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## Droshos - What to Do when You are Down

### ***Sivan - The Month of "Walking"***

Every month has a special power in it, and the special power found in the month of Sivan is "*halichah*" - walking.<sup>[1]</sup> This is not referring to physical walking, but walking with our soul. What is walking with our soul? It is not just another ability we have, but it is a power which encompasses the full spectrum of our soul.

When a child grows into an adult, at a certain point he stops growing. A woman at a certain point in life stops being fertile. Physical growth is limited - but spiritual growth never ends. When a person studies a profession, like if he studies to become a doctor or a lawyer, he learns much knowledge, and there comes a point in life where he has reached the peak of how much he can know about these fields. The growth in areas of knowledge eventually stops. Here we will speak about a kind of growth that never stops: our spiritual growth.

#### ***Endless Growth***

*Chazal* say that Torah scholars are always advancing to another level, and they never stop<sup>[2]</sup>. The kind of walking that is the power of the month of Sivan is this kind of endless walking - *halichah* - it is an ability in a person to have endless growth.

There is no person who doesn't have times of growth in his *Avodas Hashem* (spiritual improvement and service towards G-d). We all have a desire to grow in spirituality. But most people experience this desire only temporarily, and then people usually go back to their routine in life, and then they stop desiring to grow. Even when people do restart their spiritual growth, it is not a continuation from where they last left off, but they have to start all over from scratch.

We need to find a place within ourselves that enables us to have endless growth - to never stop growing in spirituality. As one of the Sages said, "I have seen those who grow spiritually, but they are few."<sup>[3]</sup> There are people who are constantly advancing in their spiritual growth.

The question is: don't we all need to rest sometimes? How is it possible to always be involved in growth? Don't we need to relax...?

#### ***How To View Breaks***

Here we come to a great fundamental in life. All of us go through stages in our life - we go through times that are hard either physically and emotionally. One who constantly grows spiritually learns how

to grow from these situations, while a non-growing person falls apart from difficult times.

One who wants to constantly grow more in his spirituality knows that he has to relax as well, but he understands that resting is in order to re-energize so that he can have return to progress. A non-growing person, however, relaxes so he can sit back and take it easy – he does not desire to continue his growth. When he relaxes, he disconnects from spiritual growth.

It is impossible for a person to constantly be in growth mode when it comes to our spiritual progress. This is because we all have times that are simply too difficult. We all have times in which we are slowed down to a halt, times in which we feel like we can't go on anymore. So we all need to take a break sometimes from our progress - but the only issue is how we *view* these situations. Are we looking at these breaks as a way to give up on our growth – so that we can sit back and just take it easy - or are we looking at our breaks as a way to refresh ourselves so that we can have more energy to go on?

That is the question we should ask ourselves: we need to realize how we view our necessary breaks, with what attitude are we going about it.

### ***Holding Onto Our “Fire” When We Go Dry***

There is another way to deal with the times in our life in which we don't feel any drive to grow.

[To illustrate the concept we are about to mention], let's say a woman is cooking supper for her family, and suddenly she realizes she needs to leave the house to take care of an errand. Either she can put out the fire on the stove when she leaves, or she can lower the flame a little. What's the difference? If she turns off the flame completely, the food gets cold, and she may have to start cooking it all over again when she comes back. But if she just lowers the flame, the food will stay warm, and when she comes back, she can continue cooking from where she left off without having to start all over again.

The same can apply to our own personal situations in life. When we have to “stop” sometimes and take a break, we need to be able to hold onto our inner “flame” of growth, and not to put it out just because we're relaxing. That is how we should go about our difficult times, in which we lack the motivation to grow: by knowing that even though we can't grow fully, at least we can grow a little. Hold onto your “flame” at least a little, even though your flame isn't being ignited so much – and in this way, you retain your aspirations and hold onto them even as you're not actively involved in spiritual growth. You can do this by remembering the times in which you *did* grow.

### ***Good Times and Bad Times***

Rabbeinu Tam writes in *Sefer HaYoshor* that every person has “Days of Love” and “Days of Hatred” – in other words, we periodically have “good” times and “bad” times. Our “good times” are when our soul feels opened, and we thus feel good about ourselves. During our good period, our emotions and our thoughts are positive. Our “bad times” are when our soul feels closed up – when we feel negative about ourselves, and we aren't experiencing positive emotions and thoughts.

What are we supposed to do during our bad times – our “Days of Hate”, as Rabbeinu Tam describes it?

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz *zt"l* said that the way is to hold onto our inner fire, as we described above. We should hold onto our previous growth even though we are currently in a time when we aren't growing. In this way, we connect our current dismal period with our uplifting periods. By holding onto some of our growth even as we take a break, we form a connection between our “bad” times and “good”

times, and then we can survive even the bad times!

For example, if a man always was used to learning five pages of *Gemara* a day when he felt that he was in a period of growth, and now he finds himself in a period where he feels that his willpower has weakened, he can still learn four pages of *Gemara*. He can tell himself that although right now he's not up to it to learn five pages of *Gemara*, at least he's able to learn four pages of *Gemara*.

Another example: If someone learns with a *chavrusa* (study partner) for ten minutes a day and then a day comes where he doesn't feel like learning with his *chavrusa*, he can at least learn with his *chavrusa* for two minutes a day.

If someone has ten a minutes a day in which he or she sits quietly and talks to Hashem, and then a hard day comes in which a person feels that he/she has no motivations whatsoever to do this, then one can at least do it for two minutes. That is something one can do no matter how hard of a period he/she is in.

In this way, even if you aren't actively involved in a period of spiritual growth, you are still somehow involved in growth, in spite of the dismal period you're going through.

### **We Need Both Attitudes**

We mentioned two ways how we can survive difficult times in which we don't feel like working on ourselves. Let us summarize them - and we will see why we in reality, we need both.

The first way is that when we are in a hard time, we can tell ourselves that really we want to grow right now, but we are just taking a break so we can re-energize and have more strength to later progress. The second way is to take some small growth with us even into the times when we don't feel like growing, "lowering the flame", as opposed to putting it out totally.

We need both ways simultaneously. Everything in life has an external layer to it and an internal way to it. The first way we mentioned is the external layer of our avodah here, while the second way is the inner layer of the avodah here.

Let's say a person only uses the second way, which is the inner way. The person is in a rut, so she decides that she will grow at least a little, even though she can't grow fully. This alone won't be enough, because a person has to realize as well that her break from growth is really a way for her to reenergize. A person has to realize that even if I can't grow fully right now (because I am growing through a very hard time right now and I am too stressed out to work on myself), I am taking a break right now so that eventually, I will be able to return to my growth, reenergized.

And if a person only uses the first way, which is to view the situation as only a temporary break - but she doesn't try to grow at all during a hard time - it will also not be enough. When a person completely stops *Avodas Hashem* and gives up totally from continuing - even if it's only a temporary period of total despair - then the person's desire to grow in *Avodas Hashem* may become lost totally.

So when we go through a hard time in our life and we don't have the strength to work on ourselves and grow, we need two things: we need to look back at the times of growth even as we are not actively growing, and in this way we hold onto some growth even as we're in a rut; and we also need to know that although right now we are taking a break from growth, the plan is really to return to eventually return to our growth.

### **Failures Are Not Failures**

Finally, there is a third step we will add onto this and clarify.

When a person is in a difficult time and he doesn't feel a drive to grow, there are two attitudes he can have. One attitude is to completely give up: "That's it. I've had enough, and I can't take it anymore. Today is a bad day, and I'm only going downhill. I can't work on myself today."

But the other attitude he can have is to have a different perspective on the situation: "My soul needs a break sometimes. I can't always be growing. It's really not a *bad* day - it's a day that I have to go through, because it's normal for my soul to feel closed up sometimes, [since Rabbeinu Tam has written that] everyone has these "Days of Hate"."

We can compare this to going to sleep. Although sleep is not productive, is sleep a bad thing? No one looks at sleep as unproductive, because we all realize that we need to go to sleep in order to reenergize. We can't function unless we get our sleep. Taking a break is part of life, and we must not look down at ourselves for this.

The difficult times in our life are thus really not "difficult" or "bad". Rather, they are like our sleep. It is necessary for us sometimes to pull back from growth, and let us not beat ourselves up that something is wrong with us that we don't feel any willpower to grow spiritually. If you have those days in which you don't feel like learning or *davening* or making any spiritual progress, realize that it's normal, and that it is actually a necessary part of your growth to go through these times in which you lack motivation.

This can change our whole attitude about life! Our soul needs to rest sometimes - we can't always grow and reach higher levels. This is not a fall from our level - it is a necessary part of our growth. "Failures" are thus not really "failures" - they are needed for our growth.

This is important to know even while you're in a period of growth and you feel fine. You need to prepare yourself for those times in which you will find it hard, by telling yourself that in order to grow, we need to go through a constant cycle of rising and falling from our level.

### ***In Conclusion***

In the month of Sivan, we didn't just receive the Torah. We received the power of a Jew - the power to always grow, no matter what we feel like we're in. Our difficult times are like times in which we go to sleep.

This power is revealed in the month of Sivan, but we must take it with us to the rest of the year: remember that no matter what, a Jew never gives up.

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### ***Questions & Answers with the Rav***

Q1: *What is an example of a good point to hold onto when we are going through difficult times?*

ANSWER: Good question. There are two opposite powers in the soul: despair, and hope. When a

person is in a going through a dismal period and he despairs, and he is too accepting of the despair, he is weakening the “fire” of his hope. The only thing a person needs to do, in order to access the power of tikva/hope, is for a person to know that “I will soon return to the way things were.” Practically speaking, a person should understand that his soul needs to go to “sleep” sometimes, just as the body needs sleep [meaning that the soul isn’t able to perform at it best, during a dismal period].

*Q2: So when a person is awakening the power of hope, there is nothing specific which a person needs to hope for?*

ANSWER: You only need to be on the proper level to do so, to have hope that you will certainly return to the way things were before, and that you can certainly succeed. This doesn’t meant to simply say “I hope” superficially, but to feel truly confident that Hashem will certainly help you succeed.

*Q3: If a person gets sick and is physically not able to do anything, and he doesn’t even have a minute or two minutes a day to work on the idea of increasing the power of “hope”, is there anything she can do, to grow right now?*

ANSWER: If he doesn’t have 2 minutes, he can still find half a minute for this.

*Q4: The sick person can only think about hope, but he has no one to work on it together with and speak about. For example, he was used to learning every day with a chavrusa, and now that he is ill, he has no one to verbalize his hope with.*

ANSWER: So he can do it while learning alone.

*Q5: But there are days when an ill person will find even this too difficult for him to do.*

ANSWER: He still has a second or where he can find time to work on this – in spite of the fact that the yetzer hora (evil inclination) is very strong.

*Q5: If a person’s ratzon (will) dries up, how can he get it going again?*

ANSWER: During a dismal period, a person should not focus on action (maaseh) that much, and instead he should focus more on maintaining whatever willpower (ratzon) he has acquired until now. It will be too difficult for a person to “create” a ratzon now for more growth, now that his will for growth has stopped. But this much, he will still be able to do.

*Q6: I have learned that a person needs to keep doing what he needs to do and to keep serving Hashem, even when he doesn’t feel like it and he has no enthusiasm or will to serve Hashem. For example, a person should daven to Hashem even if he doesn’t feel particularly enthusiastic about davening right now. But according to what the Rav is saying here, it sounds like we need to keep awakening our emotion and will.*

ANSWER: Only a person who has reached a very high level of pnimiyus is able to do so. A person will never build his inner world if he serves Hashem without feeling. If a person has already developed his pnimiyus, then he is able to have times in which he serves Hashem even when he doesn’t have any will. But for most people, it is not a proper approach to always serve Hashem without any feelings.

*Q7: But perhaps the approach (of action over emotion) would work better for women, who are usually more action-oriented.*

ANSWER: Actually, it is the opposite. Since women are more usually emotional than men, they need

to work more with their emotions, than with trying to act when they don't feel like it. By contrast, men, who are less emotionally inclined than women, are better equipped to do what they have to do even when they don't feel like it. But this doesn't either mean that men need to act robotic and mechanical, with no feeling in what they do. Everyone needs to open their hearts. This should not be about "doing what you have to do even when you don't feel like it."

Q8: *Do we have any way of knowing when these "good times" or "bad times" will come?*

ANSWER: We do not have any control of when they come and go, but the more a person works on himself, the less the "bad times" will come, and the less intense they will be. But there is almost no one in the generation who never goes through these "bad times."

Q9: *During a dismal period, a person wonders if he's going on the right path or not. How can person indeed know if he's going in the right path?*

ANSWER: During the "bad times", it is too difficult for us to know if we are going on the right path or not, so we will have to wait for the "good times" when we can think more objectively. During a dismal period, if a person feels that he needs to improve in certain areas or take a different path, it is usually coming from an unhealthy place in the soul, from feeling down and broken. So in order to analyze one's path, one will need to wait for the dismal period to pass, and analyze his path later, when "good times" return.

Q10: *How do you know if you're going through those "Bad Days"? Can it be that for two hours a day that you're going through "Bad Days?"*

ANSWER: "Bad Days" ("Days of Hate") can last well beyond 2 hours or half a day. They can go on for several days, and sometimes they can even go on for several weeks. Sometimes you can feel physical aches from them. But if you feel like you're in a dismal period for more than a few months already, that's a sign that there is a problem. Then it is not just a period of "Bad Days" anymore – it is a sign of depression.

Q11: *Why does our soul need to go through this state of "sleep", or "Bad Days"? And is there any way we can prolong our periods of "Good Days?"*

ANSWER: Hashem created the world that everything needs sleep, even our soul. Since our soul needs sleep, we need to also go through "Bad Days." There is nothing we can do about it. But the more we work on ourselves, the longer our "Good Days" will last.

Q12: *How do we start serving Hashem? Where do we begin?*

ANSWER: Start by working on a point that is closest to your heart. But you need to also daven to Hashem for help in this. Every person's soul is different [when it comes to where a person should start].

[\[1\]](#) <sup>[4]</sup> Sefer Yetzirah 5:5

[\[2\]](#) <sup>[5]</sup> Berachos 66a

[\[3\]](#) <sup>[6]</sup> Berachos 45a

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