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Introduction

The writings of our Sages, which reveal many and various faculties of the soul, help us to take a deeper look into ourselves. We can align our personalities with the will of Hashem through in-depth study and understanding of these faculties, which are common to all people. Each individual possesses unique characteristics, but we need to develop a general understanding of the human soul before exploring the specific details inherent in each individual personality.

The soul is comprised of ten basic faculties, which correspond to the Ten Utterances with which the world was created.^[1] Although there are many more subdivisions (for example, the Vilna Gaon brings that there are seventy faculties of the soul), these ten faculties make up the basic elements of the human being.

The Thirteen Forces of the Soul

However, Rav Hai Gaon^[2] explains that besides the system of ten faculties, there is also a system of thirteen. We find the number thirteen in the attributes of Hashem's compassion and in the thirteen ways to expound the Torah. Since the soul corresponds precisely to Hashem and the Torah,^[3] there must also be thirteen forces of the soul. They are: (1) the sense of one's existence (havayah), (2) faith, (3) pleasure, (4) will/desire, (5) wisdom, (6) contemplation, (7) kindness, (8) limitations, (9) compassion, (10) victory/eternity, (11) gratitude/acknowledgment, (12) connection, and (13) lowliness.

These are the thirteen basic faculties in the soul. We will now discuss and explain each one.

^[1] Avos 5:1

^[2] Pardes Rimonim 11:1

^[3] Zohar 3:73

Havayah: The Sensing of Our Existence

How do you know that you exist? This is not a philosophical question. Nor am I suggesting that we do

not exist. Try to identify how you know you exist. It is not enough to derive the knowledge of your existence from the fact that you are alive, because one does not have to be alive in order to exist.

Nor can the fact that you have needs and wants be the true source of this knowledge, because desire comes from the will, which is only the fourth of the thirteen levels we have listed above. Similarly, the fact that you are able to think cannot be the source of this knowledge, because thought (the kind that ponders) relates to wisdom and understanding, the fifth and sixth levels of the soul. Emotions, which come from even lower levels, are certainly not the source of our awareness of our existence. Although the fact that we do all these things alludes to our existence, this is only indirect proof. We are searching for more direct proof.

If the sense of existence is higher than all the other levels, there must be an inner knowledge that is higher than analysis and feelings.

The Simple, Elusive Sense of Self-Awareness

In fact, self-awareness is the most basic aspect of the soul. It is so simple that it often eludes us. Although it might be accompanied by a thought or a feeling, it is not a specific thought or feeling, and yet it is the foundation of all the faculties in the soul. Subconsciously, we all possess this self-awareness, and occasionally, we become consciously aware of it, as well. It is as hard to express this sense in words as it is to really describe emotions.

We all have a constant and deep sense of our selves, and each person experiences this in a unique way. Knowledge of one's existence is its own faculty, but it is also the source for all the other ones. Sometimes, each faculty is manifested separately, and sometimes, various faculties fuse together in one's consciousness. A person may be thinking and feeling emotions simultaneously, or he can think without feeling, because the emotions, while continuously present in the individual, are dormant at the time.

The Need to Use this Faculty

One who is conscious of his existence has a basis for reaching an awareness of Hashem, but we rarely access the potential of this consciousness. Of course, if you would ask anyone, "Do you know you exist?" he would answer "Yes!" immediately, but are we generally aware of it? Clearly not! We are so often disconnected from our inner selves.

For example, if a person takes fruit from a tree but never pays attention to its trunk and roots, his ability to benefit from the tree is limited. The basis of our souls is self-awareness, and to really use our souls properly, we must become more self-aware. We already know our thoughts and desires. We sometimes are aware of pleasures. And even faith, as we will see shortly, is often used. But self-awareness, while certainly present within us at all times, is hardly ever exercised.

When one does not make use of his basic faculty of self-awareness, he can at best grasp and work with some place in the "middle" of his soul, not the "root," and he will automatically be limited in spiritual growth. You must make contact with the "root," the awareness that you exist.

We tend to operate under a mistaken premise. We decide that we are already aware of our existence and try to improve our lives only within the boundaries of our current state of awareness. This is like trying to move an object that is not even in the same country as you, or more like trying to expand a piece of elastic without even being near it. (Why do we refer to this as expansion? Because that is what we are really trying to accomplish. We try to connect to things that will give us pleasure and fulfillment by reaching out to them. By doing so, we expand ourselves.)[\[1\]](#)

Without Self-Awareness, We Work with Illusions

We are always trying to expand ourselves. But if the self is not made real to us by our consciousness of it, then what are we expanding? For the most part, we are working with illusions. Human nature is to think that if we can only get the next object, we will be happy. But we know this isn't true, because this type of expansion is only an illusion, not the self (which we are disconnected from).

Chazal say that if someone has a hundred zuz (a unit of currency), he wants two hundred, and when he gets two hundred, he wants four hundred.^[2] That is because we lack the knowledge of how to expand the self, so we can't properly appreciate what we get. If we only expand our money, how can we be said to have changed at all? If we manage to buy a larger apartment than we had before, we might think we will actually be expanding our inner self, for we know that a nice home expands the da'as (mind) of a person.^[3] However, there must first be a person there! Otherwise, the books on the shelves may feel expansion, but their owner certainly will not.

We all want to grow and expand, but we must first find our selves. It is really the soul that seeks expansion, but it can only be satisfied if we are in touch with it. Otherwise, we are only working with our various desires — external aspects of a person.

For example, two people enter a store to buy a beautiful sofa. One will just be activating his desire for a new piece of furniture, while another will take advantage of the situation to really expand his self. The result depends on what you enter the store with! If all you come in with is the desire for a sofa, all you will emerge with is a desire for more of them. But if you are aware of the existence of the true self, the acquisition can be a tool for expanding that self and really feeling good. The point is that you must always be conscious of your soul. All the faculties we will discuss later only express and expand upon the soul that you should already have discovered.

A child may want a candy, but will that expand his soul? No, because he doesn't recognize his soul. Sadly, one can remain such a child even at age thirty or forty. Does everything you seek come from your inner self, or are you just listening to various thoughts and desires that bombard you from the outside?

Even our Mitzvos will be Deficient without Self-Awareness

Without a strong awareness of our inner self, we might behave in a way that is praiseworthy, but it won't be our true self that is motivating us. We can compare this to plowing and sowing another person's field. As hard as we work, and as nice as we feel we are to be helping out a friend, there won't be any real effect on the self. Any avodah (spiritual work) we do without an awareness of the self will be devoid of any impact or improvement of the self. Very often we taint our avodah with delusions.

Deeply Feeling Existence

The awareness of our self is not in the realm of ordinary knowledge. It must have a stronger effect on us than the knowledge, for example, that there is a ceiling in the room. The knowledge of our "I" gives us something to connect to. And when we ultimately are able to connect to our inner existence, we derive a tremendous amount of pleasure from it. If you don't experience the pleasure that self-awareness brings with it, then you will know that you haven't come close enough to it yet. It is as if you are drinking from a stream that has no source.

Do you really feel your existence? Because most people don't, they miss out on the pure delight of it. Some people were able to access a deep feeling because their lives were in mortal danger and they escaped. After such an intense awakening they were able to feel their existence for a brief period.

Most people, however, remain unconnected.

What do I mean when I say that you must connect to yourself? Who is the “you” that must connect to “yourself”? Aren’t they the same thing? The answer is that the personality has inner and outer layers. We are only aware of the more superficial levels of our being, and much less aware of the inner being, which is the true self. Become aware of that inner source. In fact, your inner part already knows itself. Extend that awareness to encompass the external layers of ordinary consciousness as well.

In the morning, we say “Modeh Ani” (“I thank”) before we say “Iefanecha” (in Your Presence). This teaches us that we have to first become aware of the “I” that has awoken. It may sound obvious, but it is a fact that remains hidden most of the time. We should be actively aware of our own existence.

A Helpful Exercise for Self-Awareness

When you have a few minutes of calm throughout the day, try to quiet your thoughts and focus on the fact that you exist. Once you get used to this exercise, you will find it very relaxing. It will also provide you with a foundation for further development.

Take yourself to a quiet place, closed off from the outside world as much as possible, and slowly forget about your environment (relaxing music might be helpful). Just think, “I exist.” Your thoughts will naturally begin to wander. Take note of your distraction, and allow your thoughts to return, and then repeat that basic idea to yourself. The more deeply you can focus on these thoughts, the greater calm you will have at the time, and the more you will be able to internalize the fact of your existence until you reach an inner revelation. At that point, the effect will be greater and longer-lasting.

We all suffer from moments of confusion in our thoughts and our feelings and we are not always certain of the source of the confusion. How can you calm yourself? Once you have attained a deep level of self-awareness, then when you feel confused, you can take a deep breath, and say to yourself, “I exist.” In this way, you can return to your root and attain peace.

But if the only root you know is your desires, you will only be able to return to all those desires. Saying, “I exist,” will only add to the confusion. Once there is a true attachment to the source and a real awareness of your existence, you will have a defense against the confusion of the inner forces. Return to your point of origin: “I exist.” This will give you a sense of calm and enable you to return to your source.

After that, the thoughts, feelings, and desires will start to emerge again, but it will be like a person who comes home from work late at night exhausted and then gets a good night’s sleep. At night, you couldn’t even talk to him, but in the morning, he is a new man.

The practice we have just discussed is like a nap in the middle of the day, for sleep itself is also a return to the source. The soul goes back to Heaven through sleep, and through this practice, too, the inner faculties return to their source. Thus, when feeling confused, since you are confounded by the various movements in the soul that cause stress, you can calm them through this inner source.

(There are actually three methods of achieving this return: return to the Creator, return to the beginning of the Torah by focusing on the word Bereishis, and return to the basis of the Self. Returning to the Creator is the highest method, but we are dealing here with the self. Most of us cannot be calmed by the knowledge of the Creator’s existence, unless it is accompanied by a strong belief that Hashem will take care of us.)

We need to return to the source. This is not just information that has no immediate benefit, like a savings account a father tells his son about for the distant future. This is something we must work

with daily and build upon.

The point of self-awareness is not as a means to solve problems. It is a way to return to a calm place in the soul. Solving problems will become easier as a result of this return to the source, where no problems exist. There is only your pristine and unsullied existence. Nor is it an escape from reality. It is no more of an escape than sleeping at night, which is invaluable, provided that you return to work the next day.

Returning to the Source throughout the Day

We must try to transform the dry knowledge of our existence into something that is useable. Though you will move in and out of the calm sense of awareness, try to return to it as often as possible. When faced with any type of doubt, return to the feeling of, "I exist." Become calm, and the doubt will be much easier to resolve. You will see it from new angles and escape from the fog of indecision. Having clarity does not mean that you will always be able to do whatever has to be done. There will always be challenges, and there is no guarantee of success, but if we are more connected to the source, it will be much easier.

The innermost point of the soul can not only help you cope with problems, it can also become a source for new strengths. If we would stay in touch with that source, we would be less confused, just as water is clearer the closer it is to its source. More important than this peace is the ability to build yourself up on a calm foundation. The other forces of the soul will draw you away from the source at different times, but we shouldn't wait until we become confused and doubtful before we return to it. Return frequently throughout the day to the sense of, "I exist." Real wisdom is not the ability to solve problems. Rather it is the awareness of how to avoid them as much as possible in the first place.

In the morning, upon awakening, remember, "I exist." When saying to Hashem, "I thank you," keep in the forefront of your mind that there is an "I" that exists, and then, that there is a "You." Go back and forth throughout the day as much as you possibly can.

Self-Awareness and Awareness of the Creator

The best way to begin your course of growth and self-improvement is with a strong sense of the self, and to build an awareness of the Creator on that foundation. Move from self-awareness to awareness of the Creator, as it says, "From my flesh, I behold G-d."^[4] Though many people skip steps of growth, including this one, it is not the ideal way.

If one skips the crucial step of achieving awareness of the self, he misses out on an important stage. You shouldn't say, "There is no 'I,' there is only a Creator." You should first affirm that there is an "I," and then nullify that "I" to the Creator. Some people are unaware of their own existence, and, as a result, behave irresponsibly, like ignoring their mortgage payments. This is because they are out of touch with reality.

Of course, attaining this peace necessitates a difficult struggle, but it is well worth the effort. It is like anything worthwhile that we strive to achieve.

The primary and strongest force is the basic existence of the self, the source we emerge from and try to return to regularly. It solves problems, and more importantly, prevents them. It is the solid ground on which we can build the other faculties of the soul.

^[1] See Getting to Know Yourself, Part Two, for more on this idea.

[2] *Koheles Rabbah* 1:13

[3] *Berachos* 57b

[4] *Iyov* 19:26

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