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Less 'Derech Eretz' - Less Involvement With the World

One of the 48 ways to acquire the Torah (and prepare for Shavuot) listed in the Mishnah (Avos 6:6) is called less "*derech erez*." There are many explanations of this term; one of the commentaries translates this to mean to lessen our worldliness; that one shouldn't hang around in the streets too much.

Torah and being on the street are two things that do not go together. That is simple to understand. But the deeper meaning of "*less derech erez*" is as follows.

The Power of "Alone" In The Soul

Rav Saadya Gaon wrote that there were three great revelations that took place at Har Sinai: Hashem revealed Himself, and He revealed the Torah, and the Jewish people were at complete unity with each other; they all had "one heart".

Chazal say (in many places) that Torah can only be acquired when we are with people, and that a person should not learn Torah alone. One of the Sages said that he learned more from his friends and students than from himself.

On the other hand, though, there is concept that a person learns Torah from within himself - and he doesn't need others for this kind of Torah learning.

There is a place in the depths of a person's heart in which a person can learn Torah, secluded with Hashem, and draw forth Torah from there. It is hidden from view of any person.

It reflects the statement of Chazal, "*Liba l'pumei lo galya*," "The heart is not revealed to the mouth."^[1] [1] - there are certain deep matters of our heart which aren't able to be expressed in any way with others. The deep matters of the heart are an inner and private experience which takes place in one's deep recesses of his soul.

The true bond with Hashem that a person can have is developed not through being with others, but through oneself, inside himself. In the depths of our heart, we can be with Hashem and learn Torah from that inner place.

Balancing Social Life and Secluded Life

So on one hand, we need others in order to learn Torah. On one hand, we must also acquire the ability to feel utterly alone with Hashem. It is a paradox, yet we must live with this paradox and utilize both of these opposite sides to our self.

Practically speaking, we need others in order to learn Torah properly. But the depth of our Torah learning is reached when we develop a strong relationship with Hashem in the innermost depths of our heart inside us.

The sefer *Mesillas Yesharim* says many times throughout the sefer that besides for learning Torah with other people, we also need to learn by ourselves sometimes.

There were some *Gedolim* who learned entirely by themselves, and they were always secluded. We are not saying that everyone do this, as it is very hard to implement. But the general concept is definitely true, that we also need **times of being alone** in order to truly learn the Torah.

A person has to
develop the power
of being “alone”

The Chazon Ish once said that all of what he comprehended in his Torah learning was because he sat in a secluded room where he learned undisturbed. There is a place in a person in which “Hashem and Yisrael are one.” It cannot be expressed by mouth to anyone; “The heart is not revealed to the mouth.”

Why We Need Seclusion

Let’s say a person always learns in the *beis midrash* and with a *chavrusa*. On one hand, this is commendable, but if a person can only learn when he has a *chavrusa*, this is a disadvantage. A person has to be able to learn alone sometimes.

A person has to develop the power of being “alone”, the power of “*levad*” – just as Yaakov fought *levad* with the angel. In the inner place of our soul, we have a power to be “alone” with Hashem.

We each have two opposite abilities. On one hand, we must unify with the entire Jewish people, and that is why we need others to learn Torah with. We aren’t able to learn Torah if we only remain alone and totally reserved from others. But on the other hand, we also need to reveal our “alone” aspect and be able to learn alone sometimes. This is because it is only in that inner place of “alone” in our soul that we can truly find Hashem and His Torah.

This applies to our entire relationship with Hashem, and it applies specifically to how we approach Shavuos, the time in which we receive the Torah.

Moshe received the Torah where he was alone, and this shows us that the true depth of Torah is revealed to a person only when he is alone with Hashem and he feels the oneness with Him. Each person has a “Moshe Rabbeinu” as well within his own soul, in which he can learn Torah “alone” with Hashem.

The Two Preparations For Shavuos: Love For Others, and Love for Hashem

There are two sides to who we are. On one hand, we must be unified with all Jews, and for this reason, we need others to learn Torah with. But on the other side of the coin, we must be able to be secluded from every person and instead be “alone” with Hashem.

One way we prepare for the Torah is by having love for other Jews, because since we all had one heart when we received the Torah, we need to unify with the Jewish people in order to be worthy of receiving the Torah. We thus need to increase *ahavas Yisrael* in order to prepare for Shavuos.

But at the same time, we must also be able to disconnect from others and be totally “alone” with Hashem. Just as the Jewish people were alone with Hashem in the desert, so we must retreat to the “desert” in our own soul and feel alone with Hashem.

So in order to acquire the Torah, we need two things. We must love all Jews and unify with everyone, and we must also build a deep relationship with Hashem.

The first way represents how we must toil to receive the Torah. The second way represents a different way to receive the Torah – not through toil, but through serenity. When we feel serene with Hashem, we are close with Him, and that is the deeper way of how we can receive the Torah.

We Need Both Exertion and Serenity In The Torah

Ever since the *Luchos* were broken, we have had to toil over the Torah. We must toil in Torah or else we can't understand it. Anyone who thinks otherwise is a dreamer.

But we must also be aware that there was a Torah of the first *Luchos*, which was a Torah that didn't require exertion to understand. It was a Torah of total serenity, due to our unblemished relationship with Hashem that we had before the sin with the Calf.

In the end of the day, we need both exertion and serenity in the Torah. We have to toil over Torah, because we live after the sin with the Calf, in which we were given the second *Luchos*, which is a Torah that can only be acquired with exertion. But we also need serenity in the Torah, besides for working hard at it. We need serenity in the Torah because that is the truer kind of Torah that existed in the first *Luchos*, which we almost received.

Chochmah\Wisdom and Temimus\Simplicity

In our own soul, we have two abilities: *chochmah* (wisdom) and *temimus* (simplicity). On one hand, we intellectualize and analyze the Torah. But we can also reveal our other power – *temimus*, to be “simple” in our relationship with Hashem and detach from intellectualizing about the Torah so much.

We do not mean *chas v'shalom* to say that we should abandon *chochmah* and only have *temimus*. We need both abilities equally; it is two sides of the coin.

When a person has a difficulty with his learning, like if he has a question, what should he do? There are three general solutions. One way is to have more *ameilus*\exertion. The second way is *tefillah* - to *daven* to Hashem about it (The Chazon Ish would do this. The Kotzker zt”l once said that if one has the second way, *tefillah*, he won't need the first way!). The third way is *teshuvah* - to deepen your relationship with Hashem.

Now we can understand the following deep point as well.

“I saw that the Chazon Ish had a sense of pleasure over being able to recognize Hashem.”

The Deepest Form of Pleasure

It is written, “*And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good.*” We were created to bask in the pleasure of Hashem. This is not an imaginary connection, but a deep relationship we can reach in our heart. And it results in a very pleasurable feeling.

Once I was speaking to Rav Dov Yaffa shlit”a, who told me that he was once by the Chazon Ish. He told me, “I saw that the Chazon Ish had a sense of pleasure over being able to recognize Hashem.”

When one exerts himself in Torah, he can come to eventually enjoy its sweetness, as a gift from all his efforts. That is one way to reach the sweetness of Torah learning.

But there is another way as well which can help you reach the sweetness of Torah learning, and it is a much deeper kind of pleasure. It is the kind of pleasure in which you won’t even have to daven to Hashem to give you pleasure in Torah (which we daven for every day in the *Tefillah* of “*V’haarev Na*”.) It is the pleasure in Torah learning that comes when a person forms a deep relationship with Hashem.

There are thus two aspects to preparing for Shavuos. The first thing we need to do is to increase the amount of time we learn and the quality of how we learn Torah. But the second way is to **reveal a new depth** in how we understand our Torah learning. The Torah contains endless depth; it is “*longer than the earth and wider than the sea.*” We can also reveal more and more depth to the Torah, and this is through connecting to Hashem more.

When a person only connects to learning Torah – without developing a relationship with Hashem – such a Torah is limited. He won’t be connected to the *Ein Sof* (Endlessness) of Hashem; he will only have limited pleasure from the Torah. He will have to ask Hashem each day to have more sweetness in his learning...[\[2\]](#) ^[2]

But if a person uses the deep place in his soul to connect to Hashem through his Torah, he connects to an unlimited Torah, in which his pleasure in it will be unlimited. This is the meaning of “*maayan hamisgaber*” – it is unlimited Torah learning, because it is to be connected to the Unlimited: Hashem.

Bringing Hashem Into Our Torah Learning

If anyone seeks a truthful kind of life, he needs two things. We can’t have one of these without the other.

We cannot only focus on our relationship with Hashem, because that will weaken our Torah learning. Yet if we only learn Torah and we never develop a relationship with Hashem, our learning will be sorely lacking, and we will be far away from the level of receiving the Torah at Har Sinai.

If one forms a relationship with Hashem and he also is connected to learning the Torah, he will have both sides of the coin – and he will receive unlimited pleasure in his Torah learning, a whole new kind of deeper pleasure.

The Revelation of Pesach, and the Revelation of Shavuos

On Pesach, Hashem took us out of Egypt. He did not take us out with an angel or with any messenger; He took us out Himself, in all His honor and glory. Pesach was the revelation of Hashem onto the world.

What then does Shavuos come to reveal? What more does Shavuos come to reveal to the world? It was the giving of the Torah – it revealed another aspect that hadn’t been revealed until now: that

Torah is only revealed when *Hashem* is truly revealed.

Pesach revealed Hashem, and Shavuot revealed His Torah. When we received the Torah, we had two aspects that were inseparable to us: we were close to Hashem through having the Torah, and we had Torah because we had closeness with Hashem.

After the sin with Golden Calf, the *Luchos* were broken. When the *Luchos* were broken, it became possible for a person to split the two aspects and miss the connection. Ever since the *Luchos* were broken, a person is able to make the mistake that either we can be close to Hashem and not have to learn Torah, or we can learn Torah and never develop a relationship with Hashem.

Either of these two ways to think is a mistake - a Torah of the "*broken Luchos*." The true state of affairs is to realize that we are only close to Hashem if we connect to Torah learning, and we can only have true Torah learning when we are connected to Hashem simultaneously.

This is an amazing point if you reflect about it.

If a person only knows of exertion in learning Torah and he doesn't feel closeness with Hashem in his life, such exertion is a kind of concealment, a result of sinning with the Golden Calf. But if a person has Hashem in his life, his exertion in learning comes from the true level of Torah, a Torah that is attached with Hashem.

When a person feels Hashem and feels a deep love for Him all the time, his learning is totally different. He gets Torah directly from Hashem, and his enjoyment in it will be much deeper.

The Barometer

How can a person know if he has reached this connection?

The way one can know this is that if he goes through something bothersome, and he can immediately return his thought to focusing on his connection with Hashem, or if he can immediately return to thinking in learning.

If someone knows how to do either of these two things, it shows that he never leaves his connection with Hashem or with Torah, because even if he gets disturbed by something, he can immediately return to his connection a moment later.

When the Ten Commandments were being given, what were the Jewish people focusing on - on Hashem, or on His Torah? They were focused on *Hashem* Who was revealing the Torah to them. The Torah they then received was a Torah with Hashem.

Shavuot - Returning To Har Sinai Each Year

What we have described here is a concept that does not come easily to us. A person is therefore likely to conclude that it's too hard to reach.

To counter this argument, this is what you can think: The time when we stood at Har Sinai was the greatest time in history. It was the most elevated moment in Creation. It was greater than the *Beis HaMikdash*. As holy as the *Beis HaMikdash* was, the event of standing at Har Sinai to receive the Torah was even holier!

When Shavuot is coming, we must realize that the greatest time in history is returning to us, and that we need to prepare for it properly as we should.

If someone never reflects, then he just learns and *davens* as he's used to (*Baruch Hashem* that he at least learns and *davens*...). But if someone reflects, he can realize that preparing for Shavuot cannot be achieved with mere inspiration. In order to prepare for Shavuot, we need to undergo a major overhaul.

To prepare, we must reveal from within ourselves an inner point in our soul. The *Ramchal* writes (in *sefer Adir B'Marom*) that deep in our soul, there is a point that was unaffected by Adam's sin. It is there, that innermost point of our soul, which we can access - it is there that we can reach a deep relationship with Hashem when we learn Torah.

We are not perfect, but we must strive to be like our forefathers. Chazal say that "One is obligated to say, "When will my actions touch upon the level of the actions of my forefathers?" We cannot reach the perfect level that our ancestors were on as they stood at Sinai, yet Chazal tell us that we must aspire to reach their level.

Some commentators noticed that Chazal say that even if we can't reach the level of our forefathers, we can still "touch upon" their level - we can touch it somewhat, even if we can't reach it fully. At least we can "touch" their level - that much we *are* capable of.

Chazal say, "One who sits and learns Torah, Hashem sits next to him and learns with him."

How To Feel Hashem In Your Learning

The way we can do this is by connecting ourselves with Hashem more often throughout the day. If we make sure to always have a relationship with Hashem every day in our life, we should understand as well that this also applies to our Torah learning.

Chazal say, "One who sits and learns Torah, Hashem sits next to him and learns with him." Hashem is really next to us as we learn, learning the Torah with us, but not everyone feels this; why not? This is because if a person doesn't feel Hashem in his day-to-day life, he doesn't feel Hashem in his learning either.

But we are able to feel Hashem with us when we learn Torah if we have already developed a relationship with Him from beforehand.

This does not mean that one should actually think about this while he is trying to learn Torah, because this will be detrimental and only weaken his mind as he tries to learn. Rather, what is meant here is that one can naturally feel Hashem with him as he learns, if he has already developed his relationship with Hashem throughout the course of his day-to-day life. He will then feel Hashem automatically in his learning as a direct result.

We must transform our life. This is how we prepare for the Torah. It is a life of true pleasure - it is a life of being with Hashem, *together* with His Torah.

May we be *zoche* to reach somewhat the level of our forefathers (even though we can't reach it perfectly) as they stood at Sinai, and to keep expanding upon that, until the souls of the entire Jewish people reach it in unison.

[1] [3] A statement of the Zohar

[2] [4] *Editor's Note: Obviously, the Rov is not chas v'shalom suggesting that a person who reaches this level won't have to say the tefillah of "V'haarev Na" in the morning, as we are acquired according to Halacha to make this blessing every morning. Rather, the Rov means that inasmuch as we are always required to make the blessing of V'haarev Na in the morning, still, in concept, we are able to transcend the level of one who is in need of having to make this blessing in the morning, for he reaches a deeper kind of sweetness than the kind of sweetness we ask for in the blessing of V'haarev Na.*

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