



Published on www.bilvavi.net

[Home](#) > Getting to Know Your Thoughts - 012 How Thoughts Affect Behavior

Getting to Know Your Thoughts - 012 How Thoughts Affect Behavior

Thoughts Affect Our Feelings and Actions

A person either uses his mind for the purpose of using the mind, or he uses his mind in order to do something.

The highest purpose our mind serves is to think in the Torah. When a person learns Torah, he is using *Chochmah*, *Binah* and *Da'as* for the sake of using the mind. The Rosh writes that learning *Torah lishmah* (for its own sake) means that one learns Torah simply for the sake of learning. That is one usage of our mind.

Another usage of our mind, which is a lower purpose, is what the Torah brings you to do. In this there are also different uses.

The Vilna Gaon writes that there are three parts to the mind: thoughts, speech and actions. Thoughts are when a person thinks and analyzes. Speech of the mind is when a person thinks what he will say; "*Da'as* is hidden in the lips." Actions of the mind are when a person puts thought into what he does.

To give a more general definition of the mind's uses, our thoughts can affect either our *middos* emotions or how we act.

Our head contains our mind, our heart contains our *middos* and our body contains our actions (which is the lowest part of our soul). The thoughts, which are the highest part of our soul, must be able to affect even the lower parts of our soul, which are our *middos* and our action; it is not enough to use our mind just to think. Our thoughts are supposed to affect our entire being – our heart, our *middos*,

and our simple actions.

First, we will explain how the thoughts are supposed to affect our *middos*.

A Child's Mind Has No Da'as

There are seven root emotions in the soul: love, fear, pride, victory, admitting, connection, and lowliness. Let us use love as an example to explain the roots of this discussion.

When a person loves something, does this come from his *middos*\emotions, or from his mind? Naturally, love is rooted in our emotions, and to be more specific, it is rooted in the faculty of *ratzon* (will).

A young child is able to love. A child's mind is at the level of *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*, but he has no *Da'as*. The highest level of *Da'as* is *ruach hakodesh*, and this can be experienced in some small way when a person uses his *Da'as* to connect to his decisions (*Da'as hamechaberes*). The lower levels of *Da'as* are *Da'as d'havdalah* and *Da'as d'hachraah* - a child does not have any of this, because he can't decide.

Before we explained that the lower *Chochmah* is to see a physical image, while *Tevunah* is to compare and act upon that comparison. These are both abilities which even a baby can do. Of course, a baby or a child can't decide to use his *Tevunah* or not, but he naturally uses his imagination anyway. An adult, by contrast, is capable of deciding if the comparison he made is correct or not. An adult continues to grow up with his imagination, but slowly he gains more and more *Da'as*, and he is able to figure out if what he's imagining is true or not.

The point here is that a child, who only has *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* but no *Da'as*, is still able to love and have other emotions.

A Child's Emotions Are Not Connected To His Mind

When a person is a child, he has only two parts functioning in his mind - *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*. He also has *middos*, which are the emotions.

Are his emotions and mind connected? No. A child's mind is one part of himself, while the emotions are a separate part of himself. Of course, we can't say that there is no connection at all, because sometimes a child's mind and emotions do work together. But even when there is a connection, it is lacking *Da'as*, and without *Da'as* everything is just a random mix. A child's love or fear are mere emotions – they aren't built upon the mind. They are just natural emotions which are rooted in a person's *ratzon*.

This is the way a person is since he is born.

When a person gets older, he gets *Da'as*, but his *middos*\emotions don't necessarily change. It's very possible that an adult still remains with the very same emotions he had since he was a child. It could even be that he is very mature in his mind, but his mind is one thing, while his emotions are another thing. He can know in his mind that a certain desire is wrong to pursue, but he just follows his emotions and gives in to his desire.

When a person's *middos* aren't connected to his mind, this resembles Esav, who head was greater than the rest of his body. Esav knew what the right thing was in his mind; he had a very great mind. But his *middos*\emotions weren't connected to his mind, so he followed his emotions.

Free Will Is Essentially To Choose Da'as

In the lower mode of thought of an adult, the more mature his *Chochmah*, *Tevunah* and *Da'as* become, the more he is aware in his mind if something is good or bad. An adult is able to decide if he will listen to his mind over his emotions. This is the basic power of *bechirah* (free will) which we all recognize in ourselves – our heart wants something which our mind knows is wrong, and it is up to the person to decide if he will listen to the heart's emotions or to the mind's knowledge.

When a child loves something, why does he love it? It is because one time he tasted it and saw it was good. His whole love comes from his emotions, not from his mind. This isn't based on his *Chochmah* or on his *Tevunah*, but purely on his natural emotions.

The lower *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* are also in a child. Even if you don't give him the exact candy he likes, he will like it anyway because he compares it with the first candy he saw, which tasted good; this is a usage of his *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*. But even when he uses *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* in what he likes, it is only just bringing out his original liking toward the candy, which is based on mere emotions.

All people have basic emotions. Many adults continue to live with the same emotions they had as children. People get smarter as they get older, but the emotional level often stays the same as when they were children.

Even the lower *Da'as*, which is the power to decide, is often not used so much by many people. Why? It is because a person as a child experienced love for something, but he didn't have *Da'as*. As a result, every time that love comes back, it awakens in the person an emotion that is based just on *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* without *Da'as*. People thus have a tendency to skip over their *Da'as* whenever they feel a liking to something.

Of course, there can be a more internal reason for this, since love is really a feeling that is above comprehension. But what is relevant for us to know is as follows. The first time a person had a desire for something, like when he was a child, he didn't have any *Da'as*. All he had was *Chochmah* and *Tevunah*. Thus, the second time he feels the desire again, it awakens in him the first time he had the desire, and the same goes for the next time he has the desire. The original emotions keep being awakened, and these original emotions didn't have any *Da'as* in them.

When a person gets older and matures, he gains *Da'as*. What happens if he encounters the desire again? His natural reaction will be to follow his original emotions, which lacked *Da'as*. For this reason, many people fall into their desires when they encounter a powerful temptation. "When the *yetzer hora* is present, there is no memory of the *yetzer tov*." When an evil desire is present, there is no good present; what is the reason for this? It is because the first time a person had a desire, he had no *yetzer tov*. When this desire gets awakened again in the person even as a mature adult who has *Da'as*, it awakens his original emotions in which there was no *yetzer tov* present - in other words, when there was no *Da'as*.

Even though an adult is capable of deciding between right and wrong, desires awaken the first time a person had a desire, which was a time when he didn't have *Da'as*. This is a very fundamental point in understanding the human soul.

When a person gets older and matures, he has a choice: either to awaken his *Da'as* that he has now, or to push it away. Then he has to decide if he will listen to this decision or not. But the beginning point of free will is for a person to choose to even awaken his *Da'as* or just go back to his original, childish emotions.

Many times a person can feel this in himself. He feels that he wants something, and there is an inner voice telling him, "No." But the person just pushes away this inner voice and runs back to his old emotions he is used to.

Mature Emotions

But when a person makes use of his higher mode of thought, it's the opposite: the emotions of a person now become mature, because they are based on the mind.

A simple example of this is Avraham Avinu, whose love of Hashem came about from the wisdom he discovered. Here is an emotion based on the mind. Did his wisdom come from his love, or did his love come from his wisdom? His love came from his wisdom. What his wisdom wanted, that is what he loved. On a more subtle note, love is rooted in a point that is above the mind.

In order for a person to have more mature emotions, he must leave his lower mode of thought - totally. Why?

According to what we have described before, it is very clear. With the undeveloped mind, everything a person does comes from his emotional reactions. Here, even his thinking is based on his emotions. If such thinking isn't really *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* but just a revelation of the natural emotions in a person, it definitely does not make use of *Da'as*.

In the higher usage of our thoughts, not only do the emotions work together with our *Da'as*, but the emotions here are a **result** of the mind. These are entirely different kinds of feelings that a person can have.

This was also the difference between the *eitz haDa'as* and the *eitz hachaim*. The knowledge contained in the *eitz haDa'as*, which was evil, is a *Da'as* that comes from emotions. Chavah only desired to eat from the *eitz haDa'as* because she saw that the tree tasted good; in other words, the whole connection to the *Da'as* came from emotions.

But the knowledge contained in the *eitz hachaim* - the tree of "life" -- which is the good kind of knowledge, represents a different way to build the emotions. These are emotions which stem from the mind. The mind is the source of a person's real "life"; "*Wisdom sustains its owner.*"^[2]

Truth and Falsity

The connection between the mind and the emotions is usually perceived as self-control, but this is a superficial definition.

Self-control is that a person learns about the good and bad *middos* emotions and tries to use his mind to control his *middos*. This is true and it is a worthy thing to do, but if this is the definition, then he is just using his mind as a tool to work on his *middos*. If this is his attitude, then his emotions he has now are the focus, and he is just using his mind to control them and fix them.

That is the lower mode of thought; in the higher mode of thought, however, it is the mind which produces **new** emotions. The focus here is not to fix your current *middos*, but to use your mind to produce new *middos* altogether.

The Rambam (in *Moreh Nevuchim*) writes that this was the difference between before Adam's sin to after the sin. Before the sin, the whole test of man was to differentiate between truth and falsity; after the sin, the test of mankind is to choose between good and evil. The difference is as follows: with "truth", a person clarifies what the truth is, and the truth tells him if he should have the emotion or not. Here, the emotions are being produced from the mind.

But in the lower state of mankind, which came after the sin, it's not about the "truth", but about what's "good." In this lower state, a person wants something because it is good; when a person wants something, it is *ratzon*, which is rooted in the *middos*. Here, the emotions are causing what a person wants.

This is also the deep difference between the *middos* of a Torah scholar to an ignoramus. Chazal say that an ignoramus cannot be pious^[3], because even though an ignoramus can acquire *middos*, his *middos* don't come from the mind. An ignoramus doesn't have a mind with which to base his emotions on.

Learning Middos From The Torah, Not From Animals

Chazal say that if not for the Torah, we would have learned how to act from animals. We would have learned modesty from a cat, consideration for other's money from an ant, and marital loyalty from a dove.^[4]

What is the difference between learning how to act from the Torah or from animals? An animal's behavior doesn't come from any thought. We can learn *middos* alone from animals - if we just want to know what's a nice way to act and what's a mean way to act. But *middos* alone aren't the *middos* that the Torah wants us to have. The Torah's attitude toward *middos* is that the *middos* have to come from the Torah and not from anywhere else.

The Torah is a “*pure heart G-d created me with, and a proper spirit to renew in my innards.*” We need **renewed** middos. To have new *middos* is different than working on your present *middos* through using your mind. If we would just have to work on our *middos*, we wouldn’t need to get new *middos*. From the renewal of the Torah, a person can draw forth new *middos* altogether. This is really the meaning of *mochin d’gadlus* – the higher state of mind.

It’s not that I have worked on my *middos*, got rid of my bad *middos* and instead revealed the good within them. That would also be a nice thing to do, but that is not our Avodah we are describing here. We are describing *middos* and emotions which are drawn forth from the Torah.

There are thirteen middos of Hashem, and these are the *middos* which we aspire to. Chazal say, *hevay domeh lo* – “You should be similar to Him”. The real *middos* which we aspire to have are *middos* that come from the Torah, which are *middos* that are rooted in the Creator.

True Emotions Stem From The Mind

This is how a person really works on himself: first, a person has to purify his *middos*. He must turn his bad *middos* into good *middos*. After this he acquires *mochin d’gadlus* – a higher state of mind. When a person has *mochin d’gadlus*, he receives entirely new *middos*.

If a person hasn’t fixed his *middos* yet and he attempts to reach *mochin d’gadlus*, he will not really be successful. Such a person is fooling himself.

The new *middos* only come to a person if he has worked to eliminate his bad *middos*. The mind can only produce new *middos* when the bad *middos* have been first transformed into good *middos*. When a person only has *Mochin D’Katnus*, he simply works on his *middos*, but with *Mochin D’Gadlus*, he is a whole new person, because he has entirely new *middos*.

Mature Love Vs. Immature Love

To give an example of what we mean, a person has to love the Torah.

If a person has reached his higher mode of thought, loving the Torah is not the same love a person is familiar with. It is not a different way to use the power of love; it is whole a new kind of love. In the

higher mode of thought, the feelings come from the mind.

When a person has love for the Torah from his higher state of mind, it's not even that he loves the Torah more than any other worldly pleasure; it's not that he is channeling his love for the physical toward loving the Torah. Although it is true that a person should do this, that is not yet the depth of loving Torah. Loving Torah is to realize what the Torah is, and from that realization to come to love it. This is a whole new kind of love.

If a person loves the Torah only because of the first way, there can be no greater downfall to a person than this. This is because he is using the lowest kind of love in order to love the Torah, which is entirely different than the regular love that people know of.

We specifically gave Torah as an example for this, because Torah is entirely the mind. Learning the Torah in a true way brings a person to have a whole new kind of mind.

Chazal^[5] say that every day a person should look at the Torah like new. If the entire Torah was already revealed to Moshe at Har Sinai, how can it be new every day? The answer to this is because it has to be new to you, on a personal level. How can it be new to you? If it is coming to you from your real mind, it is new. Chazal are saying that every day, strive to have new *middos* which come from the Torah.

When a person remains in the lower state of mind, he might be able to channel his regular emotions toward the Torah and even purify his *middos*, but these will not be new *middos*. A person who worked on his *middos*, let's say, used to love certain exciting things that were materialistic, and now he loves the Torah instead – but in the same way he loved this world. Such a person has indeed worked on himself, but he doesn't have new *middos*.

By contrast, someone who works hard at learning the Torah and comes up with new Torah insights all the time is revealing a whole new *middah* of love which he never had before. It's not that he is improving his *middos* – it is that he is getting new *middos*.

Cleaving To The Middos of Hashem

Chazal taught us that we must cleave to the *middos* of Hashem; just as He is merciful, so must we be merciful^[6].

In the lower state of mind, the emotions are a mix of good and evil. Cleaving to the *middos* here is to overcome the evil and instead listen to the good in you; when you feel like acting cruel, instead be merciful.

But this is not the depth of cleaving to the *middos* of Hashem. Does Hashem have any bad *middos*? Heaven forbid not! What does this mean then?

It is true that we must remove our evil and instead cling to good, but the depth of cleaving to the *middos* of Hashem is to have *middos* which come from the mind. When a person connects to his mind, from there he can derive *middos* which are completely good.

“Hashem, the Jewish people, and the Torah are one.” Hashem has completely good *middos*, and the Torah has entirely good *middos*. The Jewish people also have entirely good *middos*! But this is only if someone derives his *middos* from Hashem and His Torah, not if he simply channels his natural emotions for good.

We are not saying that a person shouldn't work on his *middos* in the simple sense. If a person doesn't work on his regular *middos*, he will never reach his mind. A person must work on his *middos*, simply put. What we mean is that after a person has worked on his *middos*, he must work on connecting to his mind, and from there he can draw forth new *middos*.

This is the real way to build up our minds.

Let us explain this in more simple words. Usually, we think that we need to just use our mind to work on our *middos*. But it's really the opposite. How can we do the opposite of this?

Before, we explained at length that thought is not simply for a person to become a thinker, but that we should live in a world of thought. When a person doesn't live in a world of thought, he lives either in a world of emotions or in a world of action. He is either acting upon his emotions or he is simply just acting. Such a person, when he thinks, limits his thinking either to his emotions or to what he's doing. By contrast, someone who lives in a world of thought always does everything from a viewpoint of thought.

For example, a person sees an object. What does he first think as he sees it? An action kind of person thinks, “What do I do with this?” while a feeling kind of person thinks, “Is this thing good for me or not?”

But someone who lives with thought thinks, “What is this thing made up of? What is its function?”

Chazal state that Hashem thought first to create the Jewish people before He thought of creating the universe. This shows us that the Jewish people are first supposed to make use of their thoughts, before the feelings and the any actions. Our feelings and actions need to be clarified to us through the thoughts. Whatever a person encounters, he has to approach it first through thought, and then the feelings and actions will be based upon the thoughts. To give a more inner description of this – the emotions are supposed to come from our mind.

How The Emotions Can Be A Result Of The Mind

In the future, we will reach a more perfected state of mind, in which we will reveal a kind of mind that is above the emotions.

The world which we live in is a world of emotion. Hashem thus relates to us with *middah k'neged middah* (measurement for a measurement), because since the current state of the world is that of *middos*, Hashem related to us in terms of *middos*. But in the future, Hashem will give us all a future reward, a state of total mind above emotion. The depth of the future reward is the revelation of the Torah's secrets – a revelation of the mind, and even above this level there will also be an utter connection to Hashem.

But in our current situation of the world, which will last for six thousand years (not just in the average seventy-year lifespan of people, but even in Gan Eden right now), our minds are not yet total. This is why Chazal say that “Anyone who says, “All I have is the Torah” does not even have the Torah^[7].” Since this is so, we must use our mind to affect our emotions and actions. We must “learn in order to do.”

Therefore, when we discuss the mind, it is clear that we can't just work on this just for the sake of building our mind. Our entire discussion here is about how to use our mind to affect how we act and feel. (On a very subtle note, there is a deep place in our soul in which there is a total mind, but that is only once our mind is connected to all the other parts of our soul).

The real function of the mind is to affect us and produce new *middos*. In the *sefarim hakedoshim*, the mind is referred to as “*Abba and Ima*” – “father and mother”, because the whole function of the mind is to produce new *middos*, just like a father and mother give birth to children.

Before, we discussed *Chochmah* and *Binah*; these are ways to build our mind for the sake of building the mind. But more than this, we also have to use the way of “*Abba V’Ima*”, which is to use our mind to affect how we act.

With the lower *Chochmah* and *Tevunah* – abilities in the lower state of mind -- a person uses his mind to build his *middos*. But what was described in this chapter is to use our mind in order to produce entirely new *middos*.

One function of our *Chochmah*, *Binah* and *Da’as* are meant for us to build up the mind; although Betzalel was blessed with these abilities in order to build the Mishkan, of course this doesn’t mean that *Chochmah* and *Binah* are only for the sake of knowing what to do. They can be used to know what to do, but they serve a purpose other than this as well – to build the mind.

The other function which *Chochmah*, *Binah* and *Da’as* serve is to use these abilities in order to work on our *middos* and then produce new *middos*.

What we discussed in this chapter was the second function of our *Chochmah*, *Binah* and *Da’as*, which is to use our mind to produce new *middos* in ourselves.

How The Mind Affects Behavior and Emotions

When it comes to getting things done – action – everyone can understand that our mind affects how we act. The *mitzvos* and good actions which a person has are called his “fruits”^[8]. The good actions which righteous individuals have done are considered their main offspring^[9].

It’s not that a person does something and then afterwards he examines himself to see if he did the right thing. That is *cheshbon hanefesh* (self-accounting) and it is something else. Our thoughts come into play even before we act. Before a person does something, he thinks if he should do it or not. The point is that when it comes to how we act, everyone understands clearly that our thoughts affect us.

But when it comes to our feelings, this isn’t as clear. Feelings are more sudden and this makes us less aware that our mind is able to come before it.

The Ramban writes that a person must think before he acts. The same can be true for our feelings – we are able to think before how we will feel and react.

Reb Yisrael Salanter wrote that one of the ways to fix our *middos* is through learning the part in the Torah about that particular bad *middah* we want to fix. The simple understanding of this is that through learning about that area of the Torah, the Torah's light is shined upon the person and it removes the darkness of that bad *middah*.

But according to what we have said in this chapter, there is more to his words: a person needs to work on his weaknesses because through learning about it, he will receive entirely new *middos*.

Working on our Middos -- The Point of Life

We must always remember that when we build up our mind's power, besides for developing our mind we have to mainly use it to improve our *middos*.

There is a well-known statement of the Vilna Gaon^[10]: "A person lives in order to break the *middah* which he hasn't broken yet until now. Thus, a person must always strengthen himself to work on this, because if he doesn't, what is the point of living?"

What does this mean? If we don't break our *middos* then there is no pint to life?! What about learning Torah and doing mitzvos?

The understanding of this is that we are living in a world of *middos*. (There are people who are living entirely for action, and this is the lowest kind of existence). Therefore, if we don't break our *middos*, life on this world is pointless. If a person wants to break his *middos*, he needs to break his *middos* as well as gain new *middos*.

The entire function of our mind on this world is to produce new *middos* in ourselves. When we all merit this, we will gain *middos* of Hashem, which will be the perfected state of the future.

[1] *Nedarim 32b*

[2] *Koheles 7: 12*

[3] Avos 2: 5

[4] Eruvin 100b

[5] Sifrei, V'Eschanan, 6.

[6] Shabbos 133b

[7] Yevamos 109b

[8] Sotah 46a

[9] Rashi, beginning of Parshas Noach

[10] Mishlei 4 :13

Source: <http://bilvavi.net/english/getting-know-your-thoughts-012-how-thoughts-affect-behavior>