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Revealing the True "I"

In the beginning of *sefer Shaarei Kedushah*, Rav Chaim Vital writes that a person is defined by his soul, not by his body. He brings proof to this from the words "*flesh of man*" (Shemos 30:32), which implies that there must be two parts to our self: our flesh/body, and our soul.

What, exactly, is a person? Generally, a person is called "*neshamah*."

My "I" is identified with my *neshamah*, which is a *cheilek eloka mimaal*, a "piece of Hashem". Why is the *neshamah* called "a piece of Hashem"? There are many reasons, and we will explain one of them, which is particularly relevant to our discussion here.

It is written (Devorim 32: 39), "*For I am who I am, and there is no G-d with me*". The true "I" is Hashem. The sage Hilel once said, "If I am here, everyone is here", and this is explained to mean that he was referring to Hashem, who is called "I".

The soul is called a piece of Hashem, and this means that just as Hashem is called "I", so can a person feel his "I". Since our soul is a piece of Hashem, and Hashem is considered the only true "I", our soul is able to feel this "I" as well. Our mission is to reveal and recognize who the true "I" is.

We will try to explain this, and how we can nullify our "I" and instead come to reveal the true "I", whom there is only One of.

Removing Evil By Nullifying The Self

A general rule is that every matter is made up of two stages - to first remove the evil, and then to do good. "*Remove yourself from evil, and do good.*" First we need to remove the obstacles that hold us back from what we want to achieve, and after that we can begin to do positive actions that will enable us to get to the goal.

The first step we will have to do - to remove ourselves from evil - is to nullify our "I". Then we can reveal the true "I", Who is Hashem. Let us begin with the first step.

The *sefarim hakedoshim* explain that whenever a person sees something, he sees it through his "I." A person doesn't just see himself as his "I" and worry for himself, tending to be selfish toward others; his ego goes even further than that. He sees himself in everything! Chazal say also that "Just as all faces are different, so are all *de'os* (opinions) different". This is because people see their "I" through

everything.

To give an example, Chazal state (Avos 2:4), “Do not judge your friend until you get to his place.” The Kotzker Rebbe explained that you will never be in your friend’s situation anyway, so don’t judge him. A person never really understands another’s situation, because since each person has his own individual outlook, he never understands another’s outlook. Everyone sees things differently.

Why did Hashem create the world this way? Simply speaking, it is because Hashem wants many different faces in the Jewish people. But another reason, a deeper reason, is because Hashem wants each person to realize that his view isn’t everything, and there are other views to a situation.

If a person would never realize that another person can have a different opinion than him, everyone would be very haughty. We see that there are a lot of arguments in the Gemara, such as Beis Hilel and Beis Shamai, who never agree. Yet, the students of Shamai still married the students of Hilel, because they respected each other, and their arguments were not personal. Although *machlokes* (arguing) is known for its evil, it can be good and holy as well, when it serves to reveal how each person’s opinion doesn’t have to be the right one. Hashem purposely sets up in situations where we will meet others who disagree with us, and this is all to show each person that his opinion isn’t the only one.

The Purpose of Different Opinions

Let us explain this a bit more.

When any two people meet, they have to each realize that you need to accept others’ way of thinking. Each person needs to discover that he is not the only one in the world who has an opinion on a matter, and he isn’t always right.

Why did Hashem make the world like this, that people always disagree with each other? It wasn’t so that the world should be full of confusion or doubt. The reason for this is because there is so much depth to life – depth within depth.

This concept is not an “Avodah”. It is an attitude to have on life. When someone disagrees with you, it is an opportunity for you to realize that your way of thinking is not the only way to think. Although Hashem gave you the power to think for yourself, He also gave others this power, and there is no one correct way to think; each person has his own way of thought. For this reason, two people can take opposing sides, yet they are both right, because “Their words and their words are both the words of the living G-d.”

The only undisputed fact is that we must all do the will of Hashem and give Him pleasure.

Two Ways To Reach Hashem

In Chazal, there are two approaches brought on how to reach Hashem. One approach is to begin with love for the Creator, which will then lead one to reach love for Jews. The other approach is to begin with love for the Jewish people, and from that, a person comes to love Hashem.

In more simple language, a person has to make room for Hashem in himself, and let go of his “I.” There are two ways how this can be accomplished.

One way is that a person has to allow room for others in his life, and that he shouldn’t live a selfish existence. However, this is not yet the purpose; it is only the means to a greater goal. The goal of not being selfish is that a person should get used to giving up his “I”. By getting used to *Ahavas Yisrael*

(loving other Jews), a person learns how to make room for Hashem in himself. That is one approach.

The other approach, which is a straighter approach, is to first make space for Hashem in oneself, and that will get a person to leave his "I" (and thus come to love others as a result).

Which approach should a person take? It depends on each person; both ways are correct approaches, and each person has the way that is meant for him. Let us try to understand, however, the underlying concept of these two differing ways.

A person's job is to learn how to remove his ego from all situations. We can give an example on how one can work on this. Let's say a person is standing and thinking who is standing here. A simple, superficial response would be that he is standing there by himself, but if you think about it, this can't be, because we know that Hashem is everywhere, so how can it be that Hashem and you are standing in the same exact place? If Hashem is here, then how can I stand where I am standing, if Hashem fills everything in existence?

That is the way to start thinking. It is not upon a person to understand this intellectually how it can be that he stands where Hashem is; rather, the approach should be that if Hashem is here, it must be that I am not here at all!

Of course, we don't mean to imply that we do not exist. We exist, and we have Torah and mitzvos to keep. But we mean that a person should think to himself: Who made me have such a question in the first place? Hashem. How do we know this is true? It is because Chazal (Sotah 5a) state that Hashem says about a *baal gaavah* (a haughty person), "I and him cannot dwell under one roof."

Maybe one will counter that this is only true about a *baal gaavah*. But upon deeper thinking, all people have *gaavah* by their very essence, because there is no one who does not think how it is possible that he and Hashem can be in the same place at once. Hashem causes each person to have this question at some point: How can it be that I and Hashem can be at once in the same place? The point of this questioning within is so that a person will realize the truth: Since Hashem is here where I stand, it must be that "I" am not really here!

Such a conclusion is a fact that cannot be comprehended. But it is supposed to make a person think, "Am I trying to discover where I fit into Creation, or did Hashem make me think about this question so that I should realize that I need to stop thinking about my 'I'?"

Leaving Your "I"

This is a deep and subtle matter. Whatever you encounter, get used to forgetting about yourself and how you fit into the picture. Get used to the attitude of, "It's not about you." Instead of seeing how something has to do with you, see how the matter comes to make you leave your "I."

We can give another example on how one can work on this. Chazal state (Chagigah 12b) that the world exists due to the merit of a *tzaddik*. The *sefer Nefesh HaChaim* also brings from Chazal that if there would be one second in the world in which there is no study of Torah, the world would cease to exist.

This seems to be a contradiction. Who upholds the world – a *tzaddik*, or someone who learns Torah? What happens if the *tzaddik* doesn't learn Torah – does the world still stand on his merit? We will not go into this discussion. Our aim here is to approach the question, not to get into the answers.

Chazal state (Sukkah 45b) that the world cannot survive unless there are at least thirty-six *tzaddikim*. The world needs to stand on some foundation, and the *tzaddik* is that foundation. Which of the thirty-

six *tzaddikim* does the world truly stand on? There are those who say that there is one *tzaddik* who is the most righteous of all of them, and on him the world stands. This is true, but again, we are not looking for answers to our question. What we want to get at is how we look at the question.

Let's say this *tzaddik*, whom the world stands on, is thinking that the world stands on his merit. If he were to have such a thought, he is wrong. No one should be thinking that the world stands on his merit. First of all, no one should consider himself a *tzaddik*, because Chazal say (Niddah 30b) that even if everyone tells you are a *tzaddik*, you should consider yourself to be a *rasha*. Even if someone really is a *tzaddik*, he can still be aware that there are another thirty-five *tzaddikim*, so the world doesn't necessarily depend on him alone. Even if he is indeed the greatest *tzaddik* from all of them – like if Eliyahu HaNavi came to him and told him so – he should still know that the world survives on Torah, not on him.

The point of this thinking is that a person has to get used to removing his “I” from the equation. A person needs to see how he is *not* in the picture – not how he *is* in the picture. When a person is sitting and learning Torah, he should not be thinking, “Baruch Hashem, the world stands on my merit.” (Sometimes a person does need to say this, because there is such a concept as *gaavah d'kedushah* – “holy arrogance”, to be proud of one's learning. But the more truthful viewpoint is that one should be aware that the world doesn't depend on him for survival. We see that *tzaddikim* die and the world continues to go on afterwards, so even a *tzaddik* has to be aware of that., that the world doesn't depend on him.)

Maybe a person will ask, “If so, why did Hashem create people, if He doesn't need them anyway?” The answer to this is, that's the whole point of why were created – to be able to realize that there is nothing besides for Hashem! The purpose of our existence is to reveal Hashem, and how He is perfect – which is essentially to realize that He doesn't need us.

We have the power of free will, though, and this makes us believe that we are in control of things, which makes us feel in turn that we are needed. But the true attitude to have is that since Hashem is perfect and He lacks nothing, it is our purpose in Creation to reveal this truth – *Ain Od Milvado*, There is nothing besides for Hashem.

Hashem Is The Sole Provider

Another example of how we can work on nullifying our self is as follows.

A person usually feels that he is in charge of supporting his family. He is afraid to die, because he worries for his family: Who will feed them if I'm not here? There are some people who, unfortunately, are told that they will die soon, and they are immediately filled with complaints on Hashem: “If I die, what will be with my family??”

People naturally think that they control their family's livelihood. It seems to be this way, because we can see that those who become orphaned need to depend on others for survival, because they have no one to worry for them.

This is one of the examples of how our senses delude us. The true attitude we are supposed to have is that we all have one Father, and He is the father of orphans and widows. He is also the Father of all of us as we live. Chazal say that a person has three partners – his father, his mother, and Hashem. Even if a father dies, Hashem can still take care of his family, and nothing can get in His way.

When people feel that their families won't be able to survive without them, it really comes from the ego, which doesn't want to accept that Hashem doesn't need him.

If Hashem is in charge of everything, why, indeed, did He give us responsibilities on this world if He doesn't need us anyway? It is because we are supposed to feel our responsibility, but after we take care of our responsibilities, we are supposed to feel that Hashem still didn't need us to do it. When we learn Torah, we should feel how important it is for the world to survive, but after that, we should remember that Hashem can still upkeep the world even without us.

This feeling of humility towards Hashem should not cause us to feel sad that we are not needed. Hashem doesn't need us, but He created us so that we can come to recognize this. The problem is that our soul by nature doesn't want to accept this so easily, because it is very hard to undermine your whole existence. People always want to see how they are in everything and how they are needed, and this natural part of our psyche holds us back from nullifying ourselves to Hashem.

Let's say a person travels somewhere to go to an act of chessed, and when he arrives, they tell him that he isn't needed anymore, because it was taken care of already. His reaction will likely be, "I came here for nothing...at least Chazal say that you get reward for traveling for a mitzvah."

Although that is a true statement of Chazal, this shouldn't be the inner perspective to have on the situation. His reaction should really be, "Hashem did this to show me that He doesn't need me."

Anything we encounter serves one purpose alone: there is a Creator here, and He is perfect and lacks nothing. Hashem created us so that we can reveal Him, that He alone is in charge. If so, why do we do anything, if He doesn't need us? It is because our actions serve to clarify this very point: Hashem doesn't need me.

This is how we perfect ourselves - when we realize how Hashem is perfect, because He doesn't need us, and He can run the world without us.

See Hashem In Everything

The point of this discussion is so that a person can come to see Hashem in each thing, and not himself.

We only gave a few examples of this concept, but it can be applied to an endless amount of details in our life.

A person naturally either sees Hashem or himself in everything. Those are the two possibilities. How can one come out of seeing himself in everything and instead to see Hashem in everything? The tool one can use for this is Ahavas Yisrael. By loving other Jews, you come out of yourself. The goal of this, though, is to see Hashem in everything.

Take this point we are saying and expand upon it, and keep seeing how one has to always see Hashem in everything, not himself.

Think About Hashem

Until now, we addressed the first stage of this concept, which is to "remove yourself from evil." The next step is to "do good" - to actually do positive actions that bring about the goal. This part is simpler.

After one has learned to let go of his "I", now what? Now a person has to think simply about the fact that Hashem exists. Believe in His existence, and this very thinking will help your soul be able to nullify yourself.

You don't have to reflect deeply about Hashem for this; just think about the simple fact that He exists. This will reveal the true "I", who is Hashem, and it will slowly remove your ego more and more.

If a person jumps straight to this stage without working on the first part we mentioned, we cannot say that this is pointless, but it won't do much.

When a person works on both of these stages, he will receive *siyata d'shmaya* (Heavenly assistance) to erase his "I", and he will come to reveal the simple truth of *Ain Od Milvado*.

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