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Intellect and Imagination

A person is created with two main mental powers - the power of *chochmah* (intellect) and the power of *medameh* (Our emotions rule over our minds imagination).

It is written, "Let us make man in our image (*betzalmeynu*) and in our form (*kedemuseinu*)."^[1] We are taught^[2] that the word "*betzalmeynu*" refers to the power of the intellect. In other words, our human intellect is an example of how we are created "in the image of Hashem". In contrast, the root of the word "*kedemuseinu*" is "*medameh*". This word is usually interpreted as the "imagination". ^[3]

Two Levels of the Imagination

We can divide the concept of imagination into two types - 'higher level imagination' and 'lower level imagination'. 'Higher level imagination' is based on mental reasoning and grounded in reality. In contrast, 'lower level imagination' works in tandem with the emotions. It is not connected to mental reasoning, and it leads to a complete fabrication of reality.

'Higher level imagination' involves discriminating between different pieces of information. It involves an intellectual analysis of existing facts and it extrapolates this information to new scenarios. It relies on real and substantial information in order to transform potential information into reality. In contrast, 'lower level imagination' does not involve reality at all. Since it is not grounded in reality, it leads to a completely false assessment of each situation.

A prime example of our mind being dominated by 'lower level imagination' is when we dream. Our dreams are usually dominated by fantasy rather than reality. In a dream, 'lower level imagination' takes over the mind of a person who is dreaming, and he believes he is riding a bus, while in reality, he is lying in bed. (Though he truly feels and believes that this bus-ride is true reality, obviously in this moment his rational mind is not grounded in reality and thus he is not being objective).

Rather than merely being an inaccurate form of 'higher level imagination' - such as when a person fails to use his powers of inference or discrimination accurately - 'lower level imagination' takes people to a completely false and inauthentic place. This fantasy place may seem completely real. For instance, dreams feel real and intense. Though this dream or fantasy may still involve tangible objects or even fragments extracted from reality (such as the fact that a bus is a real object), the scenario as a whole is completely divorced from reality.

The source of 'higher level imagination' comes from the mind's power of mental vision, a positive

power of the mind which connects our senses to tangible reality, essentially enabling us to extend this information to that which is still in potential form. But what is the source of 'lower level imagination'? Why does it cause people to imagine things which do not exist? And what is the detrimental effect of relying on this 'lower level imagination'?

The Relationship Between Emotions and Imagination

We all possess both intellect and emotion. Whereas the intellect is rooted in the mind, the emotions are rooted in the heart. Our imagination and our emotions are interconnected. The word "*middos*" – our character traits, also identified as our emotions[4] – has the same root letters as the Hebrew word "*dimayon*", imagination.

Ideally, our intellect should source or fuel our emotions. However, in cases when the mind is overtaken by our 'lower level imagination', our emotions are more likely to govern the intellect. Generally speaking, the weaker a person's intellectual mind, the stronger is his 'lower level imagination'. Conversely, the stronger one's intellectual mind, the weaker one's 'lower level imagination'. The more a person is detached from actual *reality*, the more he relies on and relates to his *imagined* reality.

When our mind is strong and functioning properly, it can be assisted by the power of 'higher level imagination'. But when our base emotions govern our mind, the 'lower level imagination' can run rife, leading a person to become detached from reality.

More specifically, our emotions are rooted in desire, the faculty of *ratzon*. For example, the two root emotions are *ahavah* (love) and *yirah* (fear), both of which fuel our desire. These emotions are powerful and can have both positive and negative effects. For instance, a negative effect of desire stemming from love may lead a person to chase after something that is beyond the scope of reality.

Consider a person who is so caught up in his desire to own a yacht that he either imagines that he *has* it already or he futilely chases after this impossible dream. A negative effect of fear may cause us to run away from something imaginary. Fueled by the imagination, our emotional fear may block us from realizing that this thing we are running from is really imaginary and not substantial.

In summary, when emotions dominate over rational thought, the imagination has the opportunity to govern our mind and may cause the mind to lose its ability to think rationally (objectively) or know the true reality. Ultimately, this process can lead a person to sin.

'Lower Level Imagination' Distorts Reality

The imagination can become dangerous and lead a person to sin when the mind is controlled by the emotions. Our 'lower level imagination' is used by the *yetzer hora* (the evil inclination) harnessing the power of imagination, in order to encourage a person to think or commit an act they otherwise would not commit.

For instance, the Snake in Gan Eden enticed Chavah to eat from the *Eitz HaDa'as* ("tree of good and evil knowledge") by telling her that the fruit would give her powers like Hashem. In this way, the Snake relied on Chava's imagination in order to persuade her. *Chazal* also teach that the Satan led *Bnei Yisrael* to commit the sin of the Golden Calf by showing them an image of Moshe's coffin in the sky. Their 'lower level imagination' fueled their fear, and their fear led them to create the Golden Calf.

It is written, "*The inclination of the heart of a man is evil from his youth.*"[5] When emotions take over the mind, the logical, rationale part of our brain is weakened and the 'lower level imagination' may dominate. In turn, the imagination may fuel the emotions, creating a vicious cycle. We may become

falsely convinced that we are following Hashem's will, when in reality we are being led down a false path and being propelled by our base or erroneous desires. This is how we can fall prey to acting on sinful drives.

The *emes* (truth) refers to the only true reality – that is, the reality of Hashem's existence and His *ratzon* (will) for how He wants us to live. It is written, “*You created me with a pure heart*”^[6]. A “pure heart” desires the true reality and to do and follow Hashem's will. However, when a person's heart is ‘impure’, he cannot see the true reality. His vision of the objective light of reality (that is, the *emes*) is blocked by emotions. Thus, he chases after falsehood or wickedness without even realizing his error.

There is a fundamental difference between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer hora*. The *yetzer tov* brings the heart's emotions up to the level of the mind so that “the mind controls the heart”^[7]. A person then can see and follow *emes*. His heart may assist him to achieve realistic goals by fueling it with the power of *ratzon*. In contrast, the *yetzer hora* uses the ‘lower level imagination’ to fuel our emotions and try to confuse us with falsehood and imaginary concepts. It attempts to convince us to follow paths other than *emes*. A sign that the *yetzer hora* is dominating over our *yetzer tov* is if our mind is governed by emotions, rather than the other way around.

The *yetzer hora* tries to trick a person into consciously and subjectively believing that falsehood is truth. Without a *yetzer hora*, we would realize immediately the pathetic nature of the ‘lower level imagination’. For instance, though it is quite absurd for a person to be fooled into imagining that he can become like Hashem, this is precisely what the Snake managed to convince Adam and Chavah!

Our souls naturally only want the true reality – that is, Hashem and His Torah. Our souls recognize that there is no reality other than Hashem's will. Our *yetzer tov* helps us to search for, and follow this true reality. Our ‘higher level imagination’ is one tool we can use to assist us to put Hashem's *ratzon* into practice. In contrast, our *yetzer hora* employs the ‘lower level imagination’ to appeal to our emotional side of the brain so that we are confused. ^[8]

‘Lower Level Imagination’ Fools The Mind

Until this point, we have explained that there are two kinds of imagination – ‘higher level imagination’ and ‘lower level imagination’.

The ‘higher level imagination’ can be usefully engaged in conjunction with our intellect to help us channel our emotions in order to achieve Hashem's will. However, ‘lower level imagination’^[9] can be dangerous if we allow it to dominate and rule over our intellect. It may rob us of our mental powers of clarity and leave us at the mercy of our emotions. This, in turn, leaves us vulnerable to confusion and subject to a distortion of *emes*. We may then be innocently fooled into following various, impure, selfish desires (a negative use of *ratzon*).

According to *Chazal*, a person only sins if a *ruach shtus* (spirit of folly) enters him.^[10] In other words, a person only sins when the imagination takes over his intellect. ‘Lower level imagination’ acts like *shochad* (bribery). It ‘bribes’ the mind into thinking that falsehood is actually truth, thereby fooling one's very *ratzon* (will). Since our *ratzon* is our driving force to make things happen in this world, a confused *ratzon* has the dangerous power to drive us in the wrong direction, convincing a person to ignore or override his teachers' advice and lessons.

A person who lives and makes life decisions based on his ‘lower level imagination’ is really living in a dream-world, with his vision based entirely on egocentric or inauthentic desires or fears. Instead of subjugating himself to Hashem's will, he is fooled into thinking that his lower drives are Hashem's truth.

For instance, consider a person who dreams he is on a cruise. A strong, intact intellect would ground this person, enabling him to identify this vision as simply a daydream. However, a person whose 'lower level imagination' dominates his intellect may become divorced from reality and believe this scenario is actually happening. This is an example of the 'lower level imagination' overpowering the mind, holding wisdom hostage and distorting the truth.

Another example of such delusion caused by 'lower level imagination' may be when someone writes out a check to pay a debt, despite there being no money in his account. Why would a person behave this way? He is so keen to pay his debt and take away the pressure of the debt-collector that this emotional desire clouds him from the reality of the situation – which is that he has no money in the bank. He is obviously not acting rationally and his mind has been overrun by his desires.

Such a person is living solely according to how he feels, with his emotions ruling over his higher soul and intellect. He wants things to be a certain way so badly that he detaches from reality and convinces himself that his desires are reality. Thus, he is actually living in a dream-world.

In summary, in the absence of strong intellect, the imagination can lead the emotions to take over a person's common sense and rational decision-making. Such a person lives a life divorced from reality, detached from his higher soul and essentially distanced from Hashem's will.

A World Of Imagination

The Snake convinced Chava that “just as Hashem can create universes, so can you create universes.”^[11] If we presume that we can act like Hashem and create something completely new, we are being deluded by our 'lower level imagination'.

Interestingly, the Snake targeted and enticed Chavah to sin, rather than Adam. Why did it try to ensnare Chavah rather than Adam? The Snake knew that the feminine mind is generally more prone to 'lower level imagination' (stemming from the fact that it is likely to have less *chochmah*). It sought to take advantage of the fact that Chavah may be more susceptible to the “spirit of folly” taking over her mind and thus more easily led astray.

In contrast, the Snake considered Adam more difficult to entice to sin. Unlike Chavah, Adam was created awake and he retained *chochmah* (wisdom) which could help his mind override his imagination. However, after he committed the sin, Adam also was equally subject to the temptations of 'lower level imagination.'

Nowadays, both masculine and feminine minds are subject to the same enticement of the 'lower level imagination' and are thus equally vulnerable to the emotions overtaking them and being blocked from clarity. Most of us these days are swayed by our imaginations to the point where we are detached from reality. Our emotions rule over our minds. Even those who have learned Torah for many years and who know in their minds Hashem's *emes*, often experience life through the prism of a dream-like world.

When we wake from this long nightmare of this world, the Sages state that Hashem will slaughter the *yetzer hora*^[12]. Since the 'lower level imagination' and the *yetzer hora* are integrated, this suggests that after Redemption, our minds will cease to be dominated or governed by our 'lower level imagination'.

In *Tehillim*, it is written that when the *Moshiach* comes we will exclaim, “**then, we were like dreamers.**”^[13] This implies that currently, before the advent of the *Moshiach*, we are living in a dream world. Only after the Redemption will we look back and realize that we were dreaming. In the future,

we will see how the six thousand years of this world is merely an illusion. After Redemption, wisdom will overpower our 'lower level imagination'. However, until this point when *Moshiach* comes, our minds will often fall prey to the dominion of our 'lower level imagination', instead of realizing *emes*, truth.[\[14\]](#)

Changing Our Thought Patterns

We have explained that the danger of listening to our 'lower level imagination' is that it can fuel our emotions to the point where we are confused about truth. In turn, this may lead us to act on what we subjectively feel or desire, falsely convincing ourselves that this is reality and what Hashem wants.

If we imagine something unrealistic and then become emotionally attached to this goal or vision, we risk becoming egocentric. Following our own base desires is equivalent to acting like a spoiled child - like a little girl who sees a doll in the toy store and demands that she must have it right now because she needs it!

However, every person has the power of *bechirah* (free will). Superficially, we may learn to use our *bechirah* in order to give up our negative desires altogether. However, on another level, we can learn to channel our *bechirah* so that our mind is governed by our intellect or 'higher level imagination' instead of our emotions or 'lower level imagination'.

When we succeed in accessing and revealing our true inner will (which is really the will of Hashem[\[15\]](#)), our emotions will be less able to control our mind and actions. Instead, our actions and thoughts will be under the power of our rational intellect and we will be able to pursue realistic and true goals in line with Hashem's will.

But revealing this true inner will and channeling our *bechirah* to achieve such truth takes hard work. If we do not work hard to break our negative desires, we will simply be enticed by the *yetzer hora* to always strive to gratify ourselves instead of Hashem's *emes*. As a result, we will remain living in a fantasy-world, constantly wasting our attention on dreaming about unrealistic goals or wasting our energy chasing them.

In contrast, working hard and breaking these negative desires allows us to access our real mind. In turn, a strong mind enables us to train ourselves to be in control of our emotions, rather than the other way around.

This process does not simply involve us trying to rid our heart from negative emotions in order to reveal our underlying positive emotions. Rather, once we use effort and truly desire to distance our minds from being controlled by our emotions, we may merit Hashem's assistance. He may strengthen our mind so that our mind can function as a powerful tool to control and direct our emotions. Such a strong mind can deliberately select only particular emotions which serve it well and channel them to achieve a life of truth and Hashem's will.

It is written, "A pure heart G-d created me with". Revealing our **da'as** (mind) essentially leads to a "lev tahor" (pure heart). When Hashem sees that we are working to gain control over our desires and emotions in order to gain a pure heart, He will surely assist us to achieve our goal. This in turn enables us to more easily identify and fulfill His Will.

'Higher Level Imagination' - Transforming Potential into Actual

The imagination can be useful and positive. When is imagination approved of by our holy Torah?

'Higher level imagination' can enable a person to achieve real goals by drawing on facts that currently

exist and enabling a person to apply them to a currently potential scenario in order to draw it out into reality. In other words, our imaginative faculty can be beneficial and lead us to holiness if it is based on reality and authenticity.

For example, Chazal^[16] teach that seeing *techeiles* (turquoise strings of *tzitzis*) can bring a person to have *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven) because the blue color reminds him of the sky, which in turn reminds him of the *Kisei HaKavod* (Throne of Glory). The *Kisei HaKavod* is a reality. However, a person may struggle to properly identify with it or achieve a mental vision of it because his physical senses in this World have not yet seen or experienced the *Kisei HaKavod*. In contrast, most people have seen the blue sky our 'higher level imagination' can rely on our sensory exposure to the blue sky to enable us to relate to and imagine the *Kisei Hakavod*, even though we have not actually seen it. This is a good and holy use of our imagination, enabling us to access a spiritual truth to which our physical senses have not actually been exposed.^[17]

Evil Imagination: Imagining The Non-Existent

When can the imagination become harmful and lead to evil?

The power of imagination' becomes evil when a person uses it to imagine something that is not realistic or is completely inauthentic. A person whose mind is governed by 'lower level imagination' may be convinced that falsehood is truth and truth is falsehood. In this way, his imagination serves to distance him from a life of *emes*, causing his willpower (*ratzon*) to channel his energy towards sin and lust, rather than towards Hashem's will.

The Problem With 'Guided Imagery' Techniques

Unfortunately, some recent non-Torah-based therapies employ people's 'lower level imagination' to attempt to help them overcome their issues.

For instance, a therapist may advise someone who feels unloved to imagine that he is loved. The therapist might reassure the patient that he can obtain love (or anything he wants) simply by using his imagination. He may instruct the person to convince himself that he is loved by imagining himself being loved by others, when, in reality, the person is not loved by anyone. So this process is based on falsehood.

Alternatively, if it is a gentile therapist, he may try to convince the Jew who comes to him to access the power of love in himself and thereby feel loved. However, this will still not work, because a gentile himself does not contain the very kind of self-love that a Jewish soul needs.

This form of therapy cannot assist a Jew, because the method of imagery employed is based completely on falsehood. Although the person may try to believe such imagery out of desperation, deep down, his inner soul knows the truth. Essentially, such 'lower level imagination' is employing the *yetzer hora's* power to conjure up a false reality.

Many of such "guided-imagery" therapies rely on 'lower level imagination', in a way similar to the Snake's persuading Chava that she could become "like Hashem" if she ate from the *Eitz HaDa'as*. In turn, this sin that Chava and Adam committed allowed an evil form of knowledge into the world which confuses people and conceals the truth.^[18]

The Torah's Way of Using the Power of Imagination in Therapy

In contrast, a Torah-approved way of using the power of imagination to help someone who feels unloved is to teach him how to use his 'higher level imagination' to draw forth the inherent self-love

that is contained deep within his Jewish soul. Though one's self-love may be concealed, it still exists in its potential form, and one can use the imagination to draw it out by mentally visualizing it.

To access self-love, a person may be taught to remind himself and work on believing that he has a *neshamah* (Divine soul). He can work at accepting and internalizing the truth that it is simply his physical body which is holding him back from feeling this self-love. A person can then use his imagination to visualize his *neshamah* being revealed from its potential state to its actual form.

This practice has the power to succeed because it is based on the *emes* (truth). In this way, a person can use his imagination to reveal his *potential* self-love and bring it down from his soul into his body, thereby exposing it to reality.

The *Eitz HaDa'as* was called the "tree of good and evil knowledge."^[19] The good kind of *da'as* refers to the 'higher level imagination' (outlined above), whereby a person uses tangible and revealed knowledge in order to access the holiness within. In contrast, the evil kind of *da'as* within the *Eitz HaDa'as* refers to 'lower level imagination', which confuses a person into thinking that truth is falsehood and falsehood is reality, thereby leading him to use his *ratzon* to chase after sin.

In Summary

On the one hand, our imagination – in the form of 'lower level imagination' – can be dangerous, misleading and problematic. On the other hand, our imagination – in the form of 'higher level imagination' – can be used for holy purposes and can be spiritually beneficial.

The *yetzer tov* can help us use our 'higher level imagination' to transform something positive in our souls from its potential form into its active state. Thus, our 'higher level imagination' can be used to drive our emotions and our actions to further Hashem's will. In contrast, the *yetzer hora* employs our 'lower level imagination' as a tool to dominate over our minds, confusing us and blocking us from identifying Hashem's *emes*. We may then be subject to the risk of chasing after fantasy or sin.

In other words, our imagination can serve a positive function only when it is not severed from reality but rather is serving to reveal something that already exists. In contrast, 'lower level imagination' tries to incite our emotions and clouds our better judgment, convincing us to conjure up or chase after something fabricated and lacking in truthfulness.

A person whose mind is governed by 'lower level imagination' is ignorant of the fact that he is essentially falling for the Snake's ploy and chasing after a false reality, essentially replicating the primal sin of Creation.

With the help of Hashem, we will continue to elaborate on the power of imagination in the upcoming chapters. May we merit Hashem's help to avoid the dangers of our 'lower level imagination' overtaking our minds, and to instead focus only on using the power of imagination for the purpose of holiness.

^[1] Beraishis 1:26

^[2] Arizal

[3] It also shares a root with the word “demus” , ‘resemblance’, implying that man’s power of medameh also enables man to ‘resemble’ Hashem on some level. Alternatively, the fact that imagination is related to “likeness” or similarity may mean that a proper use of our imagination involves comparing and extrapolating from existing information and facts to potential scenarios.

[4] See Getting To Know Your Feelings, Part 2, Chapter 2

[5] *Beraishis 8:21*

[6] *Tehillim 51, 12*

[7] *Sefer Tanya; Zohar III 124a*

[8] Editor’s Note: Refer to the adaptation of the author’s previous sefarim (“Building A Sanctuary of the Heart”, Parts I and II) for learning how to make self-introspection and purify the heart from erroneous desires.

[9] Editor’s Note: And indeed, we initially start out in life with only knowing of the lower kind of imagination, and it is our avodah to leave the lower imagination and instead gain the higher kind of imagination, as will be described throughout this sefer.

[10] *Sotah 2a*

[11] *Midrash Tehillim:1, Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer13, Midrash Tanchuma: parshas Tazria: 9 [Editor’s Note: Elsewhere, the author explains how this power exists in the side of holiness as well in the form of the power to break our limits and reach the Endlessness of Hashem.] This is the holy use of the inherent aspect of “medameh” in man.*

[12] *Sukkah 52a*

[13] *Tehillim 126: 1*

[14] Editor’s Note: In spite of this predicament, it is still our avodah to try to avoid our ‘lower level imagination’ and only use ‘higher level imagination’ as much as we can, as will be explained throughout this sefer.

[15] See *Building A Sanctuary In The Heart, Part II, Chapter 26*

[16] *Sotah 17a*

[17] Editor’s Note: *The Mussar masters relied extensively on their imagination; see the author’s*

Building A Sanctuary In The Heart, Part 2, page 168, where it is brought that Rav Yisrael Salanter zt"l used to hold his finger near a flame to feel a brief pain and help him feel a spiritual fire within. He used his higher level imagination to then extrapolate from the pain of his finger to the pain of yiras Hashem. Note however that most of us in this generation do not have strong enough imaginative faculties to make use of this ability.

[18] Sforno to Bereishis 3:1

[19] Beraishis 1:9

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