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[Home](#) > Getting to Know Your Feelings - 012 How To Stop Hating Yourself

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Self-Hatred: When a person hates himself upon discovering his weaknesses

The second of the seven primary negative emotions is *Sinah Atzmis* -- self-hatred.

There are those who, in a very stressful situation, will say, "I hate myself." They don't always understand what the implications are behind this statement, but they will say it anyway.

How does one come to hate himself?

When a person discovers negative aspects of his personality, and that he won't be able to change those weaknesses or shortcomings, he begins to hate himself. He sees his weaknesses as a part of his fundamental nature, and he associates them with his actual essence; thus he sees himself as an imperfect entity.

This is the simple understanding of self-hatred.

Identity Crisis

Sinah - hatred - comes from the word *sheini*, which means "two". Its opposite, *ahavah* - love - has the same numerical value as *echad*, which means "one." When we feel that someone is not "one" with us, we start to hate him.

Another variation of the word *sinah* is *shoneh*, which means “different.” A person can hate someone or something that is different from himself.

There is a striking similarity between hatred toward another and hatred towards oneself. When a person sees another as different, he perceives him as a separate entity from himself, and the same is true when a person hates himself. He doesn't see himself as “one” person, but rather “two” people co-existing inside himself.

In modern-day language, this is known as “identity crisis.” The root of self-hatred is the splitting one's identity into two separate pieces. If we would know that we are one entity, we wouldn't be able to hate ourselves. When a person says “I hate myself”, he is basically saying, “I am two people - I am not one.” He hates himself because he sees himself as two parts, a double identity.

Just like two people who once hated each other and now love each other are essentially two that became one, the opposite is also true when it comes to self-hatred: A person who used to be “one” makes himself into “two” when he hates himself.

More Evil Revealed than Good

Because the person sees in himself the opposite of what he would like to be, he experiences a **contradiction** between his external and internal selves. This contradiction makes him feel like he is two people at once, and this is the source of his self-hatred.

If he would be sure of who he is - in spite of all his shortcomings and weaknesses - he wouldn't hate himself, just like a horse, for example, doesn't hate itself because it's not a person.

Jealousy and competition do not cause self-hatred. A person hates himself because he sees within himself a good quality, and along with that he sees that he has other areas that leave much to be desired when compared to his good qualities. He sees all his **unutilized potential**, and when he sees this **contradiction** in himself, the good alongside the bad, or that the evil in him is more than the good - he views himself as two different realities and he comes to hate himself.

If we think of ourselves as a “bad person” because we have bad *middos*, this is not self-hatred. There are many people who are fully aware that their *middos* are lacking, yet it doesn't bother them at all. They are perfectly happy with themselves, and if we would ask them, “Aren't you aware that you have terrible *middos*?” they would answer, “Of course, but that's the way I am!”

People who truly hate themselves see the contradictions inside themselves. They create an inner turmoil, as part of him is screaming, "Look at this contradiction!" If a person acts haughty, a bad *middah*, his inner humility cries out, "This is not you. You are humble!" He feels the contradiction, the good crying out for recognition, and he hates himself because he can't express it.

If a person knows he is haughty and doesn't really care, he won't hate himself. It is only when his essential humility cries out within him to stop being haughty that self-hatred takes root. Once he realizes that he has two opposite forces in him, haughtiness and humility, and the haughtiness is prevailing, he'll hate himself. He doesn't believe that the good in him can prevail. There are many instances of contradictory *middos* that can bring a person to hate himself.

See the "Big Picture"

Self-hatred is the result of erroneous thoughts. When a person sees that the evil within him prevails over the good, he is only looking at **one** of his behaviors. He's looking at himself with tunnel vision.

Let's say all possible *middos* within a soul, both good and bad, are laid out in front of us. There are some good *middos* that generally prevail over the bad, and vice-versa. Then there are some areas where we cannot predict how we will act in certain situations. This is the reality of every person's soul.

The person who hates himself sees **one** bad *middah* that always prevails over **one** good *middah*. He comes to the conclusion that there is more evil in him than good, ignoring the fact that **one** bad *middah* does not obliterate **all** the good ones. That is his mistake. The person who hates himself is interpreting the facts incorrectly.

There is no such thing as a person with only bad *middos* who always acts evil when he should be good, or one who has more bad *middos* than good and acts evil most the time. What we do find is a person who has one very bad *middah* that is his particular weak spot in life and always prevails. When a person looks at that one major weak spot in his soul – that one major bad *middah* that he has -- he concludes that, "When it comes to this bad *middah* of mine, I am so unworthy. The good *middos* in me are demanding that I not give in to my bad *middah*, but to no avail." He experiences the inner contradiction and thus he hates himself.

But if he would be more open-minded, instead of focusing on the one bad *middah* he has, he would write down all the good and bad *middos* that he recognizes in himself, and he would see the bigger picture. His whole outlook would change!

People who hate themselves are suffering from Haman's problem. Haman said, "All of this is not worth anything to me." He had a lot to be happy about, but one thing irked him continuously: Mordechai refused to bow down to him. That one annoyance made him feel that he had nothing good at all. People can come to hate themselves if one small detail is lacking. Some people get anxious if they lose something, and it feels like the "end of the world" if they can't find it.

When a person begins to see the big picture, he stops being so narrow-minded and he is able to view himself very differently. He hasn't changed who he is, but rather how he looks at himself.

This is the first step toward removing self-hatred.

Start With the Easy Areas

The second step takes the first step a bit further: if a person has a terrible *middah* that he can't seem to overcome, he must first determine whether he has ever seen any improvement in that *middah*.

Anyone who works on himself knows that there are times they have made significant progress, even in that bad *middah*. A person who doesn't bother working on himself because he views himself as a lost cause, believes that he hates himself. He feels worthless and has no motivation to improve. But as soon as he determines for himself how much he has actually grown, he will see that there is far more good within him than bad. He will see that even his bad *middos* can be repaired, and his weakest areas can be developed.

"Hashem desires to merit Yisrael, therefore He increased their Torah and mitzvos." The words of the Rambam are famous: "One mitzvah can lead one to do all the mitzvos." Even if a person isn't actually working on his bad *middos*, the fact that he is working on other *middos* can, over time, bring improvement in other areas as well. This will occur automatically.

Problems start when a person begins to work on himself and he starts off with his worst *middah*. The correct approach (except for certain exceptional individuals) is to deal first with the "easier" shortcomings. A small improvement in a minor defect will make the difficult shortcomings much easier to work on.

Always See What You Have Gained

Many times a person goes through a period in which he has grown a lot, but if you ask him, "How is it

going?" He will respond, "I don't know. I'm not doing so well..." When we probe him for more details, he will find that he has indeed grown but hasn't paid attention to his growth.

People don't notice their own growth because they are too focused on their weaknesses. They assume they haven't grown because they are so self-absorbed in their shortcomings.

If a person has no sense of how much he has grown over a certain period of time, he will end up thinking only about his major weaknesses. His weakness is a heavy weight upon him. He gives up and starts to hate himself.

It doesn't matter where a person is holding or what his problems are; he must always be aware what he has gained. A person should examine his entire soul, down to the tiniest detail, and compare the past with the present. If he has worked on himself then he will see that he has changed for the better.

We are not talking about a dreamer who doesn't want to work hard and deceives himself that he has gained a lot. We are talking about someone who worked hard on himself; each according to his own can see some growth as time goes on.

He must train himself to start noticing his growth more than his failures. If we ask him how he's doing and he says, "Yes, I've grown, but..." then he is still hating himself. He should be emphasizing the "Yes" instead of the "But..."

A self-hating person who reads this might be saying, "It's easy to talk, but it's not so easy to carry out!" True, but if you ask him if he would prefer to return to the past, he will definitely answer "No," because deep down he knows that he has grown and is doing better than before.

Our Sages say that a person should have "a right eye" and "a left eye" – a right eye that reflects on what he has, and a left eye that reflects on what he lacks. It is true that a person should reflect on what he is missing, because if he doesn't, he will never grow. But at the same time a person must have a "right eye" – an awareness of what he has and how much he has gained.

If a person evaluates his growth and says to himself "I am happy with how much I have grown – I'm not the same person I was before," he has begun to separate himself from the negative emotion of self-hatred. He has stopped despairing and has started to correct himself.

This is the first general solution. This solution is not only used to solve self-hatred, but we have

mentioned it here because self-hatred is the most extreme kind of problem that can be solved with this solution.

Viewing Yourself as One

Self-hatred is based on the viewing of the self as two personalities. When a person sees in himself potential for good and for bad, and the bad is more prominent than the good, he gives up on himself, believing that he is more bad than good. This is the mistaken attitude which leads to self-hatred.

Developing a proper attitude is not dependent on whether one hates himself or not. Every person has bad *middos*. How do they fit into an overall picture?

What is a person's true self?

Everyone Has Faults

Most people define their self-worth by comparing themselves to others: "Compared to the other guy next door, I'm doing better - Baruch Hashem." The person is aware that he has faults, but since he is doing better in comparison to others (in his mind, of course - since *their middos* are surely worse than *his...*), he feels good about himself.

Others don't bother to compare themselves to others. They love themselves so much that they don't see any of their own faults. If he happens to discover that he has a bad *middah*, he won't think about it. He'll call a friend and calm down, return to his normal routine and never think about his shortcomings. He runs away from himself.

What would happen if this sort of self-centered individual actually started to think seriously about his shortcomings, what would happen?

Many people are afraid to learn *mussar* for just this reason. When they learn *mussar*, they see the truth, and the truth scares them. But if a person takes a healthy approach towards improving himself, and he finds faults he was previously unaware of, what should he do next?

Starting with easier areas is the most effective. The first thing to ask yourself is if there is anyone in

the world who is perfect. The answer, obviously, is no. Hashem created every person with his own shortcomings. The realization that it's normal to have shortcomings and that you aren't the only one who has them can make you feel relaxed. This excludes those with mental illnesses who cannot be helped by these ideas.

"I came into this world in order to fix myself"

How does a person become a *baal gaavah* (a haughty, arrogant person)? He didn't choose to be that way. Hashem created him with bad *middos*! It is now his job to change, and this is why he is alive, even though he came into this world with a "bag" full of bad *middos*.

Hashem created each person with different personalities, with each one a mixture of good and bad *middos*. We have to work on ourselves with the understanding that it's fine if we are far from perfect when we start because we have made a decision to improve.

It's hard to change when we think we are the cause of our own shortcomings, like a person who accidentally hurts another and walks around forever feeling guilty. But a person's deficiencies are not his "fault." They are part of the package that he was born with, and Hashem wants him to improve.

He shouldn't say, "This is what Hashem gave me, so I have to stay this way." Hashem gave you these shortcomings so you can work on yourself and change, and any problems you have were also sent by Hashem.

A person can be aware of his faults, but he should know that he came into this world to fix them, and that is the reason he is alive. If he was so perfect, he could have stayed above in Heaven.

This is the healthy way a person should view himself with his faults.

Bad Middos are only a garment of the soul

There is an even deeper solution to self-hatred. The Maharal says that when a Jew sins, the sin is not part of his essence, whereas the sin of a non-Jew is part of his essence.

When a Jew sins, it is definitely because he chose to do so; he had free will. He must repent for his

sins. His soul has been sullied, but the dirt is like a layer on top of his soul; it is not part of his soul.

In the words of one of the prophets, sin is like “dirtied clothing.” Clothing in Hebrew is called *begeh*, which comes from the word *begidah* – betrayal. A sin is a betrayal to the Creator, but it is only “clothing”. It is not part of the soul.

The Maharal said this regarding our actions, but the same can be said regarding our *middos*. The bad *middos* of a Jew are not part of the Jew himself -- they are only a garment. The Jew remains a pure soul that comes from above, a part of Hashem. Hashem is Pure and Holy, and thus the *middos* of a Jew are always pure and good. Any bad *middos* we see in ourselves are like dirty clothing that we are wearing.

Some people hear this and say, “*Baruch Hashem*, now I won’t have to work on myself.” This is misguided, because if a person lets his clothing get dirty for 10 years, it will be very hard to walk around in them...

People tend to associate themselves with their bad *middos*. For example, a person says, “I am a *baal gaavah*, I am an angry person, I am jealous, I am cruel, etc.” He separates himself into two entities, and it doesn’t take long for him to disregard the good within and start to hate himself. The correct way to look at oneself is to say: “All of my *middos* are good, and the bad *middos* that I find in myself are just a garment that covers who I really am. I am pure, because the soul is pure in its essence.”

When a person believes he is a *baal gaavah*, he dwells in the impure part of himself. He is living in the muck created by sin. But if he views himself as pure, he lives in a place that is pure and holy.

Understanding the truth of this can transform our entire lives. We will realize that our entire essence is pure and holy, and only has good *middos*. When we internalize this, we will understand that our soul are the embodiment of holiness.

The *Mishnah* in *Avos* (4:21) says, “Jealousy, desire and honor take a person out from the world,” The question arises: Doesn’t a person still remain in this world when he is jealous or has desires? The answer is that these things take a person out of *his real place* of purity and holiness, and brings him to the false reality of superficial understanding.

The solution to correcting self-hatred is to realize that we are a part of Hashem, who is Perfect and only Good. Sins are simply the “dirty clothes” we sometimes wear when we forget our real place. This point should be very clear.

Fixing self-hatred through realizing that one is holy

We have defined self-hatred as viewing oneself as two different personalities. This can be compared to asking someone if they are two different people when they are wearing clothing.

When a person hates himself, it's like thinking that his clothing is part of himself. He believes that his soiled clothing – his bad *middos* – is part of his essence, and he feels a contradiction within himself. He knows that he has good *middos*, but he sees the dirty clothing. He feels that the ugly clothing has become a part of himself, and thus he comes to hate himself.

One who hates himself has to change his mindset. He has to know that he is completely holy, for he is a part of Hashem. We are commanded to “cleave to Hashem’s *middos*,” because the *middos* of Hashem and the *Middos* of a person’s soul are essentially one. Our *avodah* to cleave to the *middos* of Hashem is essentially to remove our dirty garments and reveal our true essence. But a person must know that even if he doesn’t succeed in removing those garments, he is *still* intrinsically pure. Even though our entire lives must be devoted to the *avodah* of purifying our garments, we must always be aware that those garments have no bearing on who we truly are. When we dwell in this inner world in the soul, we will love ourselves.

In the previous chapter we explained that a person must balance his soul by counterbalancing his deficiencies with his goodness. Now we are learning about the deeper method of using our incorruptibly pure essence. When we employ this method, we will start to perceive ourselves as a reality of only good.

Fixing the animalistic soul in its entirety

The emotion of self-hatred has its source in the animalistic soul. There is a technique we can use that can not only repair the negative emotion of self-hatred, but the entire animalistic soul – all of the negative emotions!

When Adam sinned, he was told, “You are earth.” The source of sin is when a person views himself as earth.

Usually, a person thinks of himself as a body. He views his animalistic soul as something which comes from earth, causing him to feel sad all the time. He sees all his bad *middos* as an intrinsic part of himself rather than a detachable appendage, and by doing so he puts himself into a self-imposed and

deeply profound exile.

But when a person views himself as a soul, a part of Hashem and our nation Yisrael, made up primarily of “seven shepherds” – seven *middos* – and that his body is only a garment covering the soul, then his entire attitude toward his animalistic soul changes. He knows that the animalistic soul is only a cloak on his true essence, and this awareness can repair all of the negative emotions of his animalistic soul.

We are not saying that a person doesn't have an *avodah* in this world. Our garments need to be clean, but this technique can change the nature of the *avodah*

Before Adam sinned, he viewed his body as a garment. After the sin, he started to view his body as who he actually was. It is now our *avodah* to return to the original perception that existed before the sin. We are in essence a part of Hashem, who is totally Pure and Holy. All of our bad *middos* are a garment covering our true self. When we look at ourselves this way, he can be said to have an “*Ayin Tovah*” – a “good eye”, the characteristic of Avraham Avinu.

There are those who have a “bad eye”, the characteristic of the wicked Bilam who had relations with his donkey. He viewed his essence as animalistic, and thus he sinned with an animal. He viewed himself through the animalistic part of the soul.

To have a “bad eye” is essentially to view the entire self as an animalistic soul. When a person has a “good eye”, he knows that he is a part of Hashem.

This is the correct approach to repairing all our bad *middos*. The root of all good *middos* is Avraham Avinu, and the root of all bad *middos* is Bilam. It all depends on how we view ourselves. If we have “a good eye” like Avraham Avinu and we are aware that we are all a part of Hashem, and that our bad *middos* which come from Bilam are only a “garment”, then we have found the great solution to fixing all of the negative emotions in the animalistic part of our soul.

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