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ספר דע את נשמתך - פרק י - מחשבת רוח

1. Thoughts of The “Ruach” - Recognizing The World of Emotion

The “Ruach” level of the soul corresponds to the world of emotion that is within a person.

Recognizing the world of emotion is far more complex than recognizing one’s natural abilities. As explained in the previous chapter, the task of recognizing our natural abilities is not either easy or simple. These matters cannot be on a surface level. Rather, it is an ongoing study, in which a person must continuously seek to understand his abilities.

Our work of self-recognition can be compared to a newlywed couple. It takes a long time until the spouses become familiar with their personalities. They learn about each other with time, and it is a subtle learning process which takes an entire lifetime (understandably, it is only for those who are willing to learn). It is the same when it comes to understanding oneself. For all of one’s life, a person learns about himself.

During childhood, a person is not used to this kind of studying. Only when he gets older and he reaches maturity, does a person begin to become aware of his emotions, and then he slowly recognizes the various aspects of his personality. First one recognizes the general aspects of his personality, and then the more detailed aspects.

For example, some people are drawn towards bashfulness. Others are easily saddened, and others will easily become angry. Others are drawn towards a conceited self-image. There are all kinds of tendencies that different people have in their various personalities.

Let us make it clear that we are not discussing character improvement (*tikun hamiddos*) right now. We are referring to a stage before that, which is: to recognize the very natures of our personality.

We can compare it to an educator who walks into the classroom on the first day, and he sees 35 students in front of him. He must become familiar with each them, as opposed to treating them all with the same exact manner. He must learn each of their personalities, “*Educate the child according to his path*”, [Mishlei 26:6] and to get to know what each student is like, and educate then according to their individual needs.

It is the same when it comes to how a person must relate to his own self. On a practical level, a person must learn about himself – the various tendencies that his personal soul is drawn towards, both the good and the bad. We will once again repeat and emphasize that at this elementary stage, one does not yet work on his *middos* (character traits). In the first step of self-recognition, one must simply get to know his soul, and after that he can begin the stage of the *avodah* to improve the *middos*.

2. The Four Physical Elements In The Soul Are The Roots of One's Personality

Rav Chaim Vital explains in his work *Shaarei Kedushah* that there are four physical, natural elements: fire, water, wind and earth, and that each of these elements produce positive attributes in a person's character, as well as negative attributes.

One needs to first recognize his inner “fire”, “wind”, “water”, and “earth” that are all within him. To give a general description:

- **Fire** is the power of human growth and ascension. When one rises properly, this is like the verse, “*And his heart was high in the ways of Hashem*”. When one rises in the negative sense, this is the trait of being conceited.
- **Wind** is the root of a person's speech.
- **Water** is the root of pleasure – whether holy pleasure, such as “*My soul yearns and pines for the courtyards of Hashem*”, or whether evil pleasure.
- **Earth** is the root of sadness and laziness. Sometimes sadness can be constructive, but usually, sadness is a negative character trait.

Here we will not explain all of their roots and branches, because that is a broad discussion in and of itself. We only mentioned here a brief description. The main point we are dealing with here is that a person must learn to recognize his personality. One needs to learn what his **best** dominant element is, of these four – what his best element is, and what his **worst** dominant element is.

[Figuring Out Your Main Element]

Here we come to the question of all questions: How can a person know what his dominant element is?

Generally speaking, when a person is going through a period of [spiritual] descent, it reveals what his personality is like. Whenever a person feels somewhat down, he has some “shelter” that he “runs” to for relief.

We can see that some people, when they are going through a rut, they will lock themselves in a room and lay in bed, depressed. Others in the same situation will react differently, and they may want to grab some people and dance with them. Another kind of person in this situation will look for a person to chat with, whereas another kind of person in this situation will pursue various physical desires.

Any person can identify which of the four elements is his most dominant one, by examining where he falls to, when he feels somewhat down and uninspired.

If he falls into some level of sadness or melancholy, it is sign that his main element is earth. If he finds

himself drawn towards fulfilling various physical desires, his main element is water. If he finds that he wants to chat excessively, his main element is wind. If he tries to act controlling towards others or to release his anger on them, his main element is fire.

One also needs to see the positive side, which can be discerned during a time of spiritual progress. During a time when a person is doing well, he should see which element he is drawn towards, and this is also necessary in learning about oneself.

- If a person feels that he is generally drawn towards a healthy kind of confidence about himself, in which he feels inspired to grow (as in the verse *“And his heart was high in the ways of Hashem”*), his main element is **fire**.
- If he knows that he is drawn towards inspiring other people, by speaking to them, his main element is **wind**.
- If his main interest is to give love to others and to become more connected with them, his main element is **water**.
- If he is mainly a person who is very organized and orderly, and he emphasizes being a “realist”, his main element is **earth**.

The very power that aids your success is also the very same power that can bring you down when you are falling, because Hashem has created an equal counterbalance of forces in everyone’s personality. Therefore, your strongest “positive” element when you are succeeding, is also your strongest “worst” element when you are in a rut.

[Figuring Out Your Secondary Elements]

After learning what your strongest element is, the next stage is to figure out what your second-to-strongest element is.

In one person, fire is the main element, and after that is his water, then his wind, and then his earth. In others, the order of which force is most dominant and least dominant will be different. So besides for knowing your strongest element, you also need to know your second-to-strongest element, your third-to-strongest element, and your fourth-to-strongest [or weakest] element.

However, at first, as you begin to work on knowing this, usually you will not be aware of yourself as the element is manifesting itself while you’re acting. Only later, after you’ve acted, can you sit down with yourself and review what happened, and then figure out, slowly, what your main element is, and what your weakest element is.

For example, if a person finds himself in a rut (and he hasn’t had time yet to stop himself and think, so he is currently not aware to himself) and he finds himself pursuing some physical desire, and he feels unfulfilled so he goes to fill his emptiness with something else – when he returns to becoming consciously aware of himself and he stops himself from pursuing another desire, he should sit down and review what happened. He can then discover that his first impulse was to pursue some physical desire, so his main element is water. Since that desire wasn’t fulfilling, he went to fill his void with something else – what was that something else? By knowing it, he can figure out what his second-to-strongest element is.

This is the first step: to get to know one's own personality. The truth is that it's easy to talk about this, but to really recognize oneself is a process that takes several years, simply speaking. Of course, a person cannot spend his whole life trying to figure himself out, but the more a person tries to learn about himself, the closer he comes to self-recognition, and to identify his internal forces.

3. Taking Notes On Yourself

Since self-recognition is a long, drawn-out process that can take years to know, it's easy for a person to dismiss the details that go by in his day-to-day behavior, and then he cannot figure out what his dominant element is. When a person never keeps track of his progress, he will never be able to recognize his personality and to have self-awareness.

For this reason, the advice that is recommended is, for a person to take brief notes about himself. Let's explain the nature of how this note-taking should work.

Here is an example we will start out with, to better understand the idea. One of the greatest leaders of our people was the Chida (Rav Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai), who wrote a *sefer* titled "*Maagal Tov*", which is a book that is entirely notes about his travels. In every place where the Chida traveled to, he wrote down whom he met there, what he saw there, and what happened there.

For several years, I wondered: Of what purpose did the Chida write this *sefer* for? Why did he spend so much time writing down all these stories and events, when instead he could have been learning Torah during all of the time it took to write these events? Who needs to know about all of these travels? But there is a deep point about the soul contained here.

When a person learns about a certain field of study, he needs to cover all of the material on the subject, from beginning until end. Usually when a person enters a new field of study, he is not familiar with the material, and much is unclear. If he tries to learn the material slowly, so that he can learn it on a fundamental level, there is an advantage and a disadvantage to this. The advantage is that he will learn the material slowly and patiently, so he will better absorb the information. The disadvantage is that usually when a person learns slowly, by the time he finishes Chapter 2, he has already forgotten Chapter 1, and when learning Chapter 3, he has forgotten Chapter 2. The reason for this is simple – a person's memory is weak (except for a few people, who have exceptional memory), and people do not remember everything that happens to them throughout life.

Even someone who can remember a lot of Torah is not able to remember all of his life's experiences. There are just vague imprints of memories. A person vaguely remembers his wedding, the joy he experienced upon the birth of his first child, and, G-d forbid, a painful experience or tragedy that he remembers his whole life. But the daily occurrences are forgotten. No one remembers any of that, because there is too much information entering the brain to remember.

When a person wants to learn about his own personality, slowly and patiently, he is like a person learning *Mishnayos* in-depth, that by the time he is into the second perek, he has forgotten the first perek. A person cannot remember so many *Mishnayos*, when he learns each of them slowly. Chazal say that in order to retain one's Torah learning, one has to learn the material at least four times, then review it for 101 times, in order for the material to remain with him.

It's clear when it comes to learning Torah that we easily forget what we learn. We see that we cannot remember all the material, and therefore we understand the need to review it. But when it comes to learning about our own souls, this much is not clear. If we take a 30 year old, for example, and we ask him if he remembers what has happened to him since he was 18, all he will be able to do is tell you some things that he vaguely remembers, general memories. Usually, the memory of a person's life is

lost.

It is written, “*This is the book of the offspring of man*” – there is a “*sefer*” called “*Toldos Adam*”, “offspring of man”, (one’s own personal history), and this *sefer* is written in our own hearts. The Magid of Mezritch said that the “three books opened on Rosh HaShanah” are found in our own hearts. We all have a *sefer* in our heart – in one person’s *sefer*, it is written that he will live for 70 years, and in another person’s *sefer* it says he will live for 80 years. The problem is that we are opening only one page of this *sefer* every day of our lives, while the earlier pages of our personal *sefer* are long forgotten, and we don’t remember anything of them.

If a person wants to learn about himself, he must take notes on himself, of how the days of his life are going by and how he is experiencing them. The point of writing a personal diary is not to write in it “Today I went to the store, I bought two bottles of milk and three loaves of bread, and there was no yogurt there, so I didn’t get to buy yogurt.” The point is to write down your perspectives.

This is a subtle point, which many are mistaken in. Many people keep a diary and write in it, “Today I was happy”, or “Today I was sad”. They remember the feelings they experienced during the day and write them down, but there is not much use of this. We mean here that a person should write down more of a soul perspective concerning the day. For example: If a person was happy during the day, he should write down what caused him to be happy. If something made him sad, he should write down what caused him to be sad.

What does a person gain from this kind of writing? The results can be seen at a later date, when he compares notes. For example: “Today, on the first day of month of Kislev in the year 5767, I was happy, because....” He should write down clearly what reason made him happy. A year later, he might discover that what made him happy a year ago no longer makes him happy.

Another example: If a person lost 1000 dollars and he was sad because of this, two years later, he may find that he has matured since then, and if he loses 1000 again, he might find that he now accepts this more calmly, whether naturally or because he has worked on his *emunah* since then. When comparing notes in the diary to last year’s entry in the diary, a person can see how much he has grown since then. Two years ago, losing 1000 dollars caused him great anguish, and now, when it is two years since then, a person sees that he is less frazzled by this, and he sees how much progress he has made.

Another example: if a person got angry that day, he should write down what reason he thinks is the one that made him angry. After a year, he can re-read the entry, and he may see that whatever made him angry a year ago is exactly what makes him angry now as well, and nothing has changed.

This is all what it means to learn about oneself. The point of writing these notes in a personal diary is not just to write about what you did or felt that day. The point is to uncover the motivations behind what you did and felt.

When you want to examine your progress, open up the diary right before Rosh HaShanah and review the entire diary, from last year until now, and learn about yourself. This will take time, but it enables you to compare the beginning of the year with the end of the year, what motivated you a year ago and what motivates you now, and your ups and downs in the past year. Slowly, you will be able to learn about yourself. Make sure to read all of the entries in the diary since it began, and not just a year’s worth of it. In this way, you can examine yourself throughout the years.

This is the “*sefer Toldos Adam*”, all that has transpired upon you, written in a diary, forever there for you to see and study. When a person dies and his soul returns to Heaven, he is shown his entire life,

like a videotape. In this world, nobody videotapes a person's life for 70 years, and therefore, a person has to 'videotape' his own life by writing down a diary that describes himself throughout the years.

We want to build our inner selves, and to reach a point where we are building ourselves step after step. But we need to first build the first floor, then the second floor upon it, and then a third floor upon that. Usually when people try to build themselves, they try to build their upper floors before building the first floors, and what happens? The upper floors collapse, because nothing is holding them up.

In order to learn about our own souls, one must first keep a diary of notes about himself, taking these notes slowly and calmly, and he cannot expect after 2 weeks to know himself. He must be patient when it comes to this. A person needs at least half a year of writing these notes in his diary until he can begin to learn about himself.

One should regard his personal diary as the most valuable item he owns. It is the most precious thing he has in his life, because it can teach him how to recognize his soul.

When a person begins to take notes about himself in a personal diary, after some time, he will slowly discover things about himself which will make him realize that he never recognized himself at all until now. Before keeping a diary, if we ask a person, "How do you describe yourself?" he may have said, "I get angry a lot", "I am shy", "I feel that I am better than others", etc., and these are all generalities, which do not describe the subtleties of the soul.

We can compare this to a taxi driver, who works for 10-14 hours a day, and sometimes for even 16 hours straight. Does he care about everything that transpired to him throughout the day? All he cares about is how much money he made at the end of the day. He is not thinking about the fact that he travelled in all four directions of the earth that day. The same can be said of ourselves. Our souls are really going through so much, and we need to learn about all of its travels, where it has gone to, and these are not just memories of yesterday which we never think about ever again.

Rav Dessler once said that after he returned from a flight, he reviewed all of the new things he learned since the start of the flight until the end. Then he thought about which of this information is needed, and which is not. That is an example of a person who made sure to learn about himself.

But generally speaking, people look at their lives only with regards to results, not about what happened until then. A materialistic kind of person will think about how much money he made, or how much honor he received. A more spiritual person will think about how many pages of Gemara he has learned, and how much of it he remembers. Although this is worthwhile for a person to examine and remember, if a person remains at that level, he has missed the main point. He is missing the main thing to know, which is: the knowledge about oneself.

We have been given 70 years to work on this. We need to think about what has transpired since our childhood, and of our adulthood, if we didn't utilize it properly until now; and from that point onward, we must begin to learn about our own souls, a continuous learning process which lasts a lifetime. If a person at the age of 30 or 40 hasn't discovered anything new about his personality, it is a clear sign that he has stopped trying to understand himself - or, it can be that he has never even begun.

One needs to learn about himself throughout his entire life. In our soul, there are layers upon layers. Until the end of our life, a person is never done learning about his soul.....

4. The Proper Attitude Towards Self-Recognition: A Learning Process, Not An Absolute Knowledge

There is also a certain fundamental approach which we need to have towards our souls, which is the

proper attitude that we need to have, throughout all of this self-studying. It is illustrated through the following example.

At a certain point in one's life, he may desire to learn a certain profession, so that he can earn a livelihood. In some situations, he eventually goes out to work, after learning a profession, and in other cases, he does not. But it can also happen that two years pass after he has begun learning about a certain field, and suddenly, he feels a desire to learn about a different field.

As soon as he feels this new desire to learn about a different field, his newfound feeling is: "This is the real me! For the last two years, I was making a mistake, by learning about that other profession. I didn't understand who "the real me" was!" However, what he forgot is that two years ago, he also that that the profession which he started to learn about is the "real me".

The proper approach he needs to have right now, upon feeling the wish to learn about the new profession, is to realize that he still does not understand who his "real me" is. Instead, he should have the attitude that he is amidst a learning process, of trying to discover the "real me", and the new profession which he will be learning about is only another step in this learning process, of discovering his true personality.

The *sefer Chovos HaLevovos* says that ever since it was decreed upon man "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread", Hashem has given each person different abilities and talents with which they can use to earn livelihood from. One person has a personality that is best suited to become a blacksmith, another person is better fit to be a shoemaker, etc. These areas of work are actually related to aspects of the unique personality that is in each person. A person's livelihood needs to come from an area of work which uses his main strengths, which are part of his natural inner makeup.

If a person doesn't merit finding a job which utilizes his true personality, and instead he works at a job which doesn't really suit his nature, this is a form of exile. An example is if a person is better suited to work in front of a computer in an office, and he can't find a job, so he becomes a taxi driver. Each person is given certain abilities which he can aid him in making a livelihood. Although earning a livelihood is the curse given to mankind, a person who needs to earn livelihood still needs to find a job which utilizes his own talents.

Usually, as soon as a person feels an affinity for something, he immediately decides that he must pursue it, as if "This is me". But if he would remember that in the past he also felt that way, and that he had been mistaken, he would simply realize that his newfound feeling is simply adding more to the learning process about himself.

This doesn't mean that he should ignore what he is feeling and stay away from anything that he feels drawn towards. It just means that he shouldn't be quick to decide that "This is who I am", and that instead he should add it to the learning process about himself. He should look at his new affinity as a passing stage, which is part of his journey of self-knowledge, and that it is another opportunity for him to discover where his true strengths lie.

What usually happens is that whenever a person feels an affinity for a certain job, he immediately pursues it, and after some time he regrets it. Some people, when reaching that point, will do some soul-searching: "Why is it that I want certain things, and after some time I always end up having regrets about it?" The root of the issue is because when the person first wanted it, he identified this desire as "This is who I am", so when he later regrets his actions, he says to himself: "I don't even know what I want from myself! Am I such a confused, mixed-up person??"

If he would have gotten used to the idea that his wishes do not represent his true personality, and

that they are just part of the learning process about himself which aid him in discovering what he really wants, two weeks later when he loses his excitement for what he wanted, he can say to himself that it was only an external, superficial wish that he had, and that it wasn't a part of his actual personality to want this.

One needs to get used to recognizing that whatever he goes through in life is all part of the learning process about himself. Gradually, a person can begin to recognize what his genuine feelings are, and which feelings are accompanying him. As time goes on, he can reveal in himself deeper layers to his personality, digging deeper into his soul.

[In Summary and In Conclusion]

In summation, the "Ruach" level of the soul is, essentially, to learn about oneself. The Vilna Gaon said that a person's primary spiritual level is the "Ruach" point of the soul, because that is the part of the soul where free will is located. This is also the place in the soul where one learns about himself.

All that we have explained here is barely scratching the surface of this topic. Self-recognition is the main fundamental, upon which one builds and develops the potential of his soul. The basis of building our souls is through recognizing ourselves. Everything that we go through in life must become a learning process about ourselves. That is the "Ruach" level of the soul.

ספר דע את נשמתך - פרק יא

1. The "Neshamah" Level of Thought

The *Neshamah* level of the soul corresponds to the analytical power of reflection, which in Hebrew is called *binah* (li. "understanding") or *hisbonenus* (reflection).

The *sefer Derech Etz Chaim* says that "The wise go and constantly think." The difference between a wise person and unwise person is not that the wise person is a thinker and the unwise person is not a thinker, or that the wise person thinks more and the unwise person thinks less. The common quality of all wise people is that they are always in a state of thought. Their minds are always active, and

their thinking is always alert.

The difference between the wise person and the unwise person is, firstly, in the different topics that they think about, and on a deeper level, in their different thinking patterns.

In most people, it is the power of “**action**” which bears the most active role in their life. A small percentage of people are a bit more inward, and they have profound **feelings and emotions**, which plays a very active role in their life. (This doesn’t mean that they never act practically. It is just that their emotions play more of a role in their life, relatively speaking, in comparison to others). An even smaller percentage of people are mainly **thinkers**.

2. Alive Thought vs. Dead Thought

There are many levels to thought. Generally, thought divides into two levels: A thought which is “alive”, and a thought which is “dead”.

In our generation today, there are many kinds of thought. In the technology field, there are computer designers, the electric company, car manufacturers, etc. These experts are not that focused on hands-on action; they are more into the thinking that goes into these things. However, although they are thinkers, their heavy use of thought is a “dead” kind of thought.

For example, if a person opens up a company, he may spend 8-10 hours reviewing the orders and request, inspecting his warehouse, coming up with solutions to problems, sending out technological assistance, thinking about the best ways to profit, etc. However, he is not really “living” that which he builds. The thinking that he spends on it is only superficial. When he is done putting together everything that has to get done, he is not more connected to it just because he has thought a lot about it. Even while the company is being built, it does not express the thoughts of his soul. It is just ideas and quick flashes of inspiration. Although he gets a building and a company from all of his thinking and planning, these thoughts are not a representation of his essence. They are external thoughts, not a kind of thought that he is inwardly connected to.

There is nothing wrong with such thoughts, from a viewpoint of *halachah* (Jewish law). But we should understand that these are not the kind of thoughts which the Ramchal describes as “The wise go and think constantly.” The earlier philosophers would ponder thoughts that were closer to a “soul” kind of thought, and especially the thinkers who lived a little before 1000 years ago, and even after that, where people whose thoughts were closer to the soul. Whereas the thinkers of long ago were expressing thoughts that were “alive”, the thinkers of today are expressing thoughts that can be called “dead”.

When the Ramchal describes power of constantly active thought, this is not the same kind of thought as a person who keeps thinking how to make more money, or a person who is thinking of how to open a company. A “wise” thinker is rather someone who thinks a kind of thought that is constant and alive - a kind of thought that is vitality-giving and energizing, not a superficial kind of thought.

A person may spend the entire day in thought, thinking about various aspects of life, but these thoughts are not connected with his essence. Rather, they are “outside” thoughts. A person in charge of an organization has to think all day, answering phones from morning until night, but these thoughts do not represent his being. These thoughts are external to him, and they are not connected with his essence, with his soul.

3. Revealing The Soul’s Power of Thinking

The Ramchal’s description of a power of thought that is constantly active is a kind of thought that comes from within a person’s soul, from his inside. Why does the wise person think constantly? It is because he has revealed the power of thought.

Let us use the following analogy from our life, in order to understand this. If we ask a person why he constantly breathes in and out, what is the answer? Is it a spontaneous ability which escorts a person wherever he is? Is it an action that happens because he has no control over it? Clearly, that is not the reason why he constantly breathes. The reason why a person keeps inhaling and exhaling is because it is his very vitality. The same can be true of the power of thought. When a person has revealed the power of thought, he will think constantly, because thinking has become his very vitality.

The wise person [or Torah scholar] is constantly thinking because he is aware of the necessity to think, and that it is an act that keeps him inwardly alive, no less necessary than the act of inhaling and exhaling which keeps a person physically alive. Just as a person must breathe in order to stay alive, so do seekers of wisdom feel that they must always be in a state of thinking, in order to stay alive. The Rambam rules that when a student goes into exile, his Torah teacher goes with him, for “to be without wisdom and without Torah is like death to them.”[\[1\]](#) ^[1]

In other words, the power to constantly think does not stem from an intellectual perspective in which a person simply understands that life is about becoming a thinker. It is not the same thinking as the ideologists, who feel that people should become wise thinkers simply for its own sake. This is a perspective which comes from a superficial outlook towards life, which holds that a person who isn’t an intellectual is a lowly, unsuccessful person, whereas a knowledgeable person is dignified and worthy of attention, etc. This is the superficial perspective of universities that values the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, which, even when achieved, is only an external level of knowledge that does not express one’s inner being.

Such “wisdom” is even worse than the Torah learning of Doeg and Achitophel, whose Torah learning was only “from the lips and outward” – for they [the universities] are not involved with the soul’s actual power of thinking, but with studying matters that are not connected with man’s inner being. A person may ponder matters of science or anything else in the world, but with no internal connection to it. It is just a study of wisdom for the sake of wisdom.[\[2\]](#) [2]

When a person studies medicine, biology, or any other field, this has no connection to his being. When he thinks and studies this kind of knowledge, it does not come from his true power of thought. Instead, he has the belief that it is a good to become knowledgeable about things, or perhaps even more so, because he is a natural thinker who is drawn towards various areas of knowledge, no less than how a person who loves to talk will be drawn towards talking. But this kind of thinking does not come from the soul’s power to think. It is only some small spark of it [and hence not enough to make it spiritual].

The true power of thought, which comes from one’s inner being, and which is constantly active once it is revealed, is only revealed to a person who realizes that his very vitality comes from thinking. [Understandably, there is also a higher source of vitality than this, but we are not dealing with that level here]. One who has the understanding can then reveal and awaken the power of thought within him, as a natural and constantly active ability. One can come to understand that the power of thought is a natural part of his system, just like he has a natural circulation of blood, a natural ability to inhale and exhale, a nervous system, etc. When a person reveals the *neshamah*, he reveals a natural power of thinking, from within him.

This was the difference between true scholars, with all other scholars. The scholars who possessed true wisdom were those whose thinking came from within them, whereas all other scholars got their thinking from the outside, and not from within.

4. Acquired Thinking Patterns – The Gain and The Drawback

Our point here is not only regarding what the source of true thought is (which can only come from the soul, from inside the person, as opposed to any knowledge acquired from outside). That is, understandably, the root. But here we are aiming at how to identify the *results* of true thinking: It concerns the topic that one is thinking about, and, taking it deeper, it is about the way of thought [the thinking patterns].

Most people do not have their own independent way of thinking. It is almost nonexistent. Instead, they get their thinking from reading newspaper articles, and from their social circles which they are found in. Their way of thinking is generally coming from these outside sources, with only minimal thinking on their own, with some more and some less. This is especially the case in recent years,

where people are connected with the media. Since most people are not disconnected from the media, their thinking is mostly coming from the world outside of them.

Avraham Avinu was the beginning of our nation. He did not receive his thinking from the outside. He estranged himself from the ways of thinking of his father Terach, and his thinking came from within him. The Sages state that at three years old, Avraham recognized his Creator.^[3] ^[3] This is because he would reflect from within himself.

Thus, **we can understand that although our own thinking patterns must also be built from outside of us - that is, from the knowledge we have received in a tradition from our ancestors and Rabbis** - along with this, there is a corresponding task to build a way of thinking that comes from within ourselves [as individuals].

The Sages praise one who does not say anything which he did not hear from his [Torah] teachers.^[4] ^[4] On the other hand, the Sages state that every novel Torah thought of every Torah student was already received by Moshe Rabbeinu from the mouth of Hashem.^[5] ^[5] If one does not say any words of Torah which he didn't hear from his Torah teacher, what new Torah thoughts are there for him to say? And if he does state his own novel Torah thoughts, how can he do this, if he shouldn't say any Torah thoughts that he didn't hear from his Torah teacher?

The answer to this is because on one hand, we have the path of Torah thinking which we receive from our Rabbis [in a chain of tradition that has been passed down throughout the generations], and simultaneously, we also have a path of our own, individualized thinking.

We have seen this throughout the generations. When we learn the words of Torah which were taught by the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, do we see that they all had the same ways of thinking? When a person learns a section of Gemara with the commentaries of the *Rishonim*, and then he sees the commentaries of the *Acharonim*, he sees that there are different ways of thought, all the way until the most recent generations. When one is familiar with the different styles of thinking in Torah learning that existed, he is well-aware that there are big differences between them.

Here is an example. Two or three generations ago, a large amount of the Jewish people lived in Europe. There were two different styles of thinking there: Vilna and Poland. One can tell the difference between these two schools of thought by examining the *sefarim* of Torah scholars who came from Vilna and Poland. The same question of *halachah* which was sent to two different rabbis, one in Vilna and one in Poland, would have two completely different responses. And had the question been sent to the Torah scholars who lived in Spain, there would have been a third response which was of completely different way of thinking.

We are saying here that there are different ways to think. If a person is born in Spain, naturally, his thinking will be like the traditional way of thinking in Spain. He was born there and he grew up there, so he is used to thinking like how they think in Spain. But he is not being truthful. Just because he was born in Spain doesn't mean that he has to think like those in Spain. Perhaps he is supposed to adapt the way of thinking that is in Poland! And the same is true for a person who was born and raised in Poland - it may be that he is really supposed to think like those in Spain!

The reality of today is that a person has gotten used to a certain way of thinking, which is based on where he grew up - and with that thinking, he lives his life. All of his thinking is based on the foundations which he received, and he hasn't yet parted from it. Even if a person tries to learn everything again from scratch, he wouldn't succeed, because his thinking patterns have already been set in a certain direction, and it is upon those thinking patterns that he will base everything on. It can be compared to a cup which contains some crumbs. Any beverage which we pour into the cup will have crumbs floating in it, because the crumbs remain inside the cup.

5. The First Step - Acquiring a Traditional Way of Thinking From Our Torah Teachers

Thus, the definition here is that a person must examine the root of the very way he thinks. The question now is: How does a person reach it?

There is an external method, and an inner method.

The external method is that a person needs to get used to learning the *sefarim* of the many different kinds of wise Torah leaders of the Jewish people. (This is in contrast to the behavior of the current generation, where each person only learns the *sefarim* of his particular sect of Jewry. This is one of the gravest errors which we can possibly find).

After a person has seen all the many different 'colors', he can then discern which 'color' he feels he is closer to. This is not determined by the place where one currently lives, or where he was born, or where he was educated, or which sect of Jewry which his father was connected with. (This does not contradict the honor to his father. His father is certainly precious and he deserves to be honored. But the son is allowed to learn about where he personally belongs, and he is allowed to think in a different way than his father did).

In order for a person to recognize where he personally belongs, he needs to learn *sefarim* of many different 'colors', and slowly, as he learns more, he will begin to identify if he feels closer to a certain way of thinking. If a person begins to examine himself on the inside and he immediately feels that he is supposed to think like the way of thinking of the place he was born and raised in, it is very possible that he hasn't yet examined well what he read and learned about. He is simply remaining in his

'comfort zone'. But it is also possible that the particular way of thinking he feels drawn to is indeed the one that he truly belongs to.

Firstly, in order for a person to reach even the minimum level of independent thought, he must read the sefarim of our Rabbis, from the times of the *Geonim* and *Rishonim* through the times of the *Acharonim*, from all of the generations. After this studying, he should then see: "Where do I belong in all of this?" The purpose of this is not, *chas v'shalom*, to belittle or negate any of the paths which he doesn't connect to. "All of them are holy, all of them are pure, all of them are clear, all of them are pure." It is just that one needs to find where "I" belong to, amidst all of the different paths.

When people learn Torah exclusively with a certain way of thinking, this can be compared to a person who is asked to plant a wheat field, and instead he plants a grapevine, but the field isn't meant for a grapevine. In the same way, it's possible that a person will go his whole life using a certain way of thinking which is the wrong 'color' for his personal soul.

Our eyes can see that most people remain in the sect of Jewry which they were born into, and in the place where they were born. Understandably, many people returning to Judaism have uprooted themselves from their previous place, but most people in the world remain where they are and with their same ways of living and thinking.

If we have understood by now the need to build the power of independent thought, which must first be preceded with acquiring a way of thinking from our outside, it is by first reading and hearing all the necessary information of the holy Torah that there is for us to know, in all of its many 'colors' [the different accepted ways of thinking of the Torah]. Only after we have amassed this study can we identify which 'color' we are closer to, and to which particular sect of Jewry we belong more to.

Understandably, people can feel differently about where they belong to, depending on the particular time or period of the year. At one time of the year, a person will feel more connected to a certain point, and at other times in his life, he will feel that he more appropriately belongs to a different point. In order to know this, one should refer to the previous chapter, where we explained about how a person must know his personal world of feelings – one must learn about who he is, by examining his different feelings and perspectives. In the same way, a person must learn about his own way of thinking, by examining his thinking patterns.

In summary, first a person must learn a way of thinking which he acquires from his outside. We explained that this requires a person to read through many different 'colors' of Torah, many different ways of thinking in the Torah, which are all the ways of our teachers. After this, a person can then begin to identify which way of thinking he feels closer to and more personally connected to.

Clearly, **we do not mean** that after one has discerned a particular way of thinking which he feels closer to, that he should only learn the same *sefer* again and again which reflects that style of thinking he mainly connects to. Rather, all it means is that he should now place his central focus on the particular way of thinking which he feels the most connected to, but in the meantime, he should certainly learn other *sefarim*, so that he can 'complete the pieces of the puzzle'. But his soul will be getting vitality from the central way of thinking which he feels that he has found himself in.

6. The Second Step - Acquiring Independent Thought

Until now we learned about identifying our personal way of thinking, through outside means. Now we will explain the internal ways of revealing our personal way of thinking, which comes from within.

In order to reach an internal power of thought, we need to simply **get used to thinking!**

One of the *Roshei Yeshivos* in Yerushalayim would present a question to his students and ask them what they have to say about it. There were several gains of this, but there is one particular gain from this approach, which is relevant to our discussion.

Consider the following example. Many people are familiar with learning *Chumash* with the explanation of *Rashi*. Often, *Rashi* asks a question and then gives the answer. If a person sees *Rashi's* question and immediately proceeds to the answer, he will never reach his ability to have independent thought.

If one wishes to truly reach his ability of independent thought, he should make the following change to his style of learning. When he reads *Rashi's* question, he should pause, and close the *Chumash*. Then he should think to himself: "What is a possible answer to this question?" He should think of all the possibilities, and keep thinking it over. If he doesn't come up with an answer, he shouldn't despair, and try the same thing again when he comes to the next question.

If he does come up with one answer to the question, or more, he should then check *Rashi's* answer. If *Rashi's* answer is the same as the one he figured out, it is a sign that he has reached *Rashi's* way of thinking, from within himself! This is an inner revelation of the self.

Clearly, our intention in revealing the self should not be for the purpose of conceitedness, but to reveal the power of thought of the *neshamah* that resides within us. Through doing your own thinking into each question you come across, before seeing the answer, you begin to awaken the root of your *neshamah*.

Rashi was able to ask his question and answer his question because he had clearly revealed his power of “holy intellect”, which is the *neshamah*. Since he had revealed his *neshamah*, he was able to know the answer to his question. From the very same inner place in the soul where *Rashi* was able to produce the answer, every person as well can reveal the answer to *Rashi’s* question, from within his own soul. The soul is a “small universe”, which includes in it all of the existing aspects of the universe, and therefore a person must reveal his own independent way of thinking.

In our educational systems, from childhood through the teenage years, we can tell that there are many places where they teach people how to be robots. They teach the students that regarding a particular issue, there is a certain question, and they present the exact way that the question must be asked, along with three answers: according to *Rashi*, according to the *Ramban*, according to the *Ritva*. Then there is a test, and everyone has to write down these three answers to the question. This is a good approach if we want to teach students how to become parrots, but in order to teach them how to be a “person”, we need to bring him to a situation where he thinks!

When I was in *yeshiva* high school, there was a Rosh Yeshivah there who gave an in-depth Gemara *shiur*, as is the way of the *yeshivos*. But he would always tell us, “I request of you, please, not to believe me if I tell you something in the name of the *Ketzos HaChoshen*, open up the *sefer* and check it.”

What is the depth behind this approach? It is true that a person must have *emunas chachamim* (faith in the Torah sages), and he must believe that everything written by our Rabbis is true (and if he doesn’t understand something that he comes across, he should mark it for himself that “I don’t understand”); one should understand that all of their words are true and that it is just that he doesn’t understand, and this is the basis from which we must start. But if we want to reach the *neshamah* within us, we need to awaken the power of thought which exists in each and every one of us.

Those who are found outside the world of Torah, who aren’t involved in the holy study of Torah, are mostly not thinking. They are just taking life as it comes, without doing any thinking. Even when they learn a profession, which requires some thinking, this is just gathering information.

There was a young student in our *yeshivah* who memorized all of the phone numbers of everyone who lived in Gush Dan. It would seem that this boy should earn the title of “*gaon*” (an exceptionally brilliant person). But of what use is his knowledge? He simply memorized information. Computers can do a much better job at that today. Within moments, a computer can connect to all of information on every telephone number in the country, as well as the planet. But this is not called thinking, because it is just electronically stored information.

If that is not called thinking, then what is? It’s simple: a person has to become someone who thinks!

Some people, when they have a question about the weekly *parshah*, will quickly open up the *Chumash Mikraos Gedolos*, to see which of the *mefarshim* (commentaries) discuss their question and what they answer. They find their question and answer in *Rashi*, *Ramban*, *Kli Yakar*, *Ohr HaChaim*, or *Malbim*. This approach needs to be switched for a different one. *Baruch Hashem*, the person has merited to ask a good question about the holy Torah. So he should stop and think for 15 minutes, of how to answer his question, on his own!

If he can't think on his own for 15 minutes, he should try it for 10 minutes. If that is too hard, he should try thinking for 5 minutes. If he can't do even that, he should try thinking for just one minutes, or even half a minute! But he should start getting used to thinking!

The point of getting used to thinking is to bring a person to a revelation of the *neshamah* within him, through reflecting on each thing he comes across.

As an example, when a person is reading a verse in the *Chumash*, instead of immediately turning to *Rashi*, he should read the verse several times and keep asking himself: "Is everything clear here? Do I understand each word?" If something is unclear, he should begin to clarify what he understands and what he doesn't understand. He should think about what he doesn't understand about the verse, and try to come up with way to explain the verse. Only after that should he check the explanation of *Rashi*.

If he sees that his thinking matches the explanation of *Rashi*, it shows that he has revealed *Rashi's* thinking within himself. If *Rashi* has a different explanation than his own, he needs to think why *Rashi* gave this explanation specifically, and not the one he thought of. One should also realize that just because *Rashi* didn't explain it like you doesn't mean that your explanation is wrong. There are 70 facets of understanding to each verse in the Torah. Instead of rejecting your explanation because *Rashi* gave a different one, examine your explanation better and see if perhaps you were making a mistake about something.

Acquiring the ability of independent thought is more applicable to men, who have the commandment to study Torah in-depth, and hence less applicable to women. However, women also need to have a constantly active power of thought. The necessity to think is not an issue that depends on gender. Anyone who doesn't develop their ability of thought will become bombarded from the many different responsibilities of life, from running all over the place to take care of things, but with no time to ever think.

The power of thought must become constantly alert and active. One needs to get used to thinking about each thing he encounters. For a Jew, there is no shortage of holy topics to think about and fill the mind with. But one must also think about everything he comes across in the world. When we discussed thought on the level of "*Nefesh*", we gave examples from the world, in how a person can begin to develop his world of thought, beginning from the basic aspects of the material reality that

found in front of us. From there, we can go further into the realm of thought, to the deeper layers of the *neshamah*.

[*Thinking About Your Emotions*]

[We need to think as well about the emotions we experience]. A person has a baby born to him. Everyone is happy for him and wishing him "*Mazal Tov*". Does anyone stop to think what the meaning of "*Mazal Tov*" is? Everyone is saying it, but do they understand what they are saying? When a person experiences the birth of a baby, this is one of the deepest experiences in life, especially if it is his first child. Any new parent will feel tremendous joy. But does a person stop to think of *why* he is happy?

A person is about to get married. Does he ever think why he is getting married? Does he think of what his joy is? If people would think deeply into why they are getting married, it is certain that 70% of people would change their minds! But the reality is that not even one person thinks that deeply into it. (Even the 30% who would still decide to get married, even after realizing what marriage is, would only do so because they have made an inner decision to do so, and therefore they want to live up to their decision.)

The reality is, however, that every person getting married realizes only afterward that he had no idea what he was entering into. After being married, a person slowly realizes what it means to get married. Today, a person may consider the gains versus the drawbacks of getting married, and still decide to get married, but 70% of people, after considering this, would take a step back – not because they don't want to get married, but because they would simply become too afraid of the difficulties. In our times, there is a considerable amount of people who aren't getting married. Those who do get married are doing so either because they have great inner understanding about life, or because they do not think that much.

Marriage is a big step in life to take, and yet people don't think about it beforehand. A boy or girl who reaches marriageable age will immediately start looking for a match. But does anyone think at all of why they should get married? Perhaps one will say to this, "What's the question? Everyone is getting married, so why shouldn't we?" Nobody thought, "Maybe I shouldn't get married..." But if a person got married and he never even considered the possibility of "Maybe I shouldn't", this is like a goat which sticks its head into bucket of water in front of it, and immediately starts drinking.

Obviously, our intention here is not that people shouldn't be getting married. Our point here is that whenever a person is about to do something, before sticking his head into it, he should first think: "Should I do it, or should I not do it?"

If one is on a higher level, his intentions are closer to the sake of Heaven, and he will get married

because he knows that there is a *mitzvah* upon a man to get married, and a woman has certain marital obligations as well (to some extent). But first, before getting married, one should think if he should do it or not. After he has thought about it, he should then conclude: "Does Hashem obligate me to do this? Yes." He can also recognize that he isn't getting married entirely for the sake of Heaven. After doing such thinking, he will be clearer if he should do it or not. He can weigh the options, of why he should do it and why he shouldn't do it, and then decide.

Once a *chassid* asked the Kotzker Rebbe, "How can I become a true, devout *chassid*?" The Kotzker responded: "When you get up in the morning, before you go to *daven*, think a little about the following: "After *davening*, I will be getting ready to eat breakfast - right? After all, the Gemara says that there is an obligation to eat bread in the morning. So, think to yourself: Who says that I should first *daven* and then eat? Maybe it should be the other way around - that I should first eat and then *daven*?" The *chassid* trembled and immediately countered, "But it's forbidden to eat before *davening*!" The Kotzker said to him: "Pay attention to what you have just said. Perhaps the reason why you don't eat in the morning before *davening* is because you are simply not hungry then."

The point of this thinking is for one to first take apart a matter and to understand it more accurately. In the above example of the *halachah* not to eat before *davening*, one must first see that he does not wish to eat before *davening*, and then he should think this thought apart: What is the real reason that I am not eating before *davening*? It is because Hashem has said what the order of the day should be. First we must *daven*, and then we eat."

Then, when he goes to *daven* and when he goes to eat, he should do so with this awareness: "I, personally, would like to eat before *davening*. Or, perhaps I don't want to eat before *davening* (because I'm not hungry in the morning). But even if my personal preference is to eat before *davening*, I am holding myself back, because Hashem gave me a Torah to follow."

Clearly, the Kotzker Rebbe's words to the *chassid* were not only for the purpose of bringing a person to have intentions for the sake of Heaven (which would be a deeper point). There is a more basic and fundamental point here: For a person to train himself to be more aware of his intentions, in what he does.

The average person does not eat before *davening* because it is simply part of his daily routine, and he does not pay attention to what he does or doesn't do. This is not an issue of having intentions for the sake of Heaven or not. It is simply a lack of awareness to what he's doing. He might be a very organized person, who first *davens* before eating anything, and later he learned the *halachah* that it is forbidden to eat before *davening*. But he did not do so out of any awareness to what he was doing.

A person gets up in the morning and goes to *daven*. Does he ever think, "Maybe I shouldn't go?" He may think that any other option is unthinkable, and say, "*Chas v'shalom*. There is an obligation to go *daven* in the morning. Chazal enacted three obligatory *tefillos* a day!" Of course he is correct. But a

more truthful perspective would be: "I got up in the morning, tired, and with no strength to go *daven*. So why did I go to *daven*? It was because I know that the Torah obligates me to go *daven*. I need to align with my actions and my feelings to the Torah, and to desire to go *daven*." One needs to examine his motivations and think about what he is doing, and why.

There are countless examples of this idea, and it takes a lifetime to work upon. In any of the examples, the main point must be understood: in order for a person to reach the *neshamah* within him, he must think more.

[Training Ourselves To Think]

There's a line in a *sefer* which says, "All of the abbreviated *halachah sefarim* of our times, abbreviate the life and years of a person." In the past, in order for a person to know a certain *halachah*, he didn't have a choice but to open up the *Shulchan Aruch*, learn the *Magen Avraham* and the *Taz*, then the *Pri Megadim*, until he concluded what the *halachah* was. Today, *Baruch Hashem*, on every topic in *halachah* you can find abbreviated *halachah sefarim*, with an index in the back of the *sefer*, and then you can immediately find what you want. Clearly, there is an advantage to this, which we are not coming to negate. But the very approach [of these *sefarim*] has caused many people not to think.

In recent years, new editions of *Gemaras* have been produced, with easy-to-read commentaries. For many years, there were *Gedolei Yisrael* who were opposed to it, for the reason that it prevents a person from truly thinking while learning the words of the Gemara. It used to be that a person had no choice but to think, when he learned the Gemara. But if a Gemara has periods and commas in it which make it easier to read, and with easy-to-read commentaries on the side that simply the Gemara learning process, a person does not think at all. However, since we live in times where Torah study needs to be especially increased, the Gedolim permitted the use of such Gemara's.

Even so, there is a clear reason why there was opposition to these Gemara's. It is because a person was born to reveal the *neshamah* within him, and in order to reveal it, a person has to reach a point where his intellect is constantly active. If everything is 'spoon-fed' to us, we cannot get anywhere.

We need to train ourselves to get used to thinking. After training ourselves, we must then do the same with our children, and educate them to think. Many times a child will ask, "Why?" Before answering the child, tell him, "Think about it, and then I'll tell you why." After that, you can answer him. But before you give him the answer, give him a minute to think. Ask the child: "What do you think about this?" You don't have to 'spoon-feed' every answer to the child. This is applicable not only with children, but also with ourselves.

When you come across a question, pause and think about it. If you see two answers to a question,

begin to think why the first answer didn't want to say the second answer, and why the second answer didn't want to say the first answer. As long as it is a point which can be thought about, one should train himself not to quickly see the answer, but to stop for a moment and think about the question. We are not losing anything from this. To the contrary, we will be gaining. We will be gaining our *neshamah* from it, along the way.

The *neshamah* is the power of thinking which is found within us. It is the root of the revelation of G-dliness that is found within man. If we wish to get anywhere, we must know that a person who doesn't think has no hope!

Our life is successful only if we have "the mind controls the heart." We first need an actively working mind! If one does not develop his mind, he certainly will have no control over his heart. And if he doesn't have control over his heart, he will simply follow his heart's natural emotions, which do not enable a person to reach his *neshamah*.

In our times, a person can find quick indexes which give brief definitions of the deepest possible matters. There are certainly advantages to this, but at the same time it trains us not to think. In the past, when a person would begin to learn a tractate of Gemara, he would jump into it and arrange and clarify the matters by himself, and that is how he would enter further into the tractate. Today, the new Gemara's have two introductory pages at the beginning which give a general summary of the topics to be discussed, and immediately a person receives a clarity on what he will be learning about. On one hand, this gives him something, but at the same time, it makes him lose so much - because it trains him not to think.

The Chazon Ish would learn the Gemara first without looking at *Rashi's* explanation. First he would try to understand it on his own, and only after that would he check to see what *Rashi* said. This is not conceitedness, but an inner perspective, of training oneself to think. The Chazon Ish was known in the generation for his brilliance, and the reason for this is clear - it is because he trained himself to think about each thing.

There is a story told about Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, that once a person came into his room and saw that Reb Chaim's clock was several minutes later than the real time. The person there asked Reb Chaim: "Why doesn't the Rav set the clock to the exact time?" Reb Chaim answered, "I want to train myself that whenever I look at the clock, I am also thinking, besides for just seeing what the time is. When the clock isn't accurate, I have to figure it myself." That is an example of a person whose mind was strongly active, to the point that he was also able to place his head against the wall and think entirely about his Torah learning and forgetting about everything else in the reality around him.

These were men whose minds were active, who trained themselves to think about each thing. That was how they reached the inner point within them. This is not to say that it is the very innermost point, because there is more [in the soul] to reach than this. But in order to proceed further, we must

build the power of thinking that is deep inside us.

May Hashem merit all of us to reach the ability of holy intellect, and from there, to attach ourselves with the Creator.

[1] [6] Rambam Hilchos Rotzeiach 7:1

[2] [7] *Editor's Note: It is well-known that "wisdom for the sake of wisdom" was the Greek mentality and the epitome of the Greek exile which threatened the spiritual well-being of the Jewish people during the period of Chanukah.*

[3] [8] Nedarim 32a

[4] [9] Succah 28a

[5] [10] Megillah 19b

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