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Being Prepared To Give Yourself Up For Hashem

והשב את העבודה לדביר ביתך We ask Hashem to return to us the Avodah (service) of the *Beis HaMikdash*. The Avodah of the *Beis HaMikdash* consisted of many tasks, such as offering the *Korbonos* (sacrifices), lighting the Menorah, the singing of the Leviim, offering the *Ketores*, pouring the wine on the *Mizbeiach*, but the main Avodah was to bring the *Korbonos*.

Now that we don't have a *Beis HaMikdash* and no *Korbonos*, we are missing the main Avodah. Thus, we daven that the Avodah be returned, as it used to be, completely.

The Avodah in the *Beis HaMikdash* was with the *Korbonos*, which were animal offerings. But there is also a "lower *Beis HaMikdash*" on our own earth. Our Sages revealed that there is a *Beis HaMikdash* in Heaven and a lower *Beis HaMikdash* of this earth. There are *Korbonos* in Heaven, and there are also *korbonos* brought on this earth. What are the *Korbonos* brought above in Heaven?

Chazal state that the angel Michael offers the souls of the Jewish people each day on the Heavenly Altar. The *Ramban*^[1] writes that when a person would bring a *korbon*, he would concentrate on the fact that his soul is being offered as a *Korbon* to Hashem. This is the meaning of the concept that Jewish souls are offered on the Heavenly Altar by the angel Michael. The *Korbonos* which were brought here on earth were meant to awaken the person to realize that he is really offering his own soul as a *Korbon* to Hashem.

So when we daven to Hashem that the *Avodah* be returned, we should bear in mind how "prayer accomplishes half", as we have mentioned in the past - by preparing ourselves to be eligible as a *Korbon*. When Yitzchok Avinu was informed that he will become a *Korbon* on Har HaMoriah, he prepared himself to become an eligible *Korbon*.

The fact that the angel Michael offers the souls of the Jewish nation on the Heavenly altar implies to us that we have an *Avodah* on this earth to prepare ourselves to be an eligible *Korbon*. One must be prepared to offer himself as a *Korbon* to Hashem. This is how one does his half of the job, and in this way, his "prayer accomplishes half"; this is our part we can do in asking Hashem to return the *Avodah*.

Let us reflect a little on the depth of our *Avodah* to prepare ourselves as a *Korbon* for Hashem.

The Fear of Death

There are several factors in this. One aspect of it is to be prepared to actually die for Hashem, just as Yitzchok Avinu prepared himself to become an eligible *Korbon* for Hashem. Hashem held back Avraham at the last moment and told him not to slaughter Yitzchok – he was tested with having to kill his son for Hashem. The soul has a difficult time grappling with the fact that it has to offer itself as a *Korbon* to Hashem which is an extremely difficult test. It stems from the fact that we naturally fear death.

Ever since Adam sinned, mankind was cursed with death, and it will be this way until the future, in which death will be swallowed up forever. Until we merit the time of the future, every person has to endure the curse of death, except for a few rare *tzaddikim* who merited leaving the world without dying (such as Eliyahu and Chanoch). There were also a few *tzaddikim* who merited dying a blissful kind of death, the “kiss of death” from Hashem^[2]; but as for everybody else, we all have to go through the normal curse of death.

Most people are afraid to even think about death. Why is it that people do not like to think about death? The general reason for this is because it is usually a very depressing and melancholy kind of thought. But if a person thinks about it truthfully, he can take this thought apart and uncover that there are several reasons why we fear death.

Reason #1: Fear of Disconnection

One reason is because a person fears the fact that he will have to disconnect from being in This World. Naturally, every person feels very connected to his situation in This World, to many things: to his family, to his spouse, to his parents, to his children, etc. and to his various worldly possessions, desires and dreams and experiences. Death separates a person from all his connections to this world, and therefore, a person fears that disconnection, because he feels very connected to This World. The very thought of death is therefore frightening to a person.

Reason #2: Fear of the Unknown

Another reason why a person fears death is because it is fear of the unknown. Naturally, we fear the unknown, because we are comfortable with things we know about and are familiar with, because we are calm and serene with anything that’s familiar and expected to us. But when we think about the afterlife, which is a place that we have no idea about, naturally, it is terrifying to think about. Even to think a little bit about it is already scary.

Reason #3: Fear of The Soul-Accounting

Finally, there is another reason why we fear death, a spiritual reason. Chazal say “Know before Whom you will have to give a self-accounting.” Our soul will have to give a self-accounting one day in Heaven when we stand in front of Hashem. There will be a judgment. To think about is scary.

These are the three general reasons, briefly, of why people fear death and why they can’t deal with such thoughts. Because of these reasons, most people cannot handle the thought of death, whether we are aware of this consciously, or not.

Dealing With the Fear of Death/Disconnection from This World

Death does not skip over anyone – it is impossible for a person to run away from it. Yet, we find that every day we are supposed to think about it somewhat. Every time that a person says *Shema*, it is explained [in *Halacha*]^[3] that he should prepare himself to die to sanctify Hashem’s Name when he says the word “*Echad*.” But if someone never thinks about why he fears death, he will not be able to concentrate on this when he says *Shema*, because if he can’t even think about death at all, why

would he think about giving up his soul?

The Sage Rabbi Akiva reached a higher level than the kind of intention we are supposed to think about when we say *Shema*. Each day of his life, he waited the day of death, so that he could sanctify Hashem's Name in death. If a person doesn't know how to direct his thoughts when he thinks about death, then he won't be able to have the intention for *mesirus nefesh* during his recital of *Shema*. He is not prepared to think about giving himself up for Hashem, because he can't even think about death at all.

We need to know that death is inevitable; everybody dies. That's the way it is. So first of all, one should tell himself that death happens to every person, it's a normal part of life. But one should also tell himself that death is not some far-off event in the future; it has ramifications even now. In order for a person to be prepared to give himself up for Hashem, to feel like a *korbon* towards Hashem, one needs to be prepared to die even now, for Hashem.

Therefore, when people avoid thinking about death and never think about it, it is not a truthful kind of life. Of course, there are people who think about death all day and they are morbid and depressed because of this. But the true way to go about it is to realize that since no one knows when he will die, it is a normal part of our life to always think about death all the time.

The external reason to fear death is to fear leaving this world. But the inner reason why we should fear death is because since death is inevitable and we are all going to die one day, and it can happen unexpectedly to any of us, it is insensible for a person to completely forget about thinking of death. When a person never thinks about death that means he is not thinking about heading towards the Next World, and that means that he is living right now incorrectly, because he is living without a sense of purpose.

The spiritual reason to fear death is therefore not just meant to help us avoid sin when we think about repercussions in the Next World. It is because it would be insensible not to think about it, for one would have to be very foolish not to think about it.

When a person hears about death, he naturally runs away from such thoughts. But what one should do is to sit with himself calmly and ask himself: "Why am I afraid of death? What exactly is it that I am afraid of?"

If one discovers that he fears death because he's scared of leaving This World, then he should realize that he is avoiding the truth about why we live - we are supposed to live for the Next World which should be our main goal. If a person discovers that he mainly lives for This World and not for the Next World, he has discovered that he is not living with the correct mentality, and he needs to search for a truthful kind of life.

The word "*mes*" (death) is contained within the word "*emes*", which hints to us that thinking about death in the proper way can awaken a person to live a life of *emes*/truth. One can tell himself, "Why am I afraid to die? Because I don't want to become severed from this or from that?" In this way, a person clarifies what he is really connected to, and he can tell himself that he is not connected to his right place.

So, thinking about death awakens a person to think about his real place that he belongs to. Thinking about the day of death, and dealing with the thoughts about it, is a powerful tool that a person can use to discover what he truly feels connected to on This World. If someone is more self-aware, he can discover many subtle kinds of connections he has with This World, and then he can discover what his true spiritual level he is; and he sees that he needs to improve himself, that there is more room for

improvement: "To what am I too connected to, and to what do I need to really connect myself to?"

The more a person makes sure to connect himself to the right things, to his connection to Hashem, he will discover that his fear of death not be that scary to think about. "What's the difference between This World and the Next World? Either way, I'm connected with Hashem. In fact, in the Next World, it will be even better! I'll be closer to Hashem in the next world, better understanding Torah in the next world. I want what Hashem wants. If Hashem wants me to be here on This World, fine, I'll be here; if Hashem wants me to be in the Next World, then I'm supposed to be there."

But if one is mainly living his life for desires other than closeness with Hashem and with Torah and with doing Hashem's will, then it will be very scary for him whenever he thinks about death.

Why Tzaddikim Feared Death

There is also an intermediate level of why a person should think about death: The Vilna Gaon, on his deathbed, expressed his sadness over the fact that he won't be able to do the mitzvos anymore. On a deeper note, even the will to do *mitzvos* should be nullified to Hashem, because at the time of death, it is now Hashem's will from the person that he can't do the mitzvos anymore, and a person has to nullify his will for Hashem, even when he has a will for holiness. This is an avodah for *tzaddikim*.

But the average avodah for a person to do is that whenever he fears death, he should ask himself what he feels connected to on This World, and then redirect himself to where he should feel connected to.

Dealing With Fear of Death/Fear of the Unknown

In addition, there is another reason why we fear death: fear of the unknown. This also needs to be analyzed and channeled in the right direction.

It's only natural that we fear the unknown. But, it is written, "*To tell over in the morning of Your kindness, and of Your faith at nights.*" The more a person lives a life of *emunah*, the less he relies on his own understanding or on the knowledge of others, and he mainly places his feeling of trust of Hashem; he feels that Hashem is guiding him and taking care of Him. This World is compared to darkness; we live in darkness, because we cannot predict what will happen on This World, like if tomorrow will be a good day or not.

The more a person realizes that Hashem enables everything to happen and that nothing is up to us, for nobody knows anything for sure (and all we can do on This World is to use our power of free will), the less he will place his security on his parents, on his teachers, on his neighbor, on his money-lender, on his medicine, etc. He mainly trusts in Hashem, and he sees everyone else on this world who helps him as messengers of Hashem.

Such a person feels Hashem in his life even as he lives in this dark world; "*Your faith at nights.*" His fear of the unknown will greatly be weakened, because he has already developed to place all his security and reliance on Hashem, Whom he knows can take care of him no matter where he goes, even when he goes to the unknown. It is like a child who trusts his parents to take him to the unknown, because he is totally trusting of his parents.

The more a person tends to rely on his intelligence, he has less *emunah*, because he feels that he has to understand everything in order to feel secure. Naturally, such a person will fear death, because it is the unknown, and if he doesn't know what will be when he dies, it's very scary to think about, for he is always used to understanding everything.

But the more a person has *emunah*, and he feels reliant on Hashem that Hashem will take care of him – when he thinks about the unknown, about death, he feels totally dependent on Hashem and he is confident that he will be taken care of.

This is the pleasurable feeling that results from developing deep *emunah*: the person is happy even as he knows he is heading towards the completely unknown, because he feels totally reliant on Hashem and that all will be good. It makes a person become aware that even our life on this world is the unknown, and that we can't survive it unless we completely feel dependent on Hashem.

The Spiritual Reason To Fear Death

The third reason why people fear is because a person is afraid of giving a soul-accounting to Hashem after he dies. This is a truthful kind of fear to have, and we are supposed to think about it. It is a holy kind of fear, and this is indeed the meaning of the statement of Chazal, "Place the day of death before you."

However, even though this is a holy kind of fear, it also requires caution. The fear of judgment which we have is only a part of the equation, and it is not everything. We need to be afraid of judgment because that will help us avoid sin, but this is not all there is to our soul. Only the outer layer of our soul contains fear. The inner layer of our soul feels that it can always run to Hashem for help. So after a person feels the fear of judgment from Hashem, he should penetrate deeper into his soul by reflecting on the fact that we always have Hashem, Who can take care of us.

We must fear the judgment from Hashem which each of us will be judged with, but after we feel that fear, we must go deeper into our soul and feel that Hashem is our Merciful Father, and He is the One who loves us more than anyone.

Summary

The three reasons here of why people fear death are the main reasons why people choose not to think about death. But if a person knows how to deal with each of these fears properly, as it was explained here (briefly), he will be able to deal with the fear of death. He will fear death in a holy way and he will be able to deal with it, instead of running away from it.

Progressing To The Level of Mesirus Nefesh For Hashem

After one has clarified each of these three fears of death and he is utilizing them properly as it was explained here, now begins the Avodah of *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem.

Without knowing how to utilize the three reasons for fear of death, a person is so afraid of the thought of death that there is no way he will agree to think about giving up his soul for Hashem. After a person knows how to deal with the thought of death, he can now progress to the level of *mesirus nefesh*.

The *Chovos HaLevovos* writes, "A pious person awaits the day of death." An inner kind of person wishes he could go free from the physical restraints of his body and from the spiritual difficulties that This World presents to a person, and he wants to bind himself to become enveloped in the light of Hashem, thus, he actually desires death.

But even when a person is prepared to give himself up for Hashem as he's saying the word "*Echad*" in *K'rias Shema*, he might still wish deep down that he could remain on this world. He's prepared to die for Hashem, but only if Hashem would ask that of him – as long as Hashem doesn't ask it of him, he'd rather stay on this world. But a person who has reached a higher level with his *mesirus nefesh* is not

only willing to give himself up for Hashem; he is awaiting his whole life for the day of death, because he doesn't want to be here; he would rather be with Hashem, even right now.

"Shivisi Hashem L'Negdi Tamid" - "I place Hashem opposite me, always." Hashem is always in front of us - we can always think about Him, when we think about death and returning our soul to Him. For the same reason that you can constantly think about Hashem, so too can you always think about the fact that your life on This World is but temporary. That is the meaning of "placing the day of death before you".

Thus, thinking about death is really a part of life. It is not only a concept of thinking about the Next World. It is to take our existence and nullify it to Hashem, to realize how temporary we are, how fleeting our life on This World is. When we internalize this awareness about death, we transcend the time and place we are in, as our soul will feel a great yearning to connect itself to Hashem - the One who was, is, and will always Be.

This is the depth of what it means to have *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem. It is to recognize that This World is temporary, and to yearn to leave the limits of This World so that we can connect ourselves with Hashem, Who is the true and Eternal Reality. This perspective can give us a glimpse of what Rabbi Akiva hoped for, that for his entire life, he awaited the day of death.

(There is also a concept of wanting to give a *nachas ruach* to Hashem, and there are many other aspects as well to exploring this deep yearning of the soul; it is impossible here to explain the various subtleties involved with this. But the deepest aspect of the desire to have *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem is to wish to connect ourselves to the ultimate and eternal reality - Hashem.)

In Conclusion

והשב את העבודה לדביר ביתך We know that our prayers accomplish half the job, and our part is to realize that death is really a part of life.

The fact that people love to pursue what's comfortable and to avoid thinking about death is nothing but a fantasy of fools, who run away from the meaning of life. A true kind of life is to view death as being a part of our life which we need to think about all the time and deal with it, because it helps us understand what our own life is about.

When one overcomes his fear of death and he instead fears death in the healthy and holy way, he can then be prepared to give himself up for Hashem לקרבן אקריב לך את נפשי היחידה *"As a sacrifice I will offer myself to You, I will give to You my very soul."*

At that point, one realizes that death is not just about dying, but it is rather about an event we ideally are supposed to await, because thinking about it improves our life, similar to how Rabbi Akiva awaited death for all his life. Then, a person will merit the meaning of the true life, a life of true connection with Hashem.

[2] The six tzaddikim were: Avraham, Yitzchok, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam.

[3] *Mishnah Berurah* 61:1:3

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