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Understand Your Personality- Develop Your Soul - *Da Es Nafshecha*- "Getting to Know Your Soul"- is the companion volume to the popular *Da Es Atzmecha*- "Getting to Know Your Self." Each one of us has a unique personality, but so often we are tempted judge ourselves in comparison to others. We become self-critical and lose sight of our individual purpose in life. We also tend to judge others too quickly, asking, "Why is he like that?"

Classic Torah texts explain the four fundamental elements of personality: fire, water, wind, and earth. For the first time ever, this information is explained in English clearly and in great detail. By studying this work, you will understand your primary trait and gain great insight into yourself and those around you. In addition, you will learn how to balance your primary trait with the other ones in order to create a healthy balance.

In Part Two, which describes the thirteen attributes of the soul, you will learn how to develop your mental and emotional faculties to their fullest potential. You will learn about abilities you never knew you were capable of, and will gain a totally new understanding of the faculties you are familiar with.

This is a complete course in self-actualization which will aid anyone in search of a better understanding of the self and true spirituality. As with "Da Es Atzmecha," psychologists, educators, and others in helping professions will benefit from the deep truths revealed within its pages.

With the help of Hashem, we will try to gain, through the information in this book, some understanding about our souls. We will not be the first to make the attempt. Our Sages often describe, especially in their words concerning the deeper levels of the Torah, the nature of the soul. Everything in this work is based on the ideas of our Sages — nothing is based on our own ideas. All we will do is explain and elaborate on their words. Their words are the only source for this sefer.

Your soul is the only thing from which you can never be separated. Your spouse, children, job, house, and other possessions are only temporary. At times we are connected to them, and at other times, we are not. Only the soul is always with a person, even if he is not always aware of it. By learning about the soul and trying to understand its nature, we are examining the one thing that is always with us, and by doing so, we discover who we really are.

The soul is the "I" that is always with you, and without understanding it to some degree (we can never know it perfectly), we cannot work with it and direct it properly. As with everything in the world,

the soul needs its own form of “fuel,” and will give off its own form of energy. For example, a car requires gasoline in order to operate. Once the gas tank is filled, the car is ready to be driven. If it is filled with the wrong kind of fuel, you will not only be unable to drive it, but the engine will be ruined.

It is also important to identify the product: if you have a factory with machinery, you need to know if it is supposed to produce matzos, bread, metal, or plastic products. In the same way, you need to know the kind of sustenance your soul needs, and what it should be producing. Generally speaking, we all need similar sustenance, but more specifically, each one of us must be aware of his unique needs and requirements.

In the physical world, if you eat something that is not food, you won't be nourished by it and you will even be harmed by it. If you use your energy to produce the wrong kind of product, you are missing the point of your life. Whatever you try to produce will not come out well, because it will not be a true expression of yourself. It's just not you.

That being the case, the study of the soul is the study of life. Who am I, as an individual? Based on my discovery, I will know what kind of sustenance I need to imbibe, and what I must produce in my life.

The soul has divisions and subdivisions. There are primary divisions into four, five, seven, ten, and seventy parts, and then it subdivides ad infinitum. This is like the structure of the Jewish people. We had three Patriarchs, followed by twelve tribes, seventy people who went down to Egypt, 600,000 men in the desert, and so on. Understandably, we cannot deal with the little details of the soul that surface from moment to moment. We will focus here on the primary roots of the soul.

The Tools for Understanding the Soul

To understand the soul, one needs intellectual acumen as well as emotional sensitivity. With only one of these two, a person cannot really understand himself. As mentioned, it is impossible to understand the soul completely, because the human soul is the deepest thing in creation. We can only try to gain as deep an understanding as possible for the moment, and spend the rest of our lives deepening it further.

The first step is to develop an intellectual understanding and knowledge of the workings of the system. Sharpening your sensitivity to what is going on inside yourself is the next essential step.

We therefore wish to stress that the concepts we will be discussing are not purely intellectual; they are intellectual definitions that are based on an inner awareness. We will try to put everything in words, but words can never fully contain the depth of inner discovery; they can only lead you toward that discovery. This is a brief introduction to our topic. Now let us begin.

The Four Middos

The personality can be divided into four elements. In the natural world, each thing is made of fire, wind, water, and earth, and the human psyche is composed of these four as well. But each person has a unique mixture of these elements, with some being more dominant in him than others. In one person, fire may be dominant, and water is second. In another, it is the opposite. There is always a trait that is most dominant, and one after that, followed by a third and then a fourth. Each of us possesses all four elements, but with different degrees of prominence.

Our character traits, known as middos, are actually the means through which the soul expresses itself in the body. These middos, though ultimately rooted in the soul itself, primarily manifest themselves when the soul inhabits a body. The nature of the soul when not in a body will not necessarily be reflected in the forces of the body it inhabits. A person may in fact have a great and powerful soul,

but a small and weak body. This is no contradiction. There were gedolim (great Torah sages) with great souls who were not tall and strong, for example. So this particular study will focus on the middos one is given in this life, a crucial topic in and of itself.

Rav Chaim Vital relates the middos to the four primary elements of the world.^[1] These elements correspond to the four fundamental traits in the personality. In the context there, he deals with the negative expression of the middos: fire causes conceit and anger, wind causes excessive chatter, water causes pursuit of pleasure, and dirt causes sadness. We, however, will first explain these middos as basic forces in the personality, without yet identifying them as good or bad. What, in essence, are fire, wind, water, and earth? This will enable us to better understand Rav Chaim Vital's words.

The Rishonim (early Torah sages) teach that there are four basic forces in the world: destruction, movement, vitality, and stability. Fire's nature is to destroy. Although it has other qualities, its primary nature is destruction. The power of wind, as we know, is motion. Water gives life to plants, people, and animals. Earth gives stability and existence to all things. The other three elements are helpful to existence, but essentially, it is the earth that provides concrete existence. People will often describe something stable as "standing on solid ground," because earth is what gives real form and existence to everything.

All of these forces exist within each of us, but there is always one element that is predominant. In one person it will be fire, in another wind, etc., as previously discussed.

The Force of Destructiveness and Conceit

If a person whose dominant element is fire uses it negatively, it will become destructive — if not through action, then through speech. But let's first seek its more basic stratum. This power of destruction is a basic force in the soul. We mentioned above that conceit is a negative product of fire. Rav Chaim Vital explains that fire seeks to rise, and the conceited person seeks to be above others. But what does this have to do with destruction? When you think about it, you will realize that they are the same concept. One lifts himself above others by putting them down, at least in his mind. Although he may see good qualities in others, he focuses on their bad points, in order to convince himself that he is better than everyone else. In this way, he lifts himself above everyone.

One who thinks that he, along with everyone else, is great, is not conceited. Conceit is when one feels, "I am higher than you." But this element does not have to be negative. It can be a source for personal growth. Fire, as mentioned, seeks to rise, and this element can likewise motivate you to improve.

For example, a person has a drive to make ten million dollars. Let's say that (regrettably) he reaches that goal. Now he wants twenty. When did he get that aspiration? When he nullified the value of the ten million in his mind, deciding it wasn't good enough. This also applies to spiritual growth. When does one want to grow? When he realizes that his current state is not good enough for him. What makes fire rise? When it is destroying something. This is true with a bonfire, a candle, and everything that burns. So too, the power of fire in a person brings a destructive force to his personality.

Growth Through Fire

There are people who want to grow, but never seem to do so. They keep failing. They blame their failure on their difficult challenges, or "the side of evil" in the world. The problem is that one wants to light a fire without destroying anything in the process. (The Burning Bush that was not consumed by the fire was unique to Moshe Rabbeinu and his level of humility, but this does not relate to our

discussion.) One must abandon his current state in order to rise above it. You cannot be both above and below. The people who are very successful in life are those who have a strong sense of destruction. They are able to totally destroy everything they have. In other words, if they choose a goal, whatever else that exists is meaningless to them. When everything else has been nullified in favor of that desire, a destructive power is produced that fuels growth. Without it, there can be no real growth. And the greater the destructive force, the greater the growth, just as burning a small piece of wood cannot make a flame as high as a large bonfire.

This is the nature of fire in the personality. It is a mental destruction of one's current state of existence. Of course, a person must also be "happy with his lot"[\[2\]](#) and learn how to maintain both of these states. But the starting point of growth is to nullify your current state, feel the emptiness, and then desire to grow by filling it. (Understandably, this power can be used for the good and for the bad.)

Movement

Wind represents the inherent power to move. Unlike fire, which rises as a result of destruction, wind moves on its own. It doesn't need an additional stimulus.

Why do children like to be rocked? Because man contains an essential need to be in motion, and he feels confined without it. The direction of his movement is irrelevant, as direction comes from other elements. The wind, on its own, just moves. Those whose dominant force is wind need to move around a lot. They cannot sit still. This may manifest itself as physical movement or inner agitation. Other people may also have some wind in them, but they can behave more placidly because it is not so powerful. Those whose dominant feature is wind, though, must always be in motion. To question this habit is like asking why wind moves. Hashem has placed movement in the world. Their challenge is to give it direction, but essentially, they are movers.

Vitality

There are people who, when asked how they are, will express a tremendous yearning for something that will give them a greater feeling of being alive. This is like what Chazal say concerning fish: when it rains a little, the fish jump up with excitement.[\[3\]](#) They want to get more life. How is this different from the attribute of fire? Fire is also about getting more than what you have, but there is a major difference. With fire, one isn't seeking life for its own sake; he mainly wants to be different from his current state if he feels that it is not high enough.

A person might wonder if he is doing all right. He goes to a Kabbalist who tells him he is fine; he will merit a place in the World to Come. Many people will be happy with this answer, but the water person will not be satisfied; he still feels empty. A fire person wants to know that he is on a high level, and if he knows it, he is happy, but a water person needs to always feel vitality.

Two people might be learning Torah in the same place. If you tell one of them that there is tremendous reward for what he is doing, he will feel great. To the other, it will be meaningless. Although he believes it, it doesn't help him because he needs to feel a sense of vitality.

If you tell someone that he will have a good feeling from a job that is not so dignified, if his element is fire, he wouldn't think of it; he needs to be involved in something that seems to place him on a high level. The water person can be quite content, regardless of the prestige of the work.

The Shortcomings of Fire and Water

A common problem that emerges among fire people is that they are somewhat disconnected from

reality. They are never satisfied with their current level and will try to go to something higher even if they aren't ready for it. One might be working on attaining a certain level for two months and feel that he has been there too long and must move ahead already, even though he hasn't yet reached the level he is seeking and should stay there longer. The water person, though, can be satisfied as long as he is gaining from his current level. Growth through the water perspective, then, is much more stable than through the perspective of fire.

But there is also a problem with water. There may be an important mitzvah to do, and one will say, "It doesn't speak to me; I don't feel like doing it," when this really should have no bearing. A dominant water person who can't feel pleasure in Torah and mitzvos may abandon them to look for other pleasures, G-d forbid. The antidote is to do even what you don't feel like doing, while at the same time trying to develop a feeling for whatever you are doing.

The fire person will tend to look for ways to add to what he has; the water person will look for how to enjoy what he is doing. The fire person will wait in anticipation for a future mitzvah; the water person will focus on enjoying the present one.

Stability

Now we will discuss the element of earth, which gives stable existence to things. The negative aspects of this attribute are sadness and laziness. But what is its essence? Even though the earth is inherently empty and cannot grow something on its own, it enables what is planted in it to grow. So too, this element is all about giving expression to the other qualities. When it is expressed as a human perspective, one might be humble, or feel sad and inferior.

When preparing cement and it is too watery, you need to add something solid. In a similar way, earth gives stability, making the element of earth essentially the opposite of wind. Wind causes motion, while earth stabilizes. If the earth element is too strong, one becomes lazy and doesn't move very much. He can become depressed and inert.

When used properly, the power of earth gives constructive stability to the other qualities. Without it, one cannot be stable and solid. Earth is the solid ground on which to build. It keeps things existing and standing, each in its proper way and place. Fire, wind, and water don't have real form; they need this solid element in order to be expressed.

These four are the root elements, the middos that exist in each person, the means for guiding the innermost forces toward actualization. One must discover his own dominant element, and then his weakest one, and the weakest one must be balanced by its opposite. One must primarily make use of his strongest element. Otherwise, he will feel as if he is getting hot water when he needs cold water.

Our weakest element is the source of all our failures, and we need to balance it by guiding and strengthening the opposing middah. Even our strongest elements can lead to problems, so they too must be balanced. We will deal with balance in more detail in the coming chapters.

[1] *Sha'arei Kedushah* 1:2, based on the *Zohar*.

[2] *Avos* 4:1

[3] *Bereishis Rabbah* 97:3

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