and is still in touch with it. When it comes to *avodah* as well, we need to train our souls to acquire a certain way of thinking about these matters. It is slowly acquired.

¹ <http://www.bilvavi.net/english/fixing-your-middos-001-fundamentals-middos-improvement-part-1>

1a) Focus On Thinking About These Things, Not On “Doing” These Things.

Therefore, the purpose of these *shiurim* is not so that you will attempt to “work” on all of these matters and try to carry them out practically as soon as you hear about them.

1b) Get Used To Listening To Hundreds of These Shiurim.

In addition, even the parts you don’t understand or the parts that are not of interest to you, are still necessary for you to hear about, because as we said, the point is not for you to try to first *practice* them; the point of all these *shiurim* is so that you will *learn how to think*. In hearing these *shiurim*, you are slowly hearing about a way to think, when it comes to concepts of inner *avodah*.

After you start learning how to think from these *shiurim*, you will need to get used to listening to **several hundreds of *shiurim***, just so that you can get used to learning how to think when it comes to these subjects.

We all know that in order to understand Gemara, it takes hundreds of *shiurim* of listening to get you used to learning how to think. When you get used to hearing hundreds of *shiurim*, you slowly acquire the ability of how to think when you learn Gemara.

This is the first step you need, and it is a purpose unto itself.

After a person feels that the ability to think has become opened in himself, he can then proceed to the next stages we will describe. But when you are first hearing these *shiurim* – whether it is about the *middah* of sadness, laziness, desires, or idle speech – it doesn’t matter which topic it is – the initial reaction will be about “what to do”, but this is not the goal in the beginning stage. This is because you don’t relate to it if you aren’t ‘there’. The beginning stage is to *learn how to think* about these matters.

1c) It Takes Time.

It takes a lot of time in order to develop the power to think in an inner way. How much time it takes depends on each personal soul; each person has a different situation. But the point is to get used to listening so that you can slowly acquire the ability to think about *sugyos* (complex discussions) of *avodah* (inner work).

After listening to about 20 *shiurim* or so, you can ask yourself if you're beginning to feel a change in how you think. This is not about memorizing the details of these *shiurim* - it is about the ability of opening your mind.

Why We Must Learn 'How To Think'

To illustrate, let's say a child hears a *sevara* (logic) of *lomdus* (abstract thought about the Gemara, which requires in-depth analysis), in which two possible options of thinking are presented. He asks, "What is the difference between the two options?!" When he gets older he begins to see, that there *is* a difference.

Thus, in the beginning stage, as we are getting used to listening to these *shiurim*, and we are acquiring the way to think about these matters, the point is not to fully *understand*. The point is to get used to *learning how to think*, which, in turn, will refine your understanding along the way.

There are very subtle points presented in these *shiurim*, which will seem at first to be of no practical relevance to you when you hear them. But the point is not to see how it is of practical relevance right now in your life, because as we said, the very first point of listening to these *shiurim* is to learn how to think when it comes to these topics.

At a later point, you will be able to understand how everything said here is of relevance. You will have acquired a way to think by then, which will enable you to become interested and to explore all of the matters in-depth, and then you will be able to feel the matters in your soul.

So the first step here is to acquire the way to think. Just as "*lomdus*"² in Gemara is acquired through learning the *sefarim* of Reb Shimon Shkop and Reb Chaim Brisker, so does learning about *avodah* require a person to develop a way of thinking.

In these *shiurim*, we are not implying that this is the only way of thinking when it comes to *avodah*. There are many methods in *avodah*, as is the way of Torah, which are all true. **There are many true ways, and each person needs to choose the way that is for him, with Hashem's help.**

² abstract logic of Gemara

In Summary

So the first step is to get used to hearing these matters, in order to learn how to think. This helps you absorb the general method of *avodah* here.

(Even if you work to implement these *shiurim* week by week and there is no planned *seder* (order) to your *avodah*, this will still be of gain to you, and certainly if you give *seder* to these matters.)

2) Training Ourselves To Become Clear.

The second point we need to understand about these *shiurim* is that at first, the things we hear about in these *shiurim* will not be perfectly understandable and clear to us.

When one first begins to learn a *sugya* of Gemara, he doesn't know about it, and he needs to become clear about what he knows and what he doesn't know. When it comes to discussing *avodah* as well, these matters are not clear to us, because we are only aware of general terms that we have heard about. That is the first problem. But we have another disadvantage: we are missing familiarity of what it means to live in a "clear world."

This stems from the fact that because we are used to general terms of *avodah*, we think we know these matters. We think we know what *chessed* is, what *zerizus* (zeal) is, etc. A child says that *zerizus* is to do things quickly, and an adult often has the same understanding as the child. The knowledge of it is in very 'general' terms. We open a *Mesillas Yesharim* and we learn about *zerizus*, and it seems that we know what it is, and that we are just not acting enough upon that knowledge.

But the truth is that we don't even know what it is unless we have learned about it in-depth. We are not clear about it. It seems to us that we are clear about it, but we are not.

Sometimes we see a noted speaker who comes to deliver a *shiur*. If he is giving a *shiur* on the Gemara, only adults can understand, not children. But when a speaker comes to give a *shiur* to children and he talks about self-improvement and *middos*, we can see adults listening in too - and their understanding of the *shiur* is often on the same level of understanding as the children. This is because when it comes to matters of *avodah*, an adult's understanding is often not that different than a child's understanding. This all results from not living in a "clear world."³

Therefore, the second purpose of listening to these *shiurim* is to get used to living in a "clear world". When you learn Gemara, you need to give *seder* (order) and *birur* (clarity) to the many

³ Pesachim 50a: "You see a clear world." (The Rav often quotes this concept of *behirus* (clarity), also called "olam barur" (clear world), as a fundamental in our *avodah*: that we must learn how to gain clarity in matters. See also "Getting To Know Your Inner World_01_The Roots of Our Inner World and "Getting To Know Your Happiness_011_Happiness For The Entire Year).

shitos (opinions\views) of what you are learning about; in *cheshbon* (review of the body of the material) and in *sevara* (logic). So too, when learning about matters of *avodah*, you need to get used to giving *seder* and *birur* to these matters, and that is how you learn these matters in-depth.

(At first, you need to give *seder* to your *avodah* just through your using your *seichel*/intellect alone – meaning that you are using your intellectual understanding alone so that you can gain clarity of these matters.)

Summary of the First Two Steps.

So the first part of this is to acquire a way to think, and the second part of this is to give *seder* (orderliness) and *behirus* (clarity) to these matters. The first part is to hear more and more *shiurim*, so that you can simply absorb. The second part is more difficult: it takes real learning.

The first part slowly develops your mind, with the more you hear and absorb. But the second part requires you to actually learn about these matters and try to understand them. This is much deeper than the first part. We need both of these steps together, when we begin these *shiurim*.

Of course, you won't be able to understand everything, just as you can't understand an entire *sugya* in all its details. But you still need to try to get to the roots of these matters as much as you can.

We need both of these steps together, when we begin these *shiurim*. Every person therefore will need to see which step he is personally holding by: "Am I at the first step, or at the second?"

At the first step [listening], one is listening to these *shiurim* so that he can absorb, and the intention is not to try to understand these matters fully; and he surely can't attempt at trying to work on these matters.

A person can get confused as he is in the first step. One who passes the first stage, though, and feels that he has acquired a way to think, can now proceed to learn about these matters in-depth, in all the details, *sugya* after *sugya*, with clarity.

In the second step [in-depth learning and understanding of these matters] one still cannot arrive at the practical conclusions yet on how he should act. It is simply unrealistic to try to work on all of these matters at once, even if you were to understand all of them in all their details.

3. Understanding Matters of “Avodah” Requires A Fusion of “Intellect” and “Heart”.

There is also a third part we will need, which is deeper.

There is a big difference between learning Gemara and learning about *avodah*. The two steps we mentioned thus far are similar both when it comes to learning Gemara as well as when it comes to learning about *avodah*. But the third part which we will need is unique to *avodah*.

When learning Gemara, your understanding is based on *seichel* (intellect). It can be either human logic, or it can be the higher logic that comes from the *neshamah* for those who merit it⁴, but either way, it is the mode of the *seichel* intellect. But learning about *avodah* requires a fusion [of both “intellect” and “heart”].

If someone just learns the *kelalim* (general rules) of *avodah* and he does not learn its *peratim* (details), he might be able to understand them in his heart as well as in his intellect, but he will only know the *kelalim*. But the inner kind of *avodah* is for one to know the *kelalim* and *peratim* of *avodah*, and it combines intellect with heart. It is not intellect alone, and it not emotions alone. It is a fusion of intellect and heart.

Most people do not know what this is. People usually think that being ‘strong in intellect’ means to be strong in learning Gemara, and that being ‘strong in heart’ means to be strong about *davening*...

I won’t get into whether this mentality is correct or not, but it is true that there are people who only excel at learning and not with *davening*, and vice versa. Most people identify learning and prayer as being two different times – “the time for Torah is one thing, and the time to pray is another thing”; the time to pray is usually seen as the time of the day in which pours out his heart’s emotions to Hashem). So the intellect and the feelings in the heart are usually seen by a person as separate functions of the psyche, and as a result of thinking this way, a person does not know how to fuse intellect and feeling together.

Inner *avodah*, though, requires one to fuse the modes of intellect and heart together. It is to understand things with a palpable awareness. This is a deep concept: it is to have awareness towards a concept, which can be palpably felt.

Herein lays the reason why it is difficult for one to enter the depth of *avodah*. Most people recognize a concept either on an intellectual level or on an emotional level, whereas palpable awareness to a concept is rare.

The concepts we are discussing here are subtle. If someone has an intellect capable of plumbing to the deepest subtleties, he can keep listening to one subtle point after another. But intellectual comprehension alone doesn’t mean that a person is experiencing what he knows. When one

⁴ See *Tefillah #052 – Asking For Understanding*.

makes sure to approach *avodah* with a feeling of awareness towards what he is learning, the person can feel the subtleties, the intellect sharpens the feelings, the feelings in turn sharpen the intellect, and the cycle repeats. This is the kind of ability we need in order to learn about improving in *avodah*.

When it comes to learning a *sugya* of Gemara, all we need is intellect to refine our subtle understandings we come across. But when it comes to *sugyos* of *avodah*, we need a fusion of intellectual sharpness as well emotional sharpness, which feed on each other.

3a) 'Avodah' Requires 'Adinus' (Refining Our Understanding) and 'Dakus' (Noticing Subtlety)

In Gemara, one has to work on comprehending it according to his level of intellect. In *avodah*, one needs “*adinus*” (refinement of understanding) in order to comprehend the ‘*dakus*’ (subtleties) of these matters.⁵

The *baalei avodah* (those *Gedolim* who taught about *avodah*) essentially used these abilities of ‘*adinus*’ and ‘*dakus*’ in order to approach matters of *avodah*. There is *adinus* within *adinus* (refinement within refinement) and *dakus* within *dakus* (subtlety within subtlety).

It’s possible that a person reading the words of the *baalei avodah* doesn’t see the *adinus* and *dakus* in their words, but that’s only a superficial understanding. So we need to approach these matters with thought, but a more subtle kind of thought than how we learn Gemara: being aware of a concept intellectually, as well as being able to feel the concept. This ability will show you the *dakus* of every *sugya* in *avodah*.

Thus, it is difficult the first time we learn *sugyos* of *avodah*. Most people remain with the first step, learning how think of these matters. The second step - thinking into the details of each of these *sugyos* - is far from most people. And surely most people don’t reach the third step, of being aware to these concepts with both intellect and feeling and developing the ability of *adinus*.

Therefore, the first time we hear these lessons, we will be hearing about changes that are very far from the level that we are actually currently “holding” at.

However, just as we learn Gemara as much as we can try to understand, so too when it comes to *avodah*, we must try as hard as we can. Obviously, if a person never decides to enter it, it never starts, because he will just remain where he is. But if he enters it and progresses stage after stage, he begins to learn about these matters and think about them although he’s not ‘there’ yet. This is

⁵ Editor’s note: these concepts were first mentioned in *Fixing Your Wind_003 (Living In Denial)*

because, ‘*Sof maaseh b’machshavah techilah*’, “The end of actions is first with thought” - as we explained earlier.

This approach helps a person penetrate into *avodah* and experience the “clear world”. He becomes clear in a way of thinking, in the rules and details of each *sugya* of *avodah*, and he becomes consciously aware of the ideas he is learning about. To a certain extent, this clarity will become sharpened more and more.

Therefore, one must be aware of the following facts throughout this series. There are two parts when it comes to learning about matters of *avodah*: the knowledge about the rules (*kelalim*) and the knowledge about the details (*peratim*).

If one is only interested in knowing the general rules of *avodah*, then obviously, he doesn’t get to the details. The inner perspective is to understand is that all of the details of *avodah* are contained within the rules of *avodah*. Therefore, one has to amass knowledge of the general rules and all of the details - all of them. The secret of inner *avodah* is to arrive at more and more *adinus*/refinement.

3b) Finding Your Weakest Trait.

Going further, each of our souls contains the four elements (earth, water, wind and fire), and each of us has a particular *middah* (trait) that dominates, which is causing all of one’s issues.

First one has to learn about the elements, and then identify which *middos* come from which elements.

We all have four elements, which are used for good and for bad. We have all good and bad *middos*⁶ in ourselves. Reb Yeruchem Levovitz said that we are all like a full zoo, full of many wild animals. But we each have one particular bad *middah* element which is the main source of the problems.

If one doesn’t work on getting to the *dakus* (subtlety) of these matters, he won’t know his worst *middah*, and then he won’t know what to work on. But even if one does get to know his worst *middah*, there is still an issue. Every *middah* itself consists of many different factors, so the person will only be working on one aspect when he should be working on a different point of the aspect. Not only won’t he fix it, but he will damage himself, because he is mixing up different *sugyos*.

⁶ Editor’s Note: Elsewhere, the Rav has explained that the term “bad middos” is actually a borrowed terminology. This is because there is no such as a bad *middah*, in essence. Rather, a “bad *middah*” is a figurative term for “misused” *middah*. When a *middah* is not being used in the right place, it is called a bad *middah*, but it is not bad in essence. In essence, it is a good *middah*, it is just being used wrongly. For example, *gaavah* (conceit) is not a bad *middah* in essence. It is used for holiness when a person has a healthy sense of Jewish pride about himself. But when *gaavah* is misused, a person misuses this trait and becomes haughty and concerned about his self-image, etc.

Therefore, the depth of *avodah* is not possible unless a person is aware of the different parts of the *middah*. One must know which element the *middah* is rooted in, which bad *middah* it is, and which part of the bad *middah* needs to be fixed.

It's easy for a person to label his worst *middah* with terms like "I'm lazy", "I get angry", "I'm a glutton", "I chat too much", "I am haughty", etc. but these are all general terms which do not explore the root of the bad *middah* at hand. They are all true descriptions, but they are each complex, consisting of several factors.

One has to be aware of each part of the bad *middah*. It's possible that a person is working hard for many years at trying to uproot a bad *middah*, but he is working on the wrong aspect of that *middah*! After one becomes clear of the particular aspect of the *middah* that one needs to rectify, can one go about the stage of actually rectifying the trait.

3c) Balancing Your Elements

Another fact we should bear in mind is that the *middos* we need to fix are not just 'bad *middos*'. We are made of the four elements, and each of the four elements needs to be balanced with each other. Each soul needs a balance of the elements.

Besides for our worst *middah*, we also need to have balance in our souls. The elements, when left unbalanced, are a separate cause for detriment in the soul. A bad *middah* can cause an imbalance, which is obvious, but even a good *middah* can cause detriment to the soul, when it is unbalanced with the other elements. Too much of one good *middah* can make a person unbalanced.

If one has the general picture of the information (*tzurasa d'shmaatsa*) and he is missing knowledge of the *kelalim*, how can he hope to work on the bad *middah* he needs to work on, and all its parts...?

Most people are unclear about their souls, and therefore, there is a degree of internal suffering experienced by most people. Some people are very emotional and they suffer more, some suffer from imagination, and some are suffering from their own conceitedness. But we all suffer in our souls, and the only question is, how much. We also have a degree of suffering from external factors, such as our health, livelihood, and issues with children. The amount differs with each person. But one who never clarified his four elements will never know what his worst *middah* is, and he will be unbalanced as well in his soul.

Here we come to the core reason of why people suffer in their souls. There is no other way for us to improve (unless one learns Torah with *mesirus nefesh* and he learns Torah *lishmah*,

which gives a person *siyata d'shmaya* to find the truth without having to understand himself), unless we work to understand the elements of the soul. Without being clear about the elements of the soul, a person doesn't know how to trace which *middah* stems from which element, and he won't be able to fix his worst *middah*. He won't fix the worst *middah* in all its parts, and he won't know how to balance his soul's elements.

Improving Our Middos: Our Lifelong Challenge

People ask: "Why does this require so much difficult inner work? It is time-consuming, and it is draining to work on acquiring so much knowledge about the soul." It's certainly true. It takes a lot of time and energy and hard work.

But if a person really wants to fix his worst *middah* – as the Vilna Gaon says, that the main reason why we are here on this world is to fix our [personal] worst *middah* – then he understands that one needs to balance his soul, and this requires clarity about the soul: to know all the parts of each bad *middah*, in all their details and nuances.

Summary of the Three Steps Needed In Learning This Series About Middos Improvement.

1) The first step one needs is to simply acquire the knowledge about the soul (we are not referring yet to practical change), [as we are presenting in these *shiurim*].

2) The second step is to get used to learn, understand, and recognize the various nuances about the different aspects in our soul's elements. It is possible that a person has knowledge about the soul, but this is not enough. When learning Gemara, one has to know what it says in the Gemara. But when learning about *avodah*, one has to first learn about the matters with his intellect, and then he needs to see how these matters exist in his own personal life. This is the idea of "conscious awareness" that we described before.

Most of the time when a person learns a *mussar sefer*, he is learning knowledge and gathering facts, and at best he makes a personal *cheshbon hanefesh* (self-accounting), but he doesn't get to the depth of the matters he is learning about. Therefore, he is not that affected by what he learns. By contrast, the inner method of *avodah* is to become clear about the matters and then see how they manifest in one's own life, and to be aware of them and feel them.

So, to summarize:

1) To get used to acquiring a way of thinking.

2) The second step is to gain clarity of these matters, *sugya* after *sugya*, each person on his own level. If one tries to grab too much, he won't gain anything. Even if a person understands 5%, 10% or 15% of these matters, it is worthwhile. The point is to get used to learning about matters with clarity.

3) The third step is to see how these matters manifest in oneself. This is not referring to seeing our qualities or shortcomings [which is a later level]. It is to simply become aware of how these matters manifest in your own life. We also are not yet dealing with how to practically work on changing at this point [which is a much later level]. We are talking about the *prerequisite* of change: To recognize the soul and its various parts, to be aware of them, and to consciously feel the knowledge that we are intellectually aware of.

In Conclusion

So, we are not yet dealing with how to practically act upon these matters. We are explaining (1) How to acquire a way of thinking, by listening to these lessons. (2) To become clear about these matters, when we try to better understand these matters and explore them in-depth, and (3) To become both intellectually and emotionally self-aware of these matters in one's own life.

After doing this for several years, can one then become eligible to actually implement these matters in his life [and begin the rectification process of his *middos*].

This doesn't mean that a person cannot act upon these matters at all in the beginning stage. There are certainly resolutions one can make as he hears these *shiurim* which will help him change, and this is wonderful. But it is just that the main focus should be on the three steps we have laid out here.

To emphasize again, it takes several years to work on these steps! If someone is impatient, he must know that it takes a long time to work on these steps (even before a person actually changes his *middos*), and for this reason, we have an entire lifetime of inner work.

Questions and Answers with the Rav

Q1: Is this all true only with regards to learning the Rav's sefarim [and shiurim]?

A: In order for a person to succeed at understanding anything, he needs to amass a general picture of the information of the subject. **First, one needs to learn the information simply without trying to analyze it,** and after going through all of the information on a superficial level,

he should **then try to understand** what he has learned. Chazal say that there must first be “*ligmar*” (learning) and then “*lisbar*” (analysis).

For example, right now in the *Kolel* we are learning *Sefer Nefesh HaChaim, Shaar Daled*. It would be a good idea to go through the entire *sefer* during the upcoming *Bein HaZemanim* and just see all of the words, without trying to understand them yet. The point is to first acquire a “*tzurasa d’shmaatsa*” (body of knowledge), a general understanding of the information. Just read through the *sefer* quickly, from the beginning of the section until the end of the section.

You can do the same with *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*. First go through the entire *sefer* from beginning to end and read through it quickly, so that you can at least get a general picture of it. After that, you can delve more in-depth into the *sefer* and try to understand each thing you have learned about.

Q2: How much should one try to understand material when he’s first reading it?

A: The first time you read about something, your understanding towards it cannot go further than a child’s understanding. “*Tzurasa d’shmaatsa*” doesn’t mean that you are trying to delve into the words in-depth.

Q3: How does it work that each person has one particular negative character trait that stems from a dominance in one of the four elements?

A: Each person has one element that is his strongest, an element that is second-to-strongest, and element that is third-to-strongest, and fourth-to-strongest. It is different with each person’s soul makeup. The worst character trait of a person is found in his strongest and most dominant element. By some people, their best character trait and their worst character trait is found in one element. With others, their best character trait is located in one element and their worst character trait is located in a different element – and that would mean that their souls are more complicated to understand.

Q4: Does one need to be on a high spiritual level in order to determine what his most dominant element is?

A: One cannot identify what his most dominant element is if he hasn’t studied the four elements of the soul. As we have said here, the very first step is to amass the information about the four elements of the soul, and after that one can attempt to identify which element is most dominant in his own soul. There are a few people who have penetrating insight into themselves and they are able to begin at the second stage, but most people are going to have to go through the first stage.

Q5: Why is it that there are almost no sefarim that mention the four elements of the soul?

A: We must know something very fundamental about *mussar sefarim*. There are all different types of *sefarim* written by our previous Gedolim. *Sefer Orchos Tzaddikim* talks about the *middos*,

but there is no order of what to work on first. Each *middah* is explained about in a separate chapter, but there is no order. It is unclear why this *sefer* was written this way, but there is no orderly path of what to work on first when you learn that *sefer*. The Vilna Gaon said that all the *mussar sefarim* are good, but *Mesillas Yesharim* is the best *sefer*, because it is arranged in an orderly fashion. However, we emphasized here in this *shiur* that even *sefer Mesillas Yesharim* can be problematic to learn, because it is a ladder of ten steps based on the Ten Expressions, and we will not be able to navigate through these steps without knowledge about our four elements of the soul.

The truth is that there is no one *sefer* (order) to follow when it comes to *avodah*. We are not implying that one must work on improving himself only in the order of these *shiurim* which explain to us about the four elements of the soul. We are rather coming to explain here what we have to work with, as we are working on ourselves, and it is this area which we seek to clarify and understand. There is no one set *sefer* (order) to follow in *avodah*. That's an entirely different matter to discuss. What we are emphasizing here is that if a person never becomes clear about his own soul, he will never be able to be clear about what the *sefer* of his *avodah* should be.

Q6: *Is it worthy for a person to work on the middos based on the system of the four elements?*

A: Not only is it worthy, it is absolutely necessary.

Q7: *Why isn't this spoken about in our sefarim?*

A: The *sefarim* speak about the *middos*, but most of the *sefarim* do not discuss our *avodah* in a step-by-step manner, so there is no *sefer* that tells us what the *sefer* (order) of what one's personal *avodah* should be. The Torah was not written in chronological order either. There is an argument amongst the Sages if the *Mishnayos* have a specific order to them. In most places, the words of our Rabbis that discuss *avodah* are not arranged in a step-by-step manner. Thus, there is no *sefer* to their words.

For example, open up the Alter of Kelm's *sefer*, *Chochmah U'Mussar*. Do you see any *sefer* to the words there? It is a collection of all hundreds of his talks and there is no way to know which area to work on first. Some of the talks have *sefer* to them and you can see how one talk leads into the next talk, but most of this *sefer* is not arranged in an orderly and step-by-step manner.

Take a look at Rav Dessler's five-volume set of *Michtav M'Eliyahu*. Is there an order of what to work on first in that *sefer*? There is no order there to follow.

Chovos HaLevovos is the one *sefer* that is arranged with some order. He writes in the introduction that he has specifically arranged the chapters according to the specific order that it's in, but this doesn't apply to all of the chapters of the *sefer*; there are some chapters which are meant to be learned consecutively, but a large part of the *sefer* has no specific order to it. Additionally, the ladder of steps presented in *Chovos HaLevovos* is not necessarily the order that everyone must follow in their *avodah*.

What about sefer *Shaarei Teshuvah*? Is there a *sefer* to his words? Are his words arranged in a step-by-step manner? Does one have to work on himself starting with the matters discussed in *Shaar Aleph* (Gate I) and ending with *Shaar Daled* (Gate IV)...?

Even the Talmud Bavli was not arranged in an orderly fashion. The Rambam came and attempted to give order of what to learn to learn first in the Gemara. The *Tur* and the *Shulchan Aruch* followed suit and also gave order to the *halachos* found in the Gemara. But the Gemara itself has no order to it. Both *Agadta* and *Halacha* parts of Gemara are not arranged in any specific order. The Rambam and others who came after him were the only ones to give any kind of order to the Gemara, but when it comes to our *avodah*, there is no *sefer* that has arranged what the order of our *avodah* should be.

Q8: Does that mean that there is no *sefer* which discusses any topic completely and perfectly?

A: There is no *sefer* which we can tell anyone to learn that will provide him with the answers he is looking for. Because nothing is arranged in a completely step-by-step manner, there is no *sefer* that can completely calm you.

Let me ask you a question. Let's say you are trying to learn the *halachos* of *borer* (the laws of mixing on Shabbos). If not for the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*, would you know where to look in the Gemara in order to learn these *halachos*? Would you just look at the *Ein Mishpat*'s commentary? If we have no Rambam and no *Shulchan Aruch* on it, where will you find these *halachos*? If a person wants to learn the *halachos* of *netilas yadayim* or *tefillin*, where in the Gemara is it discussed? The *halachos* are spread out all over the place. Some areas in the Gemara are more concentrated and you can find all of the *halachos* there, but other *halachos* of the Gemara are spread out in ten different places in the Gemara.

Just as we can understand that was no *sefer* given to the Gemara before the Rambam came along and gave *sefer* to it, so can we understand that there is no *sefer* given of our *avodah*. The Rambam only arranged the *halachos* of the Gemara in an orderly fashion. He didn't do this was the *agadta* parts, which explain to us about matters of *avodah*. Therefore, we are left without a *sefer* in our *avodah*.

Q9: How can a person have a *sefer* to his *avodah*?

A: A person needs to become clear about what the four elements of the soul are, within his own soul. Then he should slowly begin to study the words of Chazal that discuss matters of *avodah*, and gradually he will be able to amass all of the words together and see what the order for him should be. Understandably, this is a very difficult task to do, and it is the depth of exile.

Q10: If it is so important to know about the four elements of the soul, why doesn't sefer Mesillas Yesharim talk about it and emphasize it?

A: *Sefer Mesillas Yesharim* is a path that is based upon working our way upwards, from the bottom up. The author of *Mesillas Yesharim* is not writing a *sefer* that describes anyone's personal *avodah* on this world. Rather, the author of *Mesillas Yesharim* has presented a general path of growth that applies to us in a more general sense. The four elements of the soul, though, are a personal and private matter with each person, because the order of the four elements is arranged differently in each person's soul.

Mesillas Yesharim is the *sefer* written for the collective of *Klal Yisrael* and it is our general path of growth, but there is also a private "map" of our growth which is not explained in sefer Mesillas Yesharim. There is no sefer that can guide a person in his personal makeup of his soul. Thus we have no sefer that tells us what the seder in our avodah should be.

Why is this so? It is because each person needs to begin at a different point. So there is no sefer that can tell each person what he should work on first and what he should work on next. We can give order to the four elements themselves, but there is no sefer that will tell us what the seder of our personal avodah should be. It is simply impossible for such a sefer to exist.

Q11: The Mesillas Yesharim states where we all need to begin: "Torah leads to zehirus, etc.?" [so obviously that is where we all need to start from]?

A: Let's ask a simple question. If someone's strongest element is earth, does that mean that learning Torah will lead him to have more *zehirus* (alacrity) and then to have more *zerizus* (zeal), in the same way for a person whose most dominant element is water, or wind, or fire? Certainly the Torah has the power to bring a person to the level of *zehirus* and then *zerizus*, but does that mean each person will be acting the same with regards to this? The fact that Torah brings a person to *zehirus* is not going to have the same exact effect on all people equally, because since the soul makeup is different with each person, the *sefer* of each person's *avodah* is not the same.

Certainly the stage of learning Torah must come first in the *avodah* of all people, but *how* a person succeeds in this stage, is different with each person, depending on which element is most dominant in his soul.

Q12: *The Rav has said that a person might be making a mistake if he's working on a certain negative trait he wants to fix, when he lacks knowledge about the elements of his soul. But didn't the yeshivos always have a Mashgiach who would give mussar Vaadim (discourses on self-improvement), which focused on one middah at a time?*

A: You are asking a very good question. Certainly it would be the best thing if each boy in yeshivah and each man in the *Kolel* had a private *vaad* with his *Mashgiach*. Now, if there are 200 boys in a yeshivah, the *Mashgiach* would be able to give a private discourse to most of the boys of the yeshivah at least twice a year. But a day or two of the year wouldn't be nearly enough for a person to really work on himself. The Chazon Ish that it used to be that there was one *Mashgiach* for 100 boys in the yeshivah, and today there is one *Mashgiach* for 1000 boys in the yeshivah, and that there should really be 100 *Mashgichim* to oversee each boy personally! If there were 100 *Mashgichim* available in each yeshivah for each of the boys, then he would be able to get a *vaad* with a *Mashgiach* once a day for every day of the year. But Hashem made the world in a way that this does not happen.

Q13: *So is the Rav saying that it's pointless to give mussar vaadim?*

A: This is the reality of things. It doesn't result in that much improvement. The question is, however: is giving a private *mussar vaad* to each person better than nothing? Or perhaps it would be better to give one *vaad* to a bunch of people and they will work on themselves together?

This issue was brought before the *Gedolim*. In Kelm they would join a *vaad* together and work on themselves together, and not one-one-one with a teacher. However, a person must consider the following. If he doesn't know his own soul, he will not know how to imply all that he learns about. If he joins a *mussar vaad*, he will just be a like a sheep following the herd.

Surely we need to work on ourselves together and strengthen each other in self-improvement, but a person needs to first know his own soul, of what he can work on and what he can't work on. Ten boys in yeshivah and ten *Kolel* men cannot all work to improve on the same character trait all on an equal level. Each person reacts differently to the subject material being taught. Each person has his own background and personality – you can't expect all the people in a *mussar vaad* to all work on the same trait equally. It's not like a *succah* where a bunch of people can sit underneath one *sukkah* and fulfill the *mitzvah*. Each soul is very different and built very differently.

If you have a suggestion of how *mussar vaadim* can be made more practical to accommodate each person's particular personality, to the contrary, go ahead with it.

Q14: *If a person has a certain negative character trait that he has a hard time fixing, does that mean that this situation is being sent to him from Heaven as his tikkun (rectification) on this world?*

A: Not only is the difficulty with his character being “sent to him from Heaven”, but he was born that way to begin with, to complete his life's mission.

Q15: After a person gets to understand his soul, will he require help in improving himself?

A: Most people cannot deal with their problems by themselves and they need someone else to help them. There are a few rare individuals who are born with sharp self-awareness and they can work on themselves without confiding in another person. There are also some people who were born with a natural power to act *lishmah* (for the sake of Hashem) and they are capable of great *mesirus nefesh* (altruism), which enables them to penetrate deeply into their souls, without the assistance of others. But most people are not capable of acting *lishmah* and with *mesirus nefesh* and they do not have that much self-awareness. Therefore, most people require help from others in order to understand themselves.

Q16: Is there any sefer one can learn which teaches him about how to use his soul's abilities?

A: Part of this study can be attained through the *sefarim* that explain the [four] elements of the soul.⁷ But as for knowing one's personal soul, one will never know it through any sefer that is found in the world. One has to pray to Hashem to reach self-understanding. Either he can pray to Hashem that he merit to understand himself from within himself, as the Gemara says that the "two kidneys of man are his advisors", where one can learn Torah from within himself. Or, one can pray to Hashem that he merit to be guided by someone who will help him understand his soul.

If one prays for this, truthfully and earnestly, and he cries to Hashem from the depths of his heart, Hashem will surely guide him to success. How? That is up to Hashem. But if someone is truly searching for this and he is sincerely trying very hard, Hashem will guide him and he will attain what he desires.

⁷ Refer to *sefer Shaarei Kedushah* of Rav Chaim Vital

2 / *Fundamentals of Middos Improvement: Part 2* ⁸

Summary of Previous Lesson

Previously, we began to discuss the prerequisites we will need [before embarking on this series of fixing our *middos*.] Now we will mention some more points which complete the discussion, so that we can get to practical outcomes from this - which is the purpose. We will briefly review the previous lesson.

There are three steps we need throughout this series of fixing our *middos*.

The first step is to get used to learning how to think, through hearing these lessons. Just as we need to acquire a way of thinking in order to learn Gemara, so do we need to acquire a way of thinking when it comes to the *avodah* of working with our soul.

The second step we need is to acquire the ability of putting together all of the information, becoming aware of all the different aspects of a topic, so that we can become clear in these matters – to live in a “clear world.”⁹ (Although we cannot attain perfect clarity, we can still become clearer and clearer about these matters with the more we seek to clarify.)

The third step is to develop self-awareness towards these concepts, becoming palpably aware in our heart of the information we are learning about with our mind. Unlike learning Gemara, where you are learning about things that do not relate to you personally (whether it’s an abstract kind of *Gemara* or a *Halacha*-focused kind of *Gemara*), when you learn matters of the soul, you need to see how the information about the soul relates to you on a personal level.

These are the three steps we explained previously. We also explained two root reasons behind the *avodah* [of knowing our soul’s *middos*]: We each need to fix our personal worst *middah* (character trait), based on knowledge of the four elements. We also need to balance our soul’s elements, even when they are not producing any bad *middos* in particular.

We explained this briefly, but we didn’t yet get to how we can work on this on a practical level. We hope to explain now how we can practically work on the concepts.

⁸ <http://www.bilvavi.net/english/fixing-your-middos-002-fundamentals-middos-improvement-part-2>

⁹ *Pesachim* 50a

All Inner Work is Based on the System of the Four Elements

The following important point must be explained, and it is being asked about: Why must we work on our *middos* specifically according to the system of the soul's four elements (earth, water, wind and fire)? Let's expand upon this question a bit more.

Anyone who is familiar with the methods of *avodah* that exist knows that there are many different approaches, especially in our generation. There are many different and valid approaches of how we can do inner work with ourselves. Can we say that there is one specific way which everyone must use? The answer is clearly "No." So why is it, then, that these classes are always based on the system of the four elements?¹⁰

The answer is: the system of the four elements is brought in a *sefer* attributed to the authorship of *Avraham Avinu*.¹¹

So if you were wondering if the system of the "four elements of the soul" comes from our generation or if it came before our generation, you should know that it has been around since the times of our *Avos*. It is the system which Chazal based their words upon, as well as the system used by our many wise leaders who came after them.

However, not every *sefer* written in previous generations openly dealt with this system. But the system of the four elements is the backbone behind all of inner wisdom of Judaism. The four elements are rooted in the four letters of Hashem's Name of *havayah*. The name of *havayah* is the root that Hashem used to create everything, and from it came everything else that we know of.

Therefore, all of the other systems [of *avodah*], besides for the system of the four elements, are considered to be 'partial' systems, which are not all-inclusive. The only system which is all-inclusive is that of the four elements. The other systems [of *avodah*] are of course rooted in holiness. And there are also other systems which do not stem from any holiness at all, which many people in our generation today are using.

Thus, the fundamental way of how we work with our soul is based on the system of the four elements, which comes from our *Avos*. Since it is the root system, I try to mainly work with it when I teach about *avodah*.

¹⁰ Editor's Note: For those unfamiliar with the Rav's approach in using the system of the four elements of the soul, refer to the previous works of the Rav: *Getting To Know Your Soul*, the series *Understanding Your Middos* and, more recently, the 'Fixing' series: *Fixing Your Earth*; *Fixing Your Water*, and *Fixing Your Wind* (and, *b'ezras Hashem*, in the forthcoming series, *Fixing Your Fire*).

¹¹ The "Sefer Yetzirah"

Giving Order

Therefore, we must know the following.

When you open a *sefer*, you should know that not every *sefer* is openly working with the system of the four elements. Rather, there are certain details, based upon the system of the four elements of the soul which each *sefer* tells you; but the system is not being presented in any specific order. Therefore, there is no *sefer* which tells you how to go from A to B, from B to C, etc. It is up to each person, as part of his personal *avodah*, to give order to all of the details - using the system of the four elements.

The difficulty of this, which you have raised to me, is that there is no *sefer* which gives you an exact order of what to work on. Our world is called “*olam*”, as our Sages state, from the world “*he’elam*”, concealment; everything is concealed from us. We cannot tell a person to learn a certain page of one *sefer* and a certain paragraph of another *sefer* until a complete picture forms. The inner world, as our Sages describe it, is scattered throughout the pages of many *sefarim hakedoshim* that describe it: “a little here and a little there.” It is like fruits scattered all over the place.

The first difficulty involved in it is that one would have to know the order to all of the information. And even if a person would have that order, to know how to connect all of the details is daunting. Therefore, there is no *sefer* which we can recommend that each person should learn so that he can see an exact order of what he needs to do.

The approach that I use is based on the system of the four elements, which is described in the beginning of Rav Chaim Vital’s *sefer, Shaarei Kedushah*. The words there briefly describe an orderly system based on the four elements, but it is only a small amount of content in comparison to the many words of our Sages that describe *avodah*. Rav Chaim Vital briefly describes what we need to do based on the roots of the four elements, but there is much order that is needed after that.

The matters are spread out all over the words of our Sages, like scattered fruit. If a person has the structure to work with, he can use it as a compass to guide him that will enable him to connect all the details he comes across. He knows how to connect all the details to the root.

But when a person is missing the structure, he sees a myriad amount of details, and he sees the details, without knowing how to connect them. He gets the false impression that our *avodah* is to work on a bunch of random details, with no structure to it. As we are explaining, though, all matters of our *avodah* are based on the system of the four elements.

(Of course, this doesn’t mean that all of the *Gedolim* in the past used the system of the four elements.)

Learning Mesillas Yescharim - In Conjunction With Using The Soul's Elements

Now we come to the following question, which you are also asking about.

Let's take *sefer Mesillas Yescharim*, for example. This is a *sefer* which describes ten levels in a ladder of growth (based on the Ten Expressions which Hashem used to create the world with). It is a *sefer* which shows you which step to start from and how to progress to the next stage. However, being that all *avodah* is based on the system of the four elements, as we explained - you need to bear in mind, as you learn *Mesillas Yescharim*, that the system of the four elements must be incorporated as you move along the ten stages.

Mesillas Yescharim starts with the level of [Torah], *zehirus* (watchfulness), then *zerizus* (alacrity), then *nekiyus* (cleanliness), then *taharah* (purity), then *perishus* (abstinence), then *chassidus* (piety), then *anavah* (humility), then *yiras cheit* (fear of sin), then *kedushah* (holiness), *ruach hakodesh*, and *techiyas hameisim*. There is also practical advice contained in the *sefer*, and there is also much to be gained from reviewing the chapters again and again. But it is describing our *avodah* in very general terms.

If someone is trying to serve Hashem based on *sefer Mesillas Yescharim* alone, he will not be successful. We can see this apparent from the fact that there are many people who try to become a living *Mesillas Yescharim*, and it doesn't work. (And there are others didn't succeed due to various other reasons).

It is most difficult to practically implement the words of *Mesillas Yescharim* in your life. This is because *Mesillas Yescharim* is telling you the general facts, but the details of what he is discussing aren't being told to you.

It's like if you were to learn *Shulchan Aruch* without the commentaries (such as *Bach*, *Taz*, etc.); can anyone know the *halacha* properly if he just learns *Shulchan Aruch* alone, and he doesn't explore the commentaries in-depth? Even if a person looks in the commentary of the *Beis Yosef*, which contains all the main information you need to see, it is not nearly enough. The *Beis Yosef* is telling you general information. The commentaries need to be learned and discussed, so that you can absorb it and notice the details that are not seen at first glance.

The same is true with learning *Mesillas Yescharim*. The author of *Mesillas Yescharim* was holy and saintly, and he doesn't need our approval; it goes without saying that every single word he says is holy. But just because that is true, does that mean that the words of *Mesillas Yescharim* alone tell us all the rules and details of *avodah*? Clearly, the answer is "No." So if a person is trying to serve Hashem using the path of *sefer Mesillas Yescharim* alone, it will be too difficult.

But if a person understands his four elements of the soul and he is in touch with them, and he knows how to use his strongest element and how to avoid his most negative element, he has a structure to work with as he's learning *Mesillas Yescharim*. When he learns about *zehirus*

(watchfulness), he works on it according to the nature of his elements, and the same goes for when he learns about *zerizus*, etc. The point is that he works on acquiring levels through a clear awareness of his four elements.

Example: Trying To Acquire “Zehirus”

Let’s explore how we use the system of the four elements when we are learning about how to acquire *zehirus*, for example.

Zehirus is that a person is careful in keeping the Torah, so he avoids certain acts that will prevent him from *zehirus*. If a person’s most dominant element is earth, he is drawn towards sadness. If he begins to become consciously aware of trying to acquire *zehirus*, his sadness will become activated as he tries to be more careful. Without getting into the depth of *zehirus* right now, this is what will happen.

Let’s use an example of an opposite kind of person to see how this is true. If a person is very strong in his element of fire, he is more energetic and enthusiastic. When he begins to work on acquiring *zehirus*, every time he is more careful, it is not *zehirus* which is being awakened; it is rather his hotheadedness which is being awakened. The difference is that *zehirus* comes from the light of the *neshamah*,¹² whereas being energetic comes from the element of fire in the soul, located in the *nefesh habehaimis* (animalistic layer) area of the soul.

So although the *sefer Mesillas Yeshtarim* is based on ten steps of a ladder of growth, the ladder of growth is really built on the four elements of the soul. If one has properly built his elements, he has the firm basis of his ladder, and he can progress, step-after-step. But if one hasn’t properly built his elements, the ladder is based on shaky ground, and then he cannot really progress on the ladder of growth described in *sefer Mesillas Yeshtarim*.

The Basis: Working With Our Elements

Without a clear picture of the four elements of the soul, a person is missing the inner wisdom which Hashem used to create the world with, which means that he will be missing the main wisdom. The system of the four elements is the wisdom from Hashem, which was given to our prophets. All of the other systems of *avodah* that are brought in our *sefarim hakedoshim*, while certainly being valid [for they are brought in our *sefarim* of our *Gedolim* of the past], are not based on the system of the four elements - therefore, those systems are not working with the roots.

¹² Refer to the Rav’s two-volume commentary on *Mesillas Yeshtarim*.

To illustrate what we mean, there is one system of *avodah* brought which is based on 5 parts of man; another system says that man is comprised of 9 parts; and another system says we are comprised of 11 parts. There are many approaches that describe our *avodah* which differ from each other, and we cannot say they are incorrect, but what we *can* say is that none of those systems are a root system.

To further illustrate, there are many languages in the world, and our Sages even validated these languages (as we learn in *Tractate Nedarim*). But the root of all languages is *Lashon HaKodesh* (the holy tongue). The root language, *Lashon HaKodesh*, doesn't invalidate the other languages; but although this is true, the other languages are still not a 'root' language. The only root language is *Lashon HaKodesh*.

Along the same lines, we can understand that since the system of the four elements is the root wisdom Hashem used to create man, it is the main structure of man. Thus, the system of the four elements forms the backbone of a person's *avodah*.

Balance In Our Avodah

In previous generations, there were *Gedolim* who based their *avodah* mainly on *emunah* (faith in G-d). Others mainly based their *avodah* on *temimus* (earnestness). However, any sensible person understands that we cannot serve Hashem today entirely through our *emunah*, or through *temimus* alone, or through *tefillah* alone, etc. There are people today who attempt this, and we will not mention their names, but anybody who is sensible understands that those people are misguided.

This is because it is impossible to truly serve Hashem when we work with just one point of our soul. If someone were to only use his *emunah* and he doesn't work with the rest of his soul's abilities, his *emunah* will become extreme, and he cannot succeed.

Of course, we can say that each *beis midrash* and each private soul in *Klal Yisrael* can have a particular fundamental point that it excels in. But that doesn't require everyone else to mainly work with one quality.

For example, you can have a place in which *tefillah* is their strongest area; let's say it's a shul in which 200 people *daven* beautifully. Can we say that each person is *davening* in the same exact manner? It is not possible, because each soul is built differently. Even if they are all striving to *daven* as best as they can, they cannot all *daven* on the same exact level.

There are people today who feel that the *avodah* of the final generation is *tefillah*, so *tefillah* must be everything. (There is some basis for this in the words of our Sages, but it is not definite, because not all of our Sages had this view.) Even if this is the case, does that mean that everyone *davens* in the same exact way?

Other views maintain that our main *avodah* now is learning Torah. Does that mean that everyone must learn Torah in the same exact manner and with the same methods of thinking? Others are of the opinion that our main *avodah* now is *chessed*. Does that mean we all need to do *chessed* in any one way? There are other examples as well that we can use, but the point is, there is no way to work on something.

This is because each person's soul is comprised of the four elements, and in each person the makeup is different, so it is not possible for everyone to act in the same exact manner.

The system of the four elements is therefore not just another concept you hear about when it comes to *avodah*. It is the fundamental system of all wisdom. It is the backbone of all wisdom that Hashem used to create the world with, and it was used to form the makeup of man. Thus, it is the system which each person's *avodah* is based on; all the words which our Sages said are really meant to become aligned with the system of the four elements and to work together with it.

This answers another question you may be asking: Why are we choosing this particular path of working with the four elements, when there are so many other ways to work on ourselves? Why must all our inner work be based on working with the four elements of the soul? According to what we explained here, this question now falls away.

Again, the system of the four elements is not my own invention. It is the system which is first attributed to Avraham Avinu, and from there everything is based.

Maintaining A Positive Self-Image As We Work On Self-Improvement

An additional point to know is as follows.

Our *avodah* requires us to work with our soul, which is the makeup of man. We must know the general makeup of the soul. In our soul, there are several layers. There is the *nefesh habehaimis* (animal soul), which is the external layer of our soul; and there are the spiritual areas of our soul.

When you begin to learn about what is contained in your *nefesh habehaimis*, which describes the negative and evil aspects contained in man, you must be aware that it is not all there is to your existence. If someone identifies 'himself' as being a '*nefesh habehaimis*,' he will develop a terrible and negative self-image of himself! Upon discovering the depth of his traits of conceit, anger, idle speech, desires, sadness, laziness, etc., if he thinks that is who "I" am, he will become terribly broken upon all these discoveries.

Certainly we need to learn about our weaknesses so that we can see how to fix them, and we can even derive a sense of vitality from this. But we need to have a deeper approach towards self-improvement: that we are comprised of both a *neshamah*, (a Divine soul), as well as a lower layer of the soul, the *nefesh habehaimis*.

When we work to improve our *nefesh habehaimis*, we must realize that our “I” is not entirely evil, even before it is improved. We have a *neshamah* in us that is pure, it is “a portion of G-d from above”, and there are garments that cover our *neshamah* which need to be rectified, all the way down to the lowest elements of our “I.” We need to become aware of those ‘garments’ that are in need of being fixed, and we must become clearly aware of them - but at the same time, we must realize that our “I” is not defined by these negative attributes that we discover in our personality.

A person is not defined by his conceit, even if he is terribly conceited; he is not defined by his anger, even if he has a big temper, and he is not defined as a glutton even if he has little self-control over his desires. First of all, we have aspects of our personality which are tolerable, and even our bad *middos* have already become rectified to a certain extent [as we work on our *middos*]. Even more so, there are parts of our self which are entirely pure and spiritual.

To illustrate what we mean, a person is *davening* and standing before Hashem in prayer, and he is aware that he has a problem of being gluttonous. Must he *daven* to Hashem the entire time thinking about how he needs to uproot his evil desires? Is that all he needs to focus on? When a person *davens*, now is not the time to fix the *nefesh habehaimis*. Prayer is the time to talk to Hashem and pour out one’s heart to Him, and as a *result* from this, he can also speak to Hashem about his problem of desires.

One certainly needs to consciously focus on fixing his *middos* and with awareness of the four elements that are present in our *nefesh habehaimis*, but he must not think that this defines his entire “I.” It cannot be the definition of one’s self-image, because it focuses too much on the negative aspects of man. Although self-improvement is a major part of our task, it is not everything.

Without this perspective, a person will come to look at himself as a lowly being, with the more he learns about his *nefesh habehaimis*. He will lower the entire spectrum of his soul to the level of *nefesh habehaimis*, and whenever he discovers a fault in himself (even a small fault, and all the more so if he discovers a big fault in himself), he will lose the basic healthy perspective towards self-awareness.

One must always be cognizant of the fact that his essence is that of a pure *neshamah*. There are parts in oneself which are totally spiritual and pure, and there is a middle area of the soul which is not as perfected, and there are lower parts to the soul, the *nefesh habehaimis*, which are in need of rectification. But the *nefesh habehaimis* area of the soul is just one part of the soul! It is not your entire self.¹³

¹³ See *Fixing Your Earth*, Chapters 1-2.

We are emphasizing this point specifically, because we have spent much time in this series¹⁴ discussing the negative aspects of the soul and how to fix them; it can mislead a person to erroneously think, at least subconsciously, that he is evil. When learning about our *nefesh habehaimis*, one becomes aware of all the negative aspects of his personality and all of the bad *middos* in himself, and he might come to think as a result from this that all of his Torah learning is negatively affected from all his bad *middos*, and other such erroneous beliefs that he might form.

Although it is true that the bad *middos* exist in oneself, it must be viewed as being part of the *nefesh habehaimis*, our lower aspect, and it must not be considered to be the general whole of the person. There are higher parts to our existence than our *nefesh habehaimis*! Although we have been focusing the discussion on our *nefesh habehaimis*, this should not imply to you that you are entirely a *nefesh habehaimis*, even though we are specifically focusing here on the area of the *nefesh habehaimis*. You must realize that your *nefesh habehaimis* is only a part of who you are; it is not all there is to your “I.”

This enables you to work on improving yourself with a perspective that is both truthful and healthy at the same time.

Learning About The Soul: More Than ‘Patience’ Required

Now we will discuss the more practical points of this discussion.

In the previous class, we said that just as we are used to learning Gemara in the way we are used to from our youth, so do we tend to approach learning about our soul with the kind of thinking we are used to from our youth. However, there is a big difference between learning Gemara and learning about the soul.

When learning Gemara, if you don’t get to the next page of Gemara, you need to be patient. When you learn about the soul, and you become aware of certain concepts, you might also think that it is upon you to remain patient before you get to learning about the next step. But it isn’t quite like that.

When learning about your soul, you might wonder how you can make the concepts practical, and then you become impatient. But it is not merely upon you to become patient. According to what we have been explaining in the previous chapter, the entire path we are taking here in working on our *middos* is a path that deliberately requires a gradual process. It is simply

¹⁴ This is referring to the Rav’s newest series on self-improvement which began in 5773 with *Getting To Know Your Inner World* (‘Da Es Yichudecha’), *Fixing Your Earth* (5774) *Getting To Know Your Imagination* (‘Da Es Dimyoncha’) (5774-5775), *Fixing Your Water* (5775-5776) and *Fixing Your Wind* (5776) which will continue, b’ezras Hashem, with the series of “*Fixing Your Fire*.”

not possible to work on all of the advice within these pages as soon as we hear about them.

Identifying Soul Concepts, Within Yourself

When you become aware of concepts that have to do with the soul – whether the information is coming to you via learning a *mussar sefer*, or because you heard a *mussar shmues*, or because a thought or feeling came to you, or because you feel a concept from within yourself – in either case, you are coming into contact with various aspects of the soul.

Therefore, you can become aware of a feeling in your soul as soon as you feel it, and your job is to simply recognize it and acknowledge it. You don't have to learn what to do with it right now and how to work with it.

Understandably, if you find yourself sensing 10 new things about your soul, you won't be able to register so much information and identify with it at all, because of the information overload. But let's say you notice something new about yourself once a week, or twice or three times a week; you can take note of it and simply learn how to recognize it in yourself, as follows:

(1) Ask yourself if it is a good *middah* or bad *middah*. (2) When you hear or learn about a certain good *middah* or a certain bad *middah*, try to discern how it is personally found in yourself.

Basic Awareness

This is not referring to yet to the ability of acquiring conscious and palpable awareness of the *middah*, [which is a deeper ability that we discussed in the previous class]. It is something else entirely that needs to come way before that: to simply ask yourself how the *middah* is manifest in your life.

For example, if you hear about *zerizus* (alacrity), try to recognize how there is *zerizus* in yourself. If you hear about *simcha* (happiness), ask yourself where *simcha* is found in your life. This slowly gets you used to acquiring information and how to recognize it within yourself.

We are not talking about simply 'amassing knowledge' of these matters when you have no connection to it. A person might learn about *simcha* or about the topic of fixing desires, but he is simply hearing it for the sake of inspiration, and he isn't even attempting to recognize how the matters are manifest in his own personal life. So we are not speaking about simply acquiring

information for the sake of amassing knowledge. Nor is the intention to acquire the art of conscious awareness.

It is a stage that must come way before that: to simply identify in yourself the concepts that you are learning about, whether you are learning about a good *middah* or a bad *middah*. This is a general kind of recognition you need to acquire.

[To be more specific], as an example, if you hear about *simcha* (happiness), ask yourself if you can remember three times this past year in when you felt *simcha*. If you hear about *zerizus* (alacrity), try to recall if you recently acted with *zerizus* in anything. There are many more examples as we can give. The point is to learn how to identify aspects of the soul you hear about, in your own life.

Discovering New Things About Yourself

By getting used to this, week after week, month after month, you slowly will gain an overhaul of perspective towards yourself and towards life. Instead of merely becoming inspired for a few minutes before *tekias shofar* (when you were far from any *avodah*) or from the superficial inspiration you were used to from trying to learn *mussar* passionately by *mussar seder*, you will suddenly begin to recognize yourself.

As time goes on and you continue like this, you will see a new person in yourself. It will feel like you are experiencing your soul, as opposed to just amassing knowledge about what the soul is.

When you are happy, for example, you will be able to discern what exactly is making you happy. When you are sad, you will be able to discern what is making you sad. You will begin to experience your emotions; it will be a change that happens from within. It is hard to explain this in words; it is a path of deep, inner change that a person experiences within himself.

A person then slowly begins to see the world differently, to see his life differently, and to see himself differently; he gains a new lens on reality. After you become clearer about your soul comes the next step which we will soon describe. Some are already there as we are giving this lesson, and some haven't even begun the first stage.

In Summary

To summarize briefly, the first step is for one to identify the concepts within himself, as much as he can, until he sees that there are inner changes taking place in himself - to the point that this ability comes to him naturally.

Of course, reaching this stage does not mean that one has reached the complete depth of knowing his soul. If one thinks that he knows the entire depth of his soul, he has fooled himself, and it is a sign that he doesn't recognize his soul at all. The sensible approach is for one to keep revealing more depth about his soul, becoming aware of the many faculties of the soul, subtlety upon subtlety.

The point is to that a person acquires a whole new perspective towards himself. He begins to see things in himself he never knew about until now. He begins to see beyond the superficial layer of things. As opposed to viewing himself from a mirror, he begins to *see himself* from *within himself*.

This ability is developed slowly, as a person gets used to the process of inner change we are describing.

Making A List of Qualities and Shortcomings

After this stage, a person must then give order to what's going on inside himself - by becoming aware of all his qualities and shortcomings.

This cannot be done in merely 2-3 hours of reflection; that would be like trying to take a shortcut. It takes at least 1-2 months of thinking about one's personal qualities and shortcomings, until a person can become aware of all of them. Each time one discovers a quality or a shortcoming, one should write it down.

Sometimes it is hard to determine if a certain part of his nature is a good quality or if it's a negative quality, but generally speaking, one needs to give order to his soul, by writing them down. On one side of a paper write down all your qualities, and on the other side of the paper write down all the shortcomings.

After doing this for about 1-2 months (and you don't have to do be involved with this for an hour each day – just go slowly with this, and go about it calmly), you now have a list of all the qualities and shortcomings you recognize in yourself up until this point.

Now you can give even more order: Ask yourself which of these abilities are more dominant in yourself, and which are less dominant.

It is hard to figure out which is your strongest ability, your second-to-strongest ability, your third-to-strongest ability, etc. It requires deep thinking to be accurate about it. But with the more you attempt to figure it out, you become clearer about yourself.

Learning About The Four Elements of the Soul

After this, a person has gotten past what we can call the ‘first’ stage, which was all the beginning to the ‘*avodah*’ stage. Now a person can progress to the ‘second’ stage, to a certain extent: One must learn about the four elements of the soul.¹⁵

One must understand how each element can contain the other three elements. Although there are four root elements – earth, water, wind and fire – those are the general roots. There are more details to those roots.

After one knows which *middos* can stem from each of the four elements, and he is aware of his own good and bad *middos*, and how dominant they are in himself, he should know try to trace the *middos* to their elements that they come from. This takes time to figure out. It is a process of inner learning.

Most of our ‘Avodah’ Is Gradual Clarity, Not Practical Change

There is a statement in our Sages, “The question of the wise, is half the answer.” What we explained until now can bring a person to the “question of the wise”, but it is ‘half the answer’ – it is half of our *avodah*, and perhaps even more so. Most of our *avodah* is not practical work. Most of our *avodah* is when we *recognize* our true self (this is called “*hakarah*”).

Hakarah, recognition [our soul], is the essence of our *avodah*. Without *hakarah*, a person is impatient and he wants to immediately get to the practical outcomes of what he’s learning. This comes from a lack of *hakarah*. If one would know what *hakarah* is, he would know that the very process of recognizing oneself is the root of *avodah* itself. *Hakarah* of our self is already halfway towards the finish line of our *avodah* - and in fact, it’s even more than half.

Therefore, as one is working at this process of inner recognition of himself, he becomes clearer about himself, as time goes on. He will discover that many problems that he had before will suddenly disappear on their own.

Anyone who has persevered with this path of inner change can testify that many of their problems went away on their own, even without any actual *avodah*! I don’t mean that there was no *avodah* at all, but since they had been unclear about themselves before they started and they became clearer about themselves as they went along, many of their problems went away on their own, from the clarity they gained.

¹⁵ see *Understanding Your Middos #01 – Elements and Traits*

After reaching that stage, there is still *avodah* to be done, of course. The practical changes still need to be implemented, which haven't been implemented until now, being that the beginning stage of *avodah* was a learning process.

Giving Order To Your Personal Four Elements

When one is tracing each *middah* to each of the four elements, a person comes to the following challenging stage, the most difficult of all: What is the order of the four elements in your personal soul? Which element is your strongest, which is your second-to-strongest, which is your third-to-strongest, and which is the weakest? And, more specifically, which is your strongest middah, your second-to-strongest middah, etc.? This particular point is the aspiration and goal of anyone who wishes to serve the Creator through his soul.

Reb Naftali Trop ז"ל once said that our most difficult issue in serving the Creator is that we don't know which part of ourselves are our greatest quality, our second-to-best quality, and our third-to-best quality. If we would know ourselves like this, it would be clear to us what our *avodah* is, and the problem is, we don't know ourselves. The lack of knowledge about our soul is the core reason why we have difficulty in serving the Creator with our souls.

Failures in one's *avodah* are usually contributed to "My *yetzer hora* overcame me", and this might be true, but it is not the entire reason. It is usually because a person doesn't understand his soul – either he didn't realize that he has misconceptions, or he was overdoing himself; which sets him up for failure.

As we said, the process we are describing takes time and effort. But as time goes on and a person perseveres, a person becomes clearer about himself, and he begins to see clearly and precisely what he needs to do to work on himself. Although complete clarity is never possible, the aspiration of every one who wishes to serve the Creator with his soul must be: to reach more and more clarity about the soul.

In Summary

In summary, we must first give order to our elements, then to our *middos*, then to our personal qualities and shortcomings, and then we can become clear in the order of our own personal soul, by seeing which aspects of our soul are balanced and which are unbalanced. (As we mentioned earlier,

imbalances in the soul are caused not only by bad *middos*, but even by good *middos*, when they are extreme.)

A Change of Perspective Towards Hearing ‘Mussar’

To conclude the discussion here, we must be aware that there is a big change of perspective which we need to get used to, as we are learning this series of fixing our *middos*.

People are usually interested in hearing a “*mussar shmuess*” only if there will be a practical tip or resolution at the end that they can work on, to actualize what they heard. But if one understands deeply the words of Chazal, he knows that there is a more inner approach than this.

The inner approach is to first amass knowledge of these matters and think into them, until a person recognizes the matters from within himself. This takes a while. Thinking into these matters is at least half of our *avodah*, and the practical part comes at a later point, after one has already thought and reflected deeply into the concepts.

If someone seeks only practical advice of how he can change and he is not interested in doing any of this long process of thinking and reflecting on the material he is hearing, the path here is not for him, and he must seek something else.

These *shiurim* are not the kind of *shiurim* you hear in which you resolve afterwards that from now on, you will say “*Amen*” with concentration, or some other resolution. Although those are truthful points to work on, this should not be the goal in hearing these *shiurim*, because the purpose here is different. The purpose of these *shiurim* is to help a person slowly gain more and clarity about his *avodah*. Although there is no such thing as perfect clarity, we can become clearer and clearer as we go along, as much as we can.

Thus, when you take the path being presented here - which is the path that our Sages took – you must know that it is not merely about ‘remaining patient’ until you can get to the practical *avodah* part. It requires you to see the gain of just learning this information and in becoming clearer as you go along.

That, itself, is the main and desired part of our *avodah*. It is supposed to be a long and gradual process of inner change; it is not supposed to result in immediate changes in your life. The practical changes will only come after you have persevered for a long time learning and studying the information, because this enables you to become clearer and clearer about the matters, as you spend time on learning these matters.

Compare this to a person who learns a *sugya* of Gemara very quickly, so that he can get to know the *halacha* that results from the Gemara he is learning. He quickly learns the Gemara, *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, *Ran*, *Rosh*, *Rif*, *Tur*, and *Beis Yosef*, until he gets to the *halachah* of the *Poskim*. He learns all of this very quickly [which means that he is learning it superficially]. But if a person really wants to learn the *sugya* well, and he also wants to know the *Halacha* that results from the Gemara, he understands that he will only be able to do so if he learns it slowly and analytically. Of course, he wants to get to the *Halacha* of it also, but he understands that he first needs to notice all the subtleties.

Does this mean that he's being 'patient'? It's more than just patience. It is because he knows that in order to really understand what he's learning, he must take his time in trying to understand it, slowly, patiently. It's not because 'he has no choice' otherwise. Rather, he understands that this is the ideal way to learn Gemara and then the *Halacha*.

So, too, when it comes to learning about *avodah*, which is a long learning process, the purpose is to become clearer as we go along in our learning of these matters, long before we get to the practical changes. It is the very clarity that we gain, as we persevere with this long process of learning, which eventually helps us get to the practical outcomes from all of this.

We have briefly outlined the main points we need to understand before we approach our *avodah* [of *tikkun hamiddos*].

Questions & Answers With The Rav

Q1: In the previous lesson, the Rav explained that a person will need to hear hundreds of lessons [of the Rav on the series of the four elements] before he can know how to put these lessons into practice. However, in this lesson, the Rav seems to imply the opposite, that a person needs to begin immediately with practical change.

A: I must repeat again, that practical action cannot be implemented based upon these lessons, until a person has heard at least hundreds of these lessons. However, it is possible for a person to gain proper self-recognition from these lessons, and that is the path which we have explained here. This is not about practical change in action, so it is not what people are referring to when they say "*l'maaseh*" ("practically speaking").

When a person takes the inner approach described here, he should realize that this is not about looking what to do "*l'maaseh*". Certainly, that should be in the plan, but if a person comes and tells me that in another 10 years he will arrive at practical change in his actions, for the 10-year learning process that comes before that, he will certainly gain tremendous clarity, which will change everything. 10 years is really a more exaggerated case. It can probably take around 5 years. But **for**

those 5 years of learning, a person will be traversing a lot, and he will change dramatically, and a large amount of self-improvement will come by default, without even putting in the hard work to get there. Of course, there will be some self-work that is needed, but it will only be a small percentage.

When a person thinks superficially, he thinks, “I need to improve in this area, that area, and another area. How long will all of this take?” The true answer to this is that a person’s entire inner structure changes [as he gets used to hearing and studying these lessons], and sometimes, this inner change causes a person to re-calculate his thinking. What he thought he needs to work on, he really doesn’t need to work on – it was just that he needed to re-organize [the different abilities in his soul]. There is an inner perspective here which needs to be absorbed.

When people enter this kind of learning with any of the erroneous mindsets mentioned before, they will immediately seek how to make all of the lessons practical, and then it will be most difficult for them to listen to all of these lessons, because they want to get the practical part already. Some people like to hear razor-sharp intellectual definitions of something, others enjoys these lessons because it helps them unwind once a week for 45 minutes from the normal routine learning sessions of the *beis midrash*, etc. But if you understand how the approach here is supposed to work, you see a different perspective. **It is a certain journey we are traversing here. The results will not come only at the end. The results will come even in the middle of this learning process, because you will further advance in your clarity [about matters of the soul].**

Of course, you will not always see instant results every moment, but you may find for example that in 2 months’ time, you have become much clearer about yourself. Another 2 months will pass and you will notice that you have gained even more clarity. **The progress is slow, but it is consistent, for the entire time [that you will be hearing and studying these lessons], and that, itself, is the factor that will bring about personal change.**

Q2: How much time is needed to be set aside, in order for a person to test himself on any of the points which the Rav addresses? And how much time does a person need to set aside to learn practical halachah?

A: There are no clear definitions. The factors change, depending on each person’s unique soul, on the particular period one is in, such as if it’s in middle of the season or during a break [*bein hazemanim*]. During the time that a person is immersed in Torah study, he should not be involved with these matters [of studying the soul] at all. At others times, a person needs to spend more time on studying these matters [of the soul]. To illustrate the idea, there is a statement of Reb Yaakov Kamenetsky zt”l, who learned for half a year in the yeshiva of Kelm, that every person should learn at least for half a year in Kelm – but only for half a year, and not more.

Q3: Should a person spend time learning about [the four elements of the soul] for 10 minutes before he begins his Torah learning session?

A: 10 minutes will not suffice for this [so there is no point in doing just learning about the four elements for 10 minutes before you start learning Gemara]. A person would have to be exceptionally brilliant to study this for 10 minutes and then immediately enter into the Gemara. Each person has his challenges, based on his unique circumstances, with many complex factors, and while some have more complex situations than others do (more or less), the common denominator is that most people are coming from a complex life. Before arriving at the Beis Midrash, a *kolel avreich* may need to be busy with babysitters, the bank, preparing meals for his children, etc. Each person has what to take care of, so each person is coming here with his fair share of ‘noise’. 10 minutes of inner silence before opening the Gemara is the bare minimum, just to help a person leave all the ‘noise’ and be able to enter into the world of Torah learning. But of course, the inner world of a person is not developed based on 10 minutes, and certainly not on 5 minutes.

Q4: There are sefarim which write that when a person changes his will, by transforming the egoistic will into a caregiving will, this enables a person to recognize his own inner evil, because his inner senses become heightened, and as a result he gains more clarity about how he needs to serve Hashem. In turn, he also will intuitively know what to work on first, second, etc. in his avodas Hashem. Does this approach contradict the path presented here [of working with the four elements of the soul] or can it also work in tandem with the approach here [of the four elements]?

A: Those are two different ways of thinking which were taught in two *Batei Midrashos* (schools of thought), as you mentioned. The approach [you mentioned] was taught by Rav Ashlag and also by Rav Dessler, and it is one of the core fundamentals that they taught. But let us repeat again that a person needs to understand the four elements of the soul, in order to attain any inner clarity. There are many other ways, besides for the way you mentioned, which bring a person to inner clarity. But in any case, the inner clarity can also be reached when one has given order to his soul [through balancing one’s four elements]. When a person doesn’t use the four elements as his ‘map’ he cannot get anywhere. When a person changes from being a taker to becoming a giver, this definitely gives him inner clarity in his soul, but that clarity can only be attained through using a ‘map’ within oneself. A person needs to give order to his soul’s four elements, and then he can navigate himself through his inner world, by using the clarity he has attained. When we need a ‘map’ to navigate our way through, let us use the map which Hashem has created.

Q5: If a person has done inner work on himself and he has reached a point where he recognizes his soul well, does that mean that the evil inclination won’t have any control on him?

A: Three people merited a level in which their evil inclination had no control over them – Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov. One must say “When will my actions touch upon that of my forefathers?” One can touch upon their level, but one cannot actually attain it.

Q6: Will a person still encounter spiritual failures [after clarifying his four elements]?

A: Certainly one can still fall.

But, much of what a person thinks he needs to work on really stems from poor self-recognition, and from confusion about oneself. And there are some areas a person thinks he needs to work on which really does need to work on. When a person traverses the approach [of the four elements] we spoke about here, he will become clearer about the first two parts [proper self-recognition as opposed to poor self-recognition, and clarity versus confusion]. Then one can discover the areas which he truly needs to work on. That is where one will have to do much difficult inner work – it will be very, very difficult. This is not to say that there isn't any inner work that needs to be done before this, but in the beginning stages it is more about clarifying to oneself, precisely, the unique aspects of one's personality. Then one's *avodah* will be more precise and organized. And certainly there will be failures, because "a righteous person falls seven times, and rises."

Q7: Is it possible for a person to work with approach by discovering these matters from within himself? Or does he need external factors for this?

A: It was mentioned at the start that a person is able to reach these matters from within himself, but we only mentioned this briefly, because most people do not have the inner tranquility to reach self-recognition from a quieted self. This is because most people have a lot of 'noise' in their lives which prevents them from attaining inner quiet. Whenever it's chaotic, such as Erev Pesach when there's a lot of tumult in the house, a person doesn't have to be particularly brilliant to recognize the powers of the soul, but in order to reach subtle points about the soul, a person needs inner quiet. That is surely the inner and truer way, but it is not within reach of most people, and that is why we only mentioned this briefly and we didn't elaborate upon it.

Q8: After a person begins to recognize his personality, are there any areas which a person certainly needs to work on improving?

A: I will repeat again that there are areas which a person definitely needs to fix, and each person needs to figure out what he needs to mainly fix. There are areas which a person thinks he needs to fix, but the reason he thought about those areas is because he doesn't have proper awareness about himself, or because there is a lack of order in his soul. It's not a question of giving order to the soul or repairing the soul [rather, it is about knowing how to work with the elements of the soul]. To illustrate the idea, a person is in a house and suddenly an appliance stops working, he calls a repairman to fix it and shows him what isn't working. The repairman shows him that there is nothing wrong with the appliance - it is just that you have to know how to use it...

Q9: If a person is often getting angry, does that mean that he needs to mainly work on his anger?

A: That is an excellent example. There are some people whose anger doesn't stem from anger, but from a lack of order in their soul, which causes them to feel pressured inside themselves. Their

displays of anger are a result of the pressure they are feeling. But their anger isn't coming from the actual trait known as anger. There are many people who feel pressured from all that goes on in their life. This is not to say that they don't have what to be angry about, but it's very possible that their frequent anger is not because anger is their dominant trait, but from a lack of order in their soul. Certainly a person will need to work on his anger, but when he needs to deal with the actual trait of anger at some other point, he will see a whole different kind of anger than the one he was used to experiencing before.

Q10: Should a person learn mussar in the interim, in order to deal with his anger, or will this just prove unhelpful?

A: It will not help much. It's impossible to say that it won't help at all. In the end of the day, Reb Yisrael Salanter said that there are two ways to repair any of the character traits – either by fixing it, or by conquering it. If one tries to learn *mussar* because he wants to fix a certain character trait, this will cause confusion in his soul, because he doesn't even recognize the character trait he is trying to fix. If he tries to learn *mussar* because he wants to conquer a certain trait, this can certainly help, but why should a person spend so much energy on an area which isn't the main issue? First he needs to give order [to his elements] and then he can be helped. I am not speaking right now on a practical level. Certainly, if a person gets very angry about something on Erev Shabbos or Erev Pesach, he should make use of any techniques that will help him overcome his anger right now. He needs a short-term solution for right now. But a person needs to engage in a program of long-term help, to try to build and develop the structure of his personal soul. Because if a person doesn't uncover the root of what's causing his anger – for example, if his anger is coming from his element of fire or from pressure in his life, whether external pressure and internal pressures – what will happen? He may be working all the time on areas which he doesn't really need to work on, and his *avodah* is lacking in precision.

Q11: Can it be said that all of Gedolim, who lived with mesirus nefesh, were able to 'skip' working with the four elements of their soul [since mesirus nefesh enables a person to skip levels]?

A: Generally speaking, our Gedolim who had *mesirus nefesh* reached the level which the *Mesillas Yesharim* describes, in which a person is standing above a garden-maze and directing another person below, since he has traversed the maze and he is above it. When a person is above the 'garden maze', he can see the four elements from above [without learning about them]. This doesn't mean that the *Gedolim* didn't recognize the four elements. It is possible that they did not traverse the path of the four elements, but after they reached a view from above, they were then able to see their four elements [from above].

Q12: Is it possible even in our generation for a person to be 'above the garden-maze'?

A: Who says that any given point can only be applied to a certain generation and not to another?

Q13: *Why then should a person use the approach of avodah explained here [about the four elements]?*

A: Because [if a person tries to bypass the approach of the four elements and he tries to be above it all], “Many did like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and didn’t succeed”. Chazal didn’t say that it’s impossible to do like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, they said instead that many did like him and didn’t succeed. A few succeeded, because there are certainly a few individuals who can take an extreme path and succeed. But it is not the way for most people. As another example, there are instances where a zealot may attack a sinner, but is that a *halachah* for all people to follow? It is only applicable to certain individuals, but it is not the way for the majority. It is a very dangerous path to take. Most people who took that path didn’t succeed, and in some cases, they fell very low, because they brought chaos to their souls.

Q14: *The Rav is implying that all the advice given by our Sages is because they reached a view from above, and they didn’t need to utilize the four elements in their souls. But when the Sages give advice, they do not specify if the advice is for a specific kind of person. If so, since each person’s main element is different, not every statement of the Sages will apply to him equally, and it may even be harmful to him, if it doesn’t suit his main element...?*

A: Yes. This point is elaborated upon in the *sefarim*, such as in the *sefarim* of the Ramchal. “The words of Torah are poor in one place and wealthy in another place” – if a person uses a particular advice of Torah in the wrong place, the results will be detrimental. An example which the Ramchal uses for this is an expression that is oft-mentioned in the Talmud: “*Hacha b’may askinan*”, “What are we dealing with here?” One needs to always know the specific case that the advice of the Torah applies to. This is the implication of the statement, “Those who learn Mishnah confuse the world”, because when a person only learns a Mishnah, which states general rules, the results are detrimental. The Sages of the Gemara came and explained in what exact circumstances the Mishnah is speaking about. When one doesn’t know the circumstance that a statement of the Sages is applicable to, he will come to transgress the Torah. In the Gemara, it is clear that one needs to know exactly in what circumstances the rule of the Mishnah is talking about. When it comes to *avodas Hashem*, though, it is not spelled out that clearly. But the rule of “What are we dealing with here?” applies to all areas of Torah [including areas of *avodas Hashem*].

Q15: *To clarify, did the Rav explain in this lesson that one of the problems a person may encounter in self-recognition is that the more issues he discovers about himself, the more he will come to identify his ‘animal soul’ as his “I”?*

A: Yes, this is a problem that may occur.

Q16: *What, then, is the true “I” of a person?*

A: There are two fundamental approaches of how we can define the “I” of a person. According to one approach, the “I” of a person is his power to choose (*bechirah*), and this is also called the “*Ruach*” [spirit] level of the soul, as the Gra writes. According to a second approach, the “I” of a

person is his pure *neshamah* [Divine soul] which Hashem has given him. These are two different approaches explained in the words of our Sages, in how to understand the “I”. The Sages who took the path of the Gra would emphasize that the “I” of a person is his power to choose, otherwise known as the *Ruach*, whereas other Sages emphasized the *neshamah* as the “I” of a person. This second approach is based on the statement, “Your world can be seen in your life”, and it is the approach that the “I” of a person is defined as “*My G-d, the soul gave to me is pure.*”

Q17: In order for a person to properly identify his “I”, does he need to know about the four elements of the soul? And does a person need to set aside time in order to see and feel what his true “I” is, no less than how senses anything else?

A: Recognizing the “I” is not like how you sense anything else. It is the root of everything, because it is the root of how a person can sense and feel the existence of the Creator. And yes, a person needs to set aside time in order to recognize his “I”.

But I want to emphasize that it is more than this. This is not simply about setting aside time to discover the “I”, because we need to realize that it is not our “I” which is at the center, but *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. The center of everything is *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* and His Torah. After one recognizes that as the center, he should then work on self-recognition.

There is a holy implication of the “I”, as well as a detrimental implication of the term “I.” The detrimental implication of “I” is when a person uses his element of fire for evil, and he becomes conceited. The holy use of the “I” is the root that all *avodah* is based upon. Eventually there is a later stage in which a person learns how to nullify that “I” to Hashem. But self-nullification can only come after one has properly built his “I”, and not before he has built his “I”. So, in the beginning stages of self-recognition, one needs to focus on building his “I” and relate to it as the “I”, rather than focusing on the weaknesses of the animal soul (*nefesh habehaimis*) and defining oneself as such. Perhaps while a person is trying to fix a negative character trait he can relate to it as a problem in his “animal soul”, but this should only be temporarily. As a general rule, one needs to keep the focus of his self-work on building his true “I”, as opposed to relating to himself as the “animal soul” (*nefesh habehaimis*).

3 / Fundamentals of Middos Improvement: Part 3 ¹⁶

Learning About Our Middos

It is written, “*Your thoughts are very deep, a fool does not know them.*” All of the Torah is very deep, but the study of the *middos* (character traits, as well as our emotions), is a particularly very deep subject.

Firstly, we need to understand each *middah*, and then we need to understand how each *middah* relates to the other *middos*. We can then learn how to “wear” them and how to “detach” from them when we need to.

Then, we can truly work on, and fix, our *middos*.

Figure Out Your Main Element

Rav Chaim Vital wrote that all of our *middos* come from the four elements of earth, water, wind and fire.¹⁷

A person needs to see which element he has a tendency towards. How a person can figure this out is a separate discussion, but the point is, that a person must figure out what his root element is.¹⁸

After a person figures this out, he should realize that whatever his main element is, there are four elements contained in it. In other words, after you find out what your main element is, figure out which is your main *middah* that comes from it. Identify your best *middah* that comes from your most dominant element, and identify your worst *middah* that comes from your most dominant element.

Your best *middah* and your worst *middah* are the opposite of each other. If you figure out that your best *middah* is not the opposite of your bad *middah* (and vice versa), it is a sign that you haven’t figured out what your main element is. This is because your best *middah* comes from a certain element in you, and your worst *middah* has to be the opposite of this.

¹⁶ <http://www.bilvavi.net/english/fixing-your-middos-003-fundamentals-middos-improvement-part-3>

¹⁷ Shaarei Kedushah, I:I

¹⁸ See *Getting To Know Your Soul*.

Therefore, besides for that we have to study the four elements and all their many branching details, each person has to really know well what his main element is. Even after you figure out what your main element is, you need to know it very well and identify it strongly.

Figuring Out Your Worst Middah

If this is too hard to figure out, then at least figure out what your most common good or bad *middah* (character trait) is, and then learn about that *middah* very well, in-depth.

Studying The Middos With Depth

Reb Yisrael Salanter said that when a person wants to work on a certain area he needs improvement in, he should learn and study that area of the Torah very well. For example, if a person sees that his most common bad *middah* is *gaavah* (conceit), then he has must learn about the topic of *gaavah* well, in-depth, and to recognize what it is very well. Or, if a person sees that his main bad *middah* present in his life is the trait of anger, then he has to learn about anger and know all about it in great detail. It should be a “*sugya*” (discussion) to him, just like a *sugya* of Gemara that he learns very well and in-depth, which he regularly analyzes and studies all the intricacies of it.

Most people like to take shortcuts when it comes to working on their *middos*. If someone wants to learn how to control his anger, he is tempted to take the easy route, reading up on it a little and perhaps doing some minimal research on this topic, looking for “tips” on how to avoid getting angry. A person naturally feels comfortable doing this when it comes to working on any bad *middah* he notices in himself.

But this is not the truthful approach of the Torah. The Torah method is that we must work for many months on understanding what the *middah* in question is, in concept, before we can even begin to actually “work” on it and fix it. Without studying our *middos*, it’s like becoming a *posek* without learning *Halacha* beforehand.

Discovering Your Personal Weakness

Also, it is impossible to say that everyone must work very hard at fixing one particular *bad middah*. This is because each person’s soul is built differently, so each of us has different qualities and faults that are unique to our personal circumstances.

But at some point, we will need to cover all of them, so that each person can figure out where his main weakness lies in. We will therefore discuss all the *middos* that come from all four elements,

and as you go along with these classes, you can see for yourself which is your own personal worst weakness.

We will learn about each *middah* in detail. The details are really endless, and it is like an endless ocean. But we will try, as hard as we can, to learn about them.

So each chapter will be covering a different *middah*. The disadvantage to this is that not everyone will be able to listen well and follow each chapter, because you might be hearing about a particular *middah* that is not of much interest to you right now, for you know that you have other areas to mainly put your focus on.

If someone is very motivated to understand the whole picture of our *middos*, then he won't have this problem. But anyone else who just wants to find out what his particular weakness is and how he can work on it will have a hard time learning all of these classes, until he hears about his particular bad *middah* that he knows he must mainly work on; and then he will lose the desire to continue. So patience is required from you, as you go along this series. We have no choice but to go through each *middah* and then give advice on how to work on each *middah*, and at some point, each person needs to find himself in all of this, where he fits in, and what he has to mainly work on.

That is the purpose of giving over the whole picture of our *middos*, as opposed to concentrating on one topic the entire time.

There is general advice here in these chapters that can apply to everyone, but there is some advice which cannot be written in any *sefer* - and it can only be arrived at when you use your "understanding of the heart".

Working On Our Middos: "Breaking" and "Removing"

When a person wants to get rid of a bad *middah*, there are two possible options he can try. One of them is the correct and sensible approach; the other method is detrimental.

One way is to simply try to fight and squash the bad *middah* at hand. For example, if a person has an evil desire, maybe he should try to hold back from giving it to his desire and practice restraint. He is attempting to kill off the desires. Or, if he gets angry a lot, he could try to pause before getting angry, and wait until his anger subsides. The point of this method is that the person attacks the bad *middah* directly head-on.

There is another way to deal with bad *middos*, though, which is based on the first method; without the first method, it will be impossible to implement this method. The second method is, that besides for practicing restraint over our bad *middos*, we can 'remove' the very *middah* itself, regardless of it is good or bad right now.

The first way is an attempt to “break” one’s *middos*. There is a statement from the Kotzker Rebbe that if someone breaks his bad *middah*, he will be left with two of them, just like when you smash an item and you are left with two pieces of it. Thus, a person has to make use of another way to deal with bad *middos*: he needs to remove the very *middah* itself at its root, rather than attempting to break it.

According to the second approach, which is the ideal method, even a good *middah* would have to be removed, at times. It is about removing the nature of the “*middah*” itself, and it is not focused on getting rid of the “bad” in the *middah*.

For example, *Chazal* say that if a person has mercy on the cruel, he will come to act cruel even to those who are deserving of mercy. A person has to act ‘cruel’ to his children sometimes, like when he disciplines them. In such a case, it is not the time to use the *middah* of *rachamim* (compassion). This is an example of ‘removing’ yourself from a good *middah* – in this case, by withholding the *middah* of *rachamim* (compassion).

So on one hand, while we must certainly work to break our bad *middos*, we must also remove ourselves from even good *middos* sometimes. That is one fundamental point in our discussion here.

The Roots of Middos

Another important point we must know here is that we need to have the whole picture of *middos* as we work on our *middos*. There are different kinds of *middos*. The root of the *middos* is the *middos* of Hashem; the 13 *middos* of Hashem, of which *Chazal* say we must cling to His *middos*. The lesson of this is that we must realize that our *middos* come from Hashem. Lower than those are the 13 “*middos* of the Torah”. The *middos* of the Torah are the revelation of the *middos* of Hashem. Lower than those are the *middos* of a person.

The Sages state, “Hashem looked into the world and created the world”. So if we want to examine our *middos* and work to fix them, we need to realize their roots – the *middos* of Hashem, which are manifested in the *middos* of the Torah.

Without this outlook, a person’s view on the *middos* is superficial and immature. We need to bear in mind the whole picture of *middos* – the roots, and the branches. If we have the ‘roots’, we can arrive at the ‘branches’.

Three Layers of the Middos

Some of our *middos* come from our soul, while some come from our body. The *middos* from our Divine soul (our *Nefesh Elokis*) are entirely good and have no bad in them. *Middos* of the body

come from the ‘animalistic’ part of our soul - the *nefesh habehaimis*. They are a mix of good and evil. There is a lower source of *middos* within than *nefesh habehaimis*, though, which is entirely evil.

A person has in himself a pure and lofty part in his soul that has entirely good *middos*. This is the *nefesh Elokis* (G-dly soul).

A person also has inside himself a *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) and a *yetzer tov* (good inclination), mixed together. The natural evil found in a person is in the *nefesh habehaimis* (animal soul), and it is essentially the *yetzer hora*. The *Chovos Halevovos* writes that the *yetzer hora* is mixed up with the good in your soul. This evil manifests itself in one’s bad *middos*.

The third layer of a person is the part of a person which is totally evil, and it is present in the lower area of the *nefesh habehaimis*.

A person has to recognize that there are three layers in himself – a part in himself which is entirely good, a part in himself which is a mixture of good and evil (it can be used for either good or evil), and a part in himself which is entirely evil.

If a person is only aware that he has a mixture of good and evil in himself, and he isn’t aware that there is a part in him which is totally good, then he has nowhere from where to draw forth his inherent good that he was created with. It is not enough for a person to separate the good from the evil in himself; he has to also realize that there is a part in himself that is totally pure and good. The way we work on our *middos* involves all three layers. Therefore, in our *avodah* of being able to ‘wear’ and ‘detach’ our *middos*, we need to be aware that we have all of these three layers.

Desire for Food – Good or Evil?

For example, if a person feels a desire (*taavah*) to eat a certain food, how does a person look at this?

If a person hasn’t yet become aware of the mixture in himself as well as the good in himself, then he considers desire to be totally evil. If that is his attitude, then his desire to eat food is indeed always evil, because he has never revealed any good about desire. When he fights the evil desire, he will feel like he is fighting evil, but he doesn’t know how to reveal any good in such a situation.

But if he becomes aware that he has in himself a mixture of good and evil, then he can be aware if his desire is coming from an actual need to eat, or if it is just coming from a lack of self-control.

If a person becomes aware of the highest part of himself – the part in him which is completely good – then he has an even higher reaction when he feels a desire to eat food: he is able to view it as a reflection of his desire to be close to Hashem.

In Conclusion

We only gave one example, but we need to become aware of our soul's three layers in every bad *middah* we discover.

In order to do this, we need to learn about the *middos* from the words of *Chazal*, and it takes a lot of time. We have to learn about the *middos* so we can work on them, and then we can learn when to use them and when not to use them. This is part of how we can wear and detach the layers of our soul, which is necessary in the path of trying to reach the essence of our soul, our very *havayah*.¹⁹

¹⁹ The following is a clip from the beginning of the next lesson, which is relevant to complete this lesson:

“We will try to explain the material here in a way that is very practical in our life. We have explained that there are three kinds of middos in ourselves: the middos that come from our nefesh habehaimis (the lower, animalistic part of our soul), which are entirely base and evil; we have the middos that come from our nefesh Elohis (the higher, G-dly part of the soul), which are always pure and holy; and we have the middos that stem from a middle layer of the soul, which contain a mixture of good and evil. To go a bit more into detail, the middle layer in the soul, which resides between the nefesh habehaimis and the nefesh Elohis, is called the point of “medameh”. The “medameh” part of the soul is where we can purify the middos of our nefesh habehaimis and get them to become more like our nefesh Elohis. Everything has within it the four elements of Creation. Both the higher and lower parts of our soul contain the four elements, and from the elements stem our middos. There are four elements in the higher part of our soul as well as in the lower parts of our soul. The elements of our higher soul (our Nefesh Elohis) are already perfected, whereas the four elements contained in our lower soul (our nefesh habehaimis) are in need of rectification.”

4 | General Q&A About The 4 Elements

Q&A – General and Individual Purpose In Life

QUESTION: How can a person know and understand his purpose on the world, on a general and individual level?

ANSWER: One can learn about the general purpose of man by studying well the sefer “*Derech Hashem*” and sefer “*Daas Tevunos*”. One can learn about his/her individual purpose by clarifying his/her personal powers, by way of learning about the elements of the soul [fire, water, wind, earth]. The more a person attains self-recognition, the better he can know his purpose. Clearly, a person [also] needs to *daven* a lot and cry to Hashem, for this. The more a person exerts himself “*lishmah*” [for non-ulterior motivations], the greater his clarity will increase about his purpose, for he will then touch upon his very *havayah* (existence).

Q&A – Balancing The Four Elements

QUESTION: I have some questions about the four elements of the soul.

1) The Rav has said that one needs to recognize his/her main element, such as by seeing what his strongest character trait is and what his weakest character trait is. This shows a person what his root element is. For example, if a person sees that he has a lot of displays of conceit or anger, it shows that his primary element is fire. How can a person identify this? Does a person also need to figure out his second-to-most dominant element in order to know his most dominant element? And how can a person figure out anything about his element of water, which only contains one character trait, lustful desire?

2) In order to figure out one’s worst character trait, does a person discover it from knowing his strongest character trait, or his weakest character trait? For example, if a person’s strongest element is fire and his weakest is wind, on one hand he will have a problem of being highly conceited (fire), but on the other hand, he will also be very inactive, because he doesn’t have that much wind and therefore he doesn’t want to move that much. [So which of the above is his weakest area?]

3) The Rav has said that we balance out the strongest element through its opposite element, even though the opposite element is this person’s weakest. From where does a person get the ability to use his weakest element to create a balance in his soul, being that it is his weakest element? Furthermore, even if a person has two elements that are equally strong, one of them has to be the root, and the other one has to be the branch. How can the root element balance out the branching element, being that they are on two different levels?

4. Are the four elements all ‘wrapped’ like a garment around each other, or are they mixed with each other? (The words of the *Hagahos Maharitz* on the beginning of *sefer Nefesh HaChaim* seems to imply the latter). If the elements are all mixed into each other, is it like a physical mixture, i.e. that a person will have 50% fire in his soul, 30% earth, etc.?

ANSWER:

(1) 1- The process of clarifying one's personal soul is long, and deep. It does not begin with recognizing your worst character trait. One needs to first recognize all of the abilities in the soul, first the positive powers and then the negative powers. One needs to identify his strongest point, and then organize the rest of the abilities in his soul, in order of how they much they dominate. After that, a person needs to analyze his strongest point and see what powers (*kochos*) and character traits (*middos*) are contained in it. Within this area, a person should see which koach\power is the strongest, which is second-to-strongest, etc. As part of this clarification process, a person also discovers what his worst character trait is.

Clarifying the strongest element needs to be done on two levels: How much it manifests (*kamus*), and the quality of much it manifests (*eichus*). In order to figure out the first part (*kamus*), one needs to see which element, ability or character trait he encounters the most and struggles with the most, in his daily life. In order to figure out the second part (*eichus*), there are many different ways to know. At first, one needs to figure out these two factors: How strongly connected you feel to a particular element or ability or trait in the soul, as well as how much stability you feel the particular element or ability or trait provides for you in your life. Understandably, throughout each part of the clarification process, you should try as much as possible to uncover as many specific details as you can, so that you can arrive at a more precise conclusion.

2 – Going deeper into the root, the main character trait of one's mainly dominant element is also connected with one's second-to-most dominant element, and so forth. But when it comes to how the abilities are actually revealed in the soul, a person is comprised of the four elements, and at the root, each element stands on its own, but at the same time, the primary element also branches out and mixes with the other elements.

3 – Regarding your question about the element of water, you should know that lustful desire is not only the trait contained in water. Water contains many other additional aspects (which are explained in the series of "Understanding Your Middos", דע מהות המידות – את מידותיך [specifically, in classes 31-65 of that series], and in the series of מים – מעשית – דע את מידותיך הדרכה מעשית – מים ("Fixing Your Water"). So it is upon a person to clarify which ability contained in water is his strongest. Another possibility is that one's element of water is producing a negative character trait that is actually coming from his opposite element, fire, which can show up as either conceit or anger or any other fire-related trait. Besides for this, Rav Chaim Vital in sefer *Shaarei Kedushah* lists other character traits that result from the element of water [such as jealousy and envy]. It is possible that one's worst character trait is coming from any of the resulting traits of his primary element.

(2) Usually if a person hasn't worked hard to repair and balance the abilities in his soul, his worst character trait will become awakened by his strongest element. This is because one's strongest element is the most active and plays the leading role in the various factors that influence one's soul.

However, one needs to know that there are two possibilities. Sometimes a person's strongest element will a negative character trait that stems from that element, and sometimes a negative character trait will be stemming from his opposite element. This is because "two opposites bear one root", and therefore, each element can either awaken its direct byproduct or a byproduct of its opposite. For example, if a person's main element is fire, his worst character trait may be conceitedness or anger. Or, it may be lustful desire, which is a product of his opposite element, water. And the same is true vice versa, as well as with all the other elements. Therefore, even if a person finds that he has a certain negative character trait, that is not a proof of what his primary element is [i.e. if one's worst character trait is anger, it doesn't necessarily mean that his primary element is fire]. It's very possible that it's exactly the opposite. That being the case, a person needs to do thorough soul-searching, in order to discover what triggers each of his character traits.

After a person has work hard at truly clarifying what his strongest element is and he has also worked hard to uproot his worst character trait, he needs to repair and balance the other abilities in his soul, which so far haven't been balanced. He can be helped by making use of his strongest element, in order to do it.

(3) Here are some reasons why and how a person can balance out his strongest element, by using his opposite [or weakest] element.

1- One reason is because "two opposites bear one root". Therefore, a person can discover his strongest element by seeing what his weakest one is. This can be used to repair any ability in the soul.

2- Another way is through making use of the power of free will to choose. Through utilizing the power to choose, one can choose which ability of the soul he will use, and which one he will not.

3- An additional reason is that sometimes, a person's strongest ability isn't yet repaired, while his weakest ability is already repaired (relatively speaking, when compared to the strongest ability which isn't yet repaired). How do we define if an ability in the soul is repaired or not? Part of the definition is if a person is able to use the ability when the time and place calls for it, in a way that it doesn't backfire on him. In this way, a person is able to use the ability as he wishes.

4- Another reason is that a person's strongest and weakest elements are not necessarily defined as root of the soul verses branch of the soul. Rather, on one hand they are two independent elements from each other, and on the other hand, they also mix with each other, as stated earlier. Therefore, it is possible for a person to use his weakest element, in order to attain a balance. And even if we do define the weakest element as the 'branch' of its 'root', the primary element – we can still 'move' 'branch' and thereby repair the root.

5- Additionally, the 'strongest element' of the soul does not mean that this is an element which totally controls all of a person's soul without any means of restraint. The other elements are certainly active and are also affecting the soul. So we can certainly use any of the other elements in order to repair any issue in the soul, according to their abilities.

6 – Each of the elements is comprised of all four elements. Even the strongest element is comprised of the other elements, so the other elements will always be manifest to some degree, doing their respective work. When a person uses his opposite element in order to strengthen his strongest element, he is essentially balancing out his opposite element that is found within his strongest element, using it correctly. For example, if a person's strongest element is fire and his weakest element is water, his fire also contains water, and this is called his "water-of-fire". When he uses his element of water, he is really balancing out his "water-of-fire". From then onward, his "water-of-fire" will be of good use to him, because it has been balanced. Since it his opposite element, it will still do its respective work, but now that it has been balanced, it will be beneficial to the person.

(4) 1- There are two different viewpoints. According to one viewpoint, the four elements are offshoots of the other [fire downgrades to wind, wind to water, and water to earth]. According to another viewpoint, the four elements are clothed in each other. According to another viewpoint, they are mixed with each other.

2- Generally speaking, the soul cannot be defined as if it's a container that holds 100% of various soul abilities, for example, 50% fire, 30% earth, 15% wind and 5% of water. That is not the way to understand it – rather, each ability in the soul is measured by itself, according to how it manifests and how much it influences the soul, and according to one's nature and temperament, as the Creator has designed the person. It is only possible to view the soul in terms of "percentages" like this with regards to how much the various abilities of the soul are mixed with each other. The mix of the different abilities in the soul is expressed in the relationship between the different abilities, in their amount and in their quality, as well as in how each

ability influences the other. Even more so, the mix between the different abilities in the soul is able to change, according to the amount of balance that exists currently in one's soul. Alternatively, when one gives balance to different abilities in his soul, this also changes the mix. Meaning, even if we can measure the percentages of how much each ability in the soul is manifest, the balance between the abilities can change, and then the percentages will change, because the current relationship between the different soul abilities has changes.

Q&A – Researching Info On The 4 Elements

QUESTION: Concerning the 4 elements of the soul, I have found other sefarim besides for Shaarei Kedushah of Rav Chaim Vital which explain the 4 elements, such as sefer “Asiris HaEifah” of the Kamarna Rebbe. Since I want to have a more complete understanding of the 4 elements, is it recommended that I learn these other sefarim, or will it just make things more confusing, since we are traversing the approach of Rav Chaim Vital specifically in the Rav's shiurim?

ANSWER: It would be a good idea to gather all of the material about the 4 elements which are found in the sefarim. If there are any questions I will be happy to receive them and I will try to answer them. Gathering all of this material together would also be very helpful to the masses.

Q&A – Learning Sefarim According To Your Primary Element

QUESTION: 1) I read the response of the Rav about the different ways of the *sefarim* according to the approaches of *mussar* and *chassidus*. The Rav has said elsewhere that a person needs to clarify what the main “element” is (from amongst the four elements of earth, water, wind or fire) of the particular *sefer* (of the particular author) that one is learning. Can the Rav give a list of some well-known *sefarim*, in the categories of both *mussar* and *chassidus*, and what the main element of the author of the sefer was? For example, can we say that the main element of the author of *Sfas Emes* was “water”, since the Sfas Emes always talks about finding the “vitality”, (corresponding to the element of water) which can be found in each thing? Does this make sense, and can the Rav give some examples?

Also, if my main element is “fire”, does that mean that I mainly need to learn *sefarim* of an author whose main element was “fire”? Or do I need to balance myself out by learning a sefer whose author had the opposite element, which would be water or earth?

ANSWER:

1. An example of a sefer whose author had a primary element of “earth” was the Rambam's sefer *Mishneh Torah*. In this *sefer* - which was the primary *sefer* of the Rambam - the author establishes each *halachah* in its proper place and defines the boundaries of each *halachah*, which is a use of the element of “earth”: putting each thing in its proper place. This shows you that the root element of the Rambam's soul was the element of earth. This is in contrast to the Rambam's sefer *Moreh Nevuchim*, which is not written in any particular order.

An example of a sefer whose author had a primary element of “water” is *sefer Chovos HaLevovos*, for the central theme of this *sefer* is the idea of expressing gratitude, giving, love. It is a sefer which involves reflection and calm thinking, which is an

outcome of a perfected element of “water” (i.e. calmly moving water). This is also because the element of water is rooted in the intellect, which is the ability of calm thinking and reflection.

The *Ramchal's* sefarim show that his main element was wind, because the *Ramchal's* sefarim are based upon the concept of *yichud Hashem*, which the root concept that “moves” all of the Creation to its purpose, reminiscent of the wind.

A *sefer* whose author's main element is fire, is the *sefer Yesod V'Shores H'Avodah*, which gives a fiery, passionate approach that is meant to inspire and ignite a person to serve Hashem better. This “fiery” approach is manifest in the author's other *sefarim* as well.

“Earth” is also the main element in the teachings of the Kotzker Rebbe, which reflect a constant demand for growth, not out of a fiery enthusiasm, but from clarifying the reality, to make reality very clear, which results in recognizing Hashem and serving Him. That is the element of “earth” – building upon a palpable reality.

“Water” is the main element of the Baal Shem Tov and his teachings, for the Baal Shem Tov's underlying theme is to have a “calm love” to all Jews, even towards the wicked, and this calm kind of love is reminiscent of “calm waters”. Also, his teachings reflected a calm, pleasant form of *d'veykus* (attachment) in Hashem, which is like calm, pleasantly moving waters.

“Wind” is the main element of Reb Pinchos Koritzer's teachings, which reflect the pursuit of *emes*, truth, because truth encompasses the beginning, middle and end of a matter – the “movement” which connects everything together, reminiscent of the wind, which moves. This is in contrast to the “movement” of falsity, which moves everything to the side.

“Fire” is reflected in the teachings of Bresslov, for Rebbe Nachman of Bresslov said, “A fire will burn within me, until Mashiach comes.” The teachings of Bresslov are essentially a “fire” of *bittul* (self-nullification), the nullification of the intellect, which is *temimus* (simplicity), by which wisdom can be drawn from *ayin* (nothingness/the non-ego state).

2. Yes, one should learn *sefarim* whose author shares his primary element. However, since each of the four elements contains aspects of all four, one's “root element” subdivides into further divisions (i.e. one's main element can be either earth-of-earth, water-of-earth, wind-of-earth, or earth-of-fire, water-of-fire, etc.). One needs to discover what his primary subdivision is, within his primary element [i.e. if his primary subdivision is earth-of-fire, or fire-of-water, etc.]. One should also try to discover further subdivisions of his primary element [i.e. earth-of-earth-of-fire, water-of-earth-of-fire, etc.].

There is also an additional clarification for one to make. There are four main divisions of souls: one category of souls is those who are more “action”-oriented, other souls are more “emotion”-oriented, other souls are more intellectual-oriented, and other souls are more spiritual. Since this is also a factor in self-discovery, one also needs to examine which of these divisions his particular soul is rooted in.

Besides for this [studying *sefarim* whose author bears the same primary element as yours], you also need to study the *sefarim* authored by one who bears your opposing element. This is because in order to understand your main element [and the path of *avodah* which corresponds to it] you need to learn about it by studying its opposite element [and its corresponding way of *avodah*].

Finally, one should also attempt to learn different *sefarim* corresponding to all of the four elements, because a person doesn't see clearly until he sees the “full picture” [hence one should try to learn sefarim in which the main approach is “earth”, as well as *sefarim* which are mainly “water”-based, “wind”-based, and “fire”-based].

Q&A – Teshuvah & Clarifying My 4 Elements

QUESTION: After listening a lot to different shiurim of the Rav, and due to personal experiences I had from previous years, when trying to prepare for the Yom HaDin [Rosh HaShanah], I have come to the following conclusion. Although it is commonly accepted practice that a person should take on a “resolution” of improvement for the coming year, and those on a higher level make cheshbon hanefesh [self-accounting], I realized that none of this involves working on my middos and on balancing my “four elements.” This year, I am accepting upon myself to learn about the “four elements”, with their practical applications in my life. This will be in place of taking on specific resolutions of certain actions to do or any specific kind of self-accounting. As I explained, this is because from my personal experience, I am seeing that problems with middos can prevent a person from truly growing at this time of the year.

I want to hear from the Rav if my thinking is correct, or if the Rav doesn’t agree with this. These thoughts are particularly on my mind during my avodah at this time of the year of the Yomim Noraim.

ANSWER:

1. For any sins committed this year, you need to write down a self-accounting on them, and see how you can fix those sins. You cannot wait to do this until you understand yourself better [rather, you need to do this even if you have not reached deep self-recognition of yourself].

2. In addition to learning about the “four elements” and how you can apply them practically in your life – which is a very good direction to take – you should also take upon yourself a small resolution to do a certain action of improvement, according to your current level. Pick something that is currently appropriate for you to improve on. This is because you also need to implement the power of “action”, even if it is only a little.

So there are three parts for you to do: Make a self-accounting about any sins you committed this year, and write down how you can repair them. Learn about the “four elements” and how they can apply to you practically. Accept upon yourself to do a small action of improvement, which you are able to do on your current level.

Q&A – Elements of The Emotions

QUESTION: Each person has seven primary negative emotions, as mentioned in “Getting To Know Your Feelings”. Do each of these emotions stem from a specific element in the soul, or is there a branch of the soul, or several branches, which are motivating a particular emotion (i.e. fire-of-water, or fire-of-water-of-fire)? What are the elements behind each of the seven primary negative emotions?

Thanks for all of the help. I am still gaining immensely from all of the Rav’s sefarim. A friend of mine has told to me several times that he is now beginning to learn the “Bilvavi” sefarim and that it is changing his entire life, for the better.

ANSWER: Each emotion has a primary element behind it, and in addition, the other elements mix with it. Love (ahavah) comes from the element of water. Fear (yirah) comes from fire. Pride (hispaarus) comes from wind. Victory (nitzachon) comes from fire-of-water. Admitting (hodayah) comes from water-of-fire. Lowliness (shiflus) comes from earth. That is a general description, and there are further details.

Q&A – Understanding Myself & Others

QUESTION: I am interested in learning more about the powers of the soul, and I would be happy to know if there is any sefer the Rav recommends that I should get [to learn about this]. Additionally, I would be happy to know about any sefer that speaks about the topic of “How to understand another person”. I want to learn how to be able to identify the dominant elements in another person, so that I can be able to help others with this knowledge about themselves.

ANSWER: If one wants to learn about the powers contained in his soul, the sefer recommended the most for this topic is ‘Da Es Nafshecha’ [available in English as “Getting To Know Your Soul”]. There is no sefer yet which explains specifically about how to understand others. But it may be helpful for this to learn ‘Da Es Baisecha’ and ‘Da Es Yaldecha’ [available in English as “Getting To Know Your Home”].

Q&A – The 4 Elements of Fear

QUESTION: In our generation we are finding two central causes for all personal issues: depression, and fear. There are therapists today who see these two experiences as the root of all issues in the soul that exist today. I want to ask: In the Rav’s series of the Four Elements, the Rav explains at length about the element of earth as being the cause for sadness (and laziness). I see that the series on the four elements does not cover the issue of fears – why? Fear doesn’t come from the four elements? Aren’t fears a product of a certain element or trait? I am aware that the Rav addresses the topic in the series on bitachon (trust in G-d), but the many prevalent issues in our society related to fear have prompted me to ask why the subject of fear hasn’t been addressed in the series about the four elements. Many thanks to the Rav.

ANSWER: If a person fears [a situation that involves] destruction, such fears stem from the element of fire. If a person fears a state of becoming confined, such fears stem from the element of wind. If a person fears pain, such fear stems from the element of water. If a person fears a lack of stability, the fear stems from the element of earth.

Q&A – The 4 Elements In Smoking & Overeating

QUESTION

I would like to ask the Rav about the Torah’s view on how to (1) quit smoking and (2) how to lose weight - so that I can help my clients who are trying to quit these bad habits.

ANSWER: The approach to any issue is by understanding the four elements of the soul, through which a person can attain a balance in his personality and thereby modify his behavior. The roots of smoking and being overweight are a result of imbalances in the distribution of the soul’s four elements. Therefore, the solution is to balance the soul’s abilities, and their roots, which are the four elements.

1) SMOKING: Addiction to smoking can stem from an imbalance in any of the four elements, or from several elements together. Therefore, the way to treat smoking issues will vary, depending on the situation.

Smoking can come from an imbalance in one's element of fire: when one feels a surge of anger (fire), he may be pulled towards smoking as a result.

Smoking can also come from an imbalance in one's element of water: When one feels a pull towards a "desire" for smoking.

Smoking can also come from an imbalance in one's element of wind: When one seeks an outlet of that involves various movements that are consistent and pleasant. The movements involved in smoking, such as inhaling the smoke and exhaling the smoke, are ways to calm one's desire for movement. When this is one's main motivation in smoking, his habits of smoking are stemming from an impaired element of wind in his soul.

Finally, smoking can also come from an imbalance in one's element of earth: If one got into the bad habit of smoking since his younger years, when he was acting silly and he habitually got used to it, to the point that it became a regular part of his schedule, his element of "earth" is weighing heavily upon him, expressing itself in the form of an attachment to the habit of smoking which has become a regular part of his routine.

2) OVERWEIGHT: Being overweight can also stem from an imbalance in one's elements – either from one of them, or from more than one of them. Accordingly, the way to deal with the overweight issues is to deal with the impaired element(s) causing it.

Being overweight may be stemming from an impaired element of fire in one's soul: when one feels inwardly empty, and he feels as if he is basically 'destroyed' on his inside [a result of too much dominant fire in his soul], he demands a relief to fill his inner void. This can manifest itself in the desire for overeating.

Being overweight may also stem from an impaired element of water in the soul: When one is simply dragged after a lustful desire for food.

Being overweight can also stem from an impaired wind in the soul: When one is chasing food because he desires the movements involved in getting to the food. The act of eating itself can also be a way for him to satisfy his need for movement which he is not getting enough of.

Finally, being overweight can stem from impaired earth in the soul: When one wants to eat because he wants the feeling of a "full stomach", which makes him feel heavy afterwards. In this case, a person eats until he feels heavy, and he doesn't feel satisfied from his eating until he feels heavy – i.e. "to feel full", after eating. He is ignoring the Rambam's rule about eating, which is that a person should only satisfy a third of his appetite when eating.

Q&A – Applying The Four Elements To Marriage

QUESTION: The Rav has said that in order for a couple to improve their marital peace, a couple needs to find the element that they are both strong in [in the positive sense], and from there onward, they can go about building their marriage. My wife and I have opposite elements. I am mainly dominated by the element of earth, and my wife by wind. Many fights erupt between us, as a result. Through the kindness of Hashem upon us, we both have been graced with a strong element of water, and we are trying to fulfill the advice of the Rav. However, it is not clear to us how we can build our marriage through working with our common element – in our case, the element of water, which is mainly about getting pleasure. (I am asking this question assuming that I have understood the Rav's approach). Does that mean that we need to go out to eat together in restaurants and eat very appetizing food there, together? Does it

mean that we need to experience a lot of pleasure together? It seems that this would only cause our spirituality to sink, on many levels.

I would be happy for guidance on this matter. Thank you.

ANSWER: Before we consider how to build a marriage through finding the common element between you, a husband and wife are able to build their marital peace in several other ways as well. Here are some examples:

1. Each of the spouses should connect to their true self, their “I”, and from reaching that place they can build a relationship with each other. Meaning, when the husband is living his own internal world, and the wife is also living her own internal world, they will be able to connect to the other, in a way that suits each of their personal soul structure and their true inner abilities, without having to do trespass each of their personal boundaries [the natural limitations of their personal soul], and without having to trespass the boundaries [the natural limitations of the soul] of the other spouse.

2. Each spouse can offer his or her best to other spouse, which in turn will create a strong connection to each other. Practically speaking: (1) The husband should recognize his nature well and what his most positive aspect is, and then connect to that point and receive vitality and joy from it. (2) The wife should recognize her nature well and what her most positive aspect is, and connect to that point and receive vitality and joy from it. (3) Each of the spouses should make good use of his\her strong positive point, in order to be his/her best to other spouse and create a connection to each other through each of their positive points.

3. The above is especially true in your case, where your dominant element is earth and your wife’s is wind (as you said), the benefits which you can each give to each other are tremendous, because earth and wind are opposite elements, and they each complete the other. For example, the earth-dominant husband can prove a wind-dominant wife with more stability and consistency, while the wind-dominant wife can provide the earth-dominant husband with more movement and expansion.

4. A fundamental rule is, that all opposites bear the same root. Therefore, what is found in you is also found in her, and whatever is found in her is also found in you. So each spouse needs to find how there are traces of his/her main positive points in the other one. Alternatively, each of the spouses should see how some positive aspects of the other spouse also exist within himself or herself. Through either of these ways, they can each find common strong points that they share and build their relationship from this.

5. Now let’s speak about what it means to build the relationship together from finding their common strong point. Firstly, each of the spouses needs to do the inner work of balancing out his/her dominant element, and to learn how to direct it towards holiness [how it can be used in a constructive way]. After that, they can each use the balanced element as a common point between them.

Alternatively, they can each find qualities in either of their personalities which are already repaired, and then they can use these aspects as a common point that can connect them together. Along with this, they should also aspire to further increase upon those qualities.

If the above cannot be done, then, as a last-resort option, one of the spouses should find his\her strongest good point and guide the other spouse on how to improve in that area – but only if the other spouse agrees to this. They can then use this as their common connecting point. Understandably, this kind of approach will only work if they both choose to do so together, and if they are both very willing to make changes.

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In certain instances, the common element between the spouses should be used in order to provide a connecting point between them, even if the connecting point in question is on the level of the 'animal' level of the soul, as in the example you are presenting in your question [going to eat in restaurants, which provides outlet for the element of water\pleasure that is dominant in you and in your wife]. But even when that is the case, you should still try to infuse some holiness into it. For example, you can eat good-tasting food together on Shabbos, when there is a *mitzvah* to have *oneg* (pleasure) on Shabbos, or by any meal that is a *seudas mitzvah*.