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[Home](#) > Fixing Your Fire [Conceit] - 001 Stable Growth

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Editor's Introduction:

This is the fourth in the “*Fixing Your Middos*” series, an in-depth approach of how we can fix our *middos* that result from the four elements in the soul – earth, water, wind and fire.

The previous three parts of this series discussed our *middos* that stem from earth, water, and wind. In this series, we tackle the *middos* which stem from our element of ‘fire’, which is the root of the traits of conceit, anger, hatred, grudges, control-seeking and honor-seeking.

The first half of the series explains the branches of the trait of **conceit**, and the second half of the series explains the how we fix the trait of **anger**.

The Element of Fire: Conceit and Anger

With the help of Heaven, we will now begin to learn about the element of fire in the soul.

Rav Chaim Vital, in *sefer Shaarei Kedushah*, writes that the element of fire in the soul is the source of the traits of “**gaavah**” (conceit) and “**ka’as**” (anger). Those are the roots, and they have many branches.[\[1\]](#)

We will begin, with Hashem’s help, to discuss the trait of **gaavah** (conceit).

‘Gaavah’ At Its Root Is Holy

Our Sages taught that each character trait can be used for either good or evil. There is no *middah* that is entirely good or evil; every *middah* has a good use, as well as an evil use, *chas v’shalom*.

The holy root of the trait of *gaavah* is rooted in *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, Who exercises the trait of *gaavah* at times. In addition, the Gemara famously says that one should have an ‘eighth of an eighth’ of *gaavah*. (However, according to a different opinion of our Sages there, one should not have any trace of *gaavah* at all). So we see that there is a concept of holy and healthy *gaavah*. We also find that there is a possuk, “*And his heart was high in the ways of Hashem*”, and we learn from this that there is a healthy kind of *gaavah* that one needs to have.

We will soon discuss the negative and positive uses of *gaavah*, but first we will explain the very concept of the *middah* of *gaavah* itself. As opposed to just exploring what the ‘*middah*’ (trait) of *gaavah* is, we will explore the roots that are behind this trait.

Four Branches of Fire\Conceit

The four elements, in order from lowest to highest in the soul, are earth, water, wind and fire. Within each element are contained aspects of the other elements. First we will briefly explain the four branches of the element of fire, and then we will explore them in greater detail. Within the element of fire, there is **(1) Earth-of-fire**, **(2) Water-of-fire**, **(3) Wind-of-fire**, and **(4) Fire-of-fire**:

1) Earth-of-fire is the 'stable' aspect of 'fire'; when one's inner 'fire' is stabilized. (This is the outline; later we will explain this.)

2) Water-of-fire is when the 'fire' burns and sparks, which causes it to jump around and not stay in its place. This is due to two aspects: the aspect of 'wind', which is the source of movement, and also due to the 'water' aspect, which can 'drag' the fire, similar to the nature of water which drags things with it. Fire itself cannot exist when it stands alone; it needs something else to destroy, and then it gets stronger. It gets 'dragged' after what surrounds it, attaches itself and destroys it, and then it can continue to burn. This is all the 'water' aspect that is within fire.

3) Wind-of-fire is when the 'fire' moves either upwards or downwards, similar to how the nature of wind can move up or down.

In the order of creation, Hashem first made wind (air) and then made water from it, and from water Hashem made fire. With regards to the human soul, water can only drop in a downward direction, fire can only ascend upward, while wind can move in any direction. Fire cannot ascend by itself; it uses the movement of the wind in order to ascend upwards. So the aspect of ascension in fire comes specifically from '**wind**' of the fire.

4) Fire-of-fire describes the nature of fire itself, which is all about ascension. Fire, by nature, wants to ascend, to its source, which is in Heaven. Fire has been brought down from the Heavens onto this world, and it wants to go back to its higher source that it came from, thus, by its very nature, fire wants to ascend, upwards, back to where it came from.

The Branches of Earth-of-Fire

Now we will explore each of these in detail. First we will begin with **earth-of-fire**, which is when the 'fire' is stable. **Earth-of-fire** itself contains the other elements, so there is:

(1) Earth-of-earth-of-fire,

(2) Water-of-earth-of-fire,

(3) Wind-of-earth-of-fire,

(4) Fire-of-earth-of-fire.

Earth-of-Fire: The 'Place' Where We Currently Stand

Each person has a certain place where he stands on - both in the physical realm as well as in the spiritual realm.

In terms of the physical, we all have a ground we are standing on: the earth we stand on, a valley, a hilltop, a mountain. We also have the ability to go higher from the place we currently stand on. In the spiritual realm - our soul - we also have a nature to go higher from where we currently stand. This is the nature of *gaavah* (conceit) in the soul: it is essentially the nature of the soul that wants to go

higher.

This desire for ascension contains two aspects to it. There is the place we *currently* stand at, and there is the place we wish to *ascend* to.

Earth-of-Earth-of-Fire and Fire-of-Earth-of-Fire

The **earth**-of-earth-of-fire represents where we stand currently, and the **fire**-of-earth-of-fire is represents the place where we want to ascend to. So the 'earth' aspect of fire is where we stand now, and the 'fire' aspect of fire is where we want to get to.

Water-of-Earth-of-Fire and Wind-of-Earth-of-Fire

In order for us to understand **water**-of-earth-of-fire, we need to first explain what **wind**-of-earth-of-fire is. Wind is the idea of movement; the 'wind' aspect of fire is to move from the place where we are (earth) to the place we want to get to (fire). Water is the root of pleasure; when movement is stemming from pleasure, this gives some stability to the movement. (As of this point, we cannot totally understand this concept, but hopefully as we continue this point will become understandable.)

Now that we have described the outlines of **earth-of-fire** and the four branches of it, we can now explore each of them in greater detail.

Earth-of-Earth-of-Fire: When I Am Conceited With My Current Level

Let's start with the lowest point, which is **earth-of-earth-of-fire**. This is when a person has *gaavah* (conceit) in the place where he currently stands at.

It is written, "*Who will ascend the mountain of Hashem, who will ascend to His Holy abode?*" There is a deep desire in our soul to move. It is also called "*rotzuy v'shov*", 'running and returning' – the nature of our soul is that it is always moving.

The lower use of this power is the ability to move from place to place, from one situation to another. The words of the *Vilna Gaon* are famous: "If one is not ascending, he is descending." So not only are we always moving, but we are either going higher or falling lower. We are always cycling back and forth between ascent to descent, from descent to ascent, and the cycle repeats.

Being that we are always ascending or descending, one must know exactly the place where he is at: "Am I currently ascending, or descending?" One needs to determine if he is currently in a situation of spiritual ascent or descent. When one is not clear about this, he will lack stability in his soul.

To understand it better, being that we all have a place we are in, if a person does not know if he is ascending or descending, he is probably descending. Why? Compare this to the nature of fire. Fire continues to burn, but if there is no more oil to keep it burning, it becomes extinguished.

This illustration helps us understand the concept of the *Vilna Gaon*, that we are always either ascending or descending: If one identifies where his 'earth' is and where his 'fire' is, he is clear about where he stands (earth) and to where he wants to get to (fire); and he is clear about where his currently going (wind).

To further illustrate, Moshe Rabbeinu ascended to Heaven for 40 days. He was clear about where he stood before he ascended, so after 40 days, he was able to descend back from Heaven and come back to the earth. Similarly, in our soul, we must be clear about the ground that we stand on currently.

We are not talking about the physical ground you currently stand on; we are talking about the spiritual ground you currently stand on. In the spiritual realm, each person is standing on different ground. One must know the level of the spiritual ground that he is currently standing on – and to where he wants to get to.

(Right now we are not discussing the aspect of where one wants to get to, which is the ‘fire’ aspect of fire-of-earth. We will discuss that later (G-d willing). We are currently discussing the aspect of where one is currently at, which is the ‘earth’ aspect of fire-of-earth.)

Lack of Stability In Spiritual Growth

If one is not clear about the current spiritual level that he is at, he might identify himself with either one of two possibilities: either he will think he is at the level of **‘wind’** (of fire-of-earth) or he will think that he is like a **‘fire’** (of-earth-of-fire). Both of these are unstable kinds of spiritual ambitions.

1) Fire-of-Earth-of-Fire. He might think he is at the level of his **‘fire’** (of-earth-fire), as follows: If he has ambitions to reach certain spiritual levels, he will feel as if he is actually there, when in reality, he deluded himself.

When he eventually falls from his high level, this will feel very painful to him, because he will feel like he has fallen from the highest levels of heaven all the way down to the earth [at least according to his delusional perspective]. He will think that his actual level is found where his fire is – the heavenly levels he wishes to get to. Therefore, he is very pained when he sees that he has ‘fallen’ from his “high level.”

That is one possibility of what can happen to him, when he isn’t clear about where he stands. He might act totally delusional, convinced that he is on a high spiritual level, while in reality he is not. All of us act like this to a certain extent, but only someone with a dominant amount of **fire-of-earth-of-fire** will act totally delusional, and he honestly believes that he lives on a Heavenly plane and that he is found there.

For example, if it is during *Yomim Noraim* and he is *davening*, he is the type to convince himself that he’s actually found on all of the high spiritual levels he is aspiring to. Then a few weeks later, he feels like he has ‘fallen’ from his previously “high level” that he convinced himself he is on, which will, understandably, feel very painful to him.

2) Wind-of-Fire-of-Earth. The other possibility (when he lacks proper identification of his actual spiritual level) is that he will identify his current level as **wind**-of-earth-of-fire. Just as wind drifts through the air and moves up and down, so will he will become kind of ‘afloat’ in his spiritual progress, like a “tower floating in the air.”

Although he is spiritually unstable, he does not feel it; he feels like he is moving, and that is enough for him to get vitality. He is not found ‘above’, nor is he is found ‘below’ - he is somewhere in between, reminiscent of the words of the Sages that ‘the *beinonim*’ (‘average ones’) are hanging between above and below.”

You can see this in people who act very disconnected. They are not being truly spiritual, nor are they grounded on this earth.

This is a person who is nowhere; he’s not grounded in any one place. It is reminiscent of the concept of “*Kaf HaKela*” (a spiritual form of suffering, in which a person feels like he is being flung all over the universe). There is no ‘place’ that he’s standing on He has a great desire to go higher, yet he lives off of this very feeling of movement. It is coming from his dominant amount of **wind-of-fire**: his very

movements towards spiritual achievements are making him feel inspired and full of vitality, but he is not actually getting anywhere.

It's very possible that a person will go on for 20 or 30 years and think he is growing spiritually, getting vitality from this, while in reality, he is not found anywhere, nor is he getting anywhere.

All of us have aspirations to grow higher, but a healthy soul is one who knows exactly where he stands, and he does not fool himself. He knows that he is not yet at the levels he would like to be on, but he also knows that he is trying. If he gets vitality from such spiritual movement, this is the desired situation.

But if a person is always in movement towards something and he isn't getting there at all, it is because there is a dominance of **wind-of-earth-of-fire** in his soul; there is a lack of stability to his movements. He is like a 'tower floating in the air' – he is not above, and he is not below.

In Summary

To summarize and conclude, **earth-of-earth-of-fire** is the point of the soul where a person identifies where he stands, before he attempts to go higher. We have said that there are two possibilities in which one can be very mistaken about his current level: **fire-of-earth-of-fire**, which is when a person who deludes himself into thinking that he is totally spiritual, and **wind-of-earth-of-fire**, which is when a person is spiritually 'afloat', who is neither above or below; and he lives off of his constant movements that aren't getting him anywhere.

'Grounding' Before 'Ascending'

Now let's explain this concept in clearer terms. The element of fire in the soul is the desire of man to ascend; we will give sharper definition to this concept.

The initial state of our soul is that it does not want to ascend higher. The initial state of the soul is to stay where it is, moving back and forth from the place where one stands, with a desire to return its original place. This is called the process of "*rotzuy v'shov*"^[2] ("running and returning"). The desire to ascend higher is the *second* step that the soul takes, but its *first* step is to know its place and move back and forth there (without going higher), where it can keep forming a new '*rotzuy*' (desire) to wish to return to its place.

Thus, we can now understand better why there are people who become mistaken with their spiritual aspirations, either becoming deluded or becoming spiritually unstable. When a person is at "Point A", let's say, and all he wishes to is to ascend to a different point, to "Point B", then why should he care about where is currently at? All he cares about is to ascend higher to another place, so Point A, his current level, is of no significance to him.

But if a person understands correctly how to ascend spiritually – which is by first realizing where one currently stands, before he seeks to go higher – then it makes a big difference to him when he knows where he currently stands.

We are describing a totally different perspective that one needs to have towards the entire concept of spiritual growth and ascension.

When a person doesn't seek to be clear about his inner and spiritual dimension, to live in the 'clear world', then he does not care for the current level he is at; he just wants to go higher. He simply 'knows' that a person has to acquire knowledge of the whole Torah, that he must fix all the bad *middos* and acquire all of the good *middos* that can be acquired. Although this is all true, the person

has a superficial perspective towards spiritual growth. He has no idea how to approach that which he knows about.

But when a person is clearer about his own inner world and he is in touch with it, he knows *where* he has to get to, but he also knows at the same time that he cannot get to it all at once. He knows that it is his aspiration to go higher, but he also makes sure that he is capable of returning to his current level – he makes sure that there will be ‘ground’ he can return to when he descends from his lofty perch.

Spiritual Growth: Being Able To ‘Ground’ After We Ascend

In order to reach higher levels in spirituality, it is not in the same way that a child goes from first grade to second grade and then to third grade. When it comes to success in the physical realm, achievement means to keep ascending, and there is no concept of returning to a previous level. But with spiritual growth, in order for a person to ascend in the right way, he must be able to return to his previous ‘ground’, before attempting to ascend.

Therefore, before one attempts to ascend spiritually, he must make sure that he has prepared for himself a stable ‘ground’ – recognition of his current spiritual level – so that he can have a stable ground of growth.

The Danger of Too Much Fire In The Soul

If a person’s main element is fire, he is in danger. He is consciously focused all the time on how he can keep ascending, so he is in danger of losing all stability of the soul. This is because the current level he stands on doesn’t mean anything to him, and the level he wants to get to isn’t here yet. He has nothing to stand on at all; thus he has no stability to begin with.

The “next step” that a person wants to get to must be preceded by some stepping stool. Without the solid grounding of a previous level – without first ‘standing’ on it – a person never gets to the “next step” that he’s aiming for.

When a person is unaware of this concept – for whatever reason – he attempts to go higher without a stepping stool beforehand, and he has not been built by any foundation.

It is troubling to us to see, but we see that there are people who strive for spiritual growth, with no solid ground they stand on. Without getting into the issue of not knowing where exactly they want to get to, the bigger issue is that they stand on nothing, so they are not spiritually stable.

There is a famous joke that says, “Nobody ever fell from the ground.” The concept we have been describing here is that all spiritual growth needs to have clearly stable ‘ground’ that precedes it.

We have so far described the concept - and now we will get to the practical applications of this concept.

Periods of Growth and Periods of Descent

Rabbeinu Tam writes in *Sefer HaYashar* that every person has periods of spiritual growth as well as times of spiritual descent. They are called “Days of Love” and “Days of Hate.” In a “good” period, the soul is functioning at its best, and a person is filled with inspiring deeds and feelings. During a “bad” period, a person feels closed up, and he loses inspiration.

Being that we all have dismal periods, *Rabbeinu Tam* suggests that we need to prepare for those

times beforehand, as follows. During “Days of Hate”, you can’t perform as much as you usually can, but you can hold onto a previous level and take it with you, even as you’re in the “Days of Hate”.

To be clearer about this, we all have abilities that are within our nature to do, which we can use at any given time, even when we are going through a rough period where we feel a bit down. We usually don’t fall from the level of being able to use our natural abilities. But we also strive for more growth, which requires more exertion of our soul to reach. It is those areas we fall from when we are in a period of “Days of Hate”.

The Three ‘Points’

We mentioned earlier that the spiritual growth process is called “*rotzuy v’shov*” (“running and returning”), a cycle in which we first know our level, then we attempt to ascend higher, we progress, and then we digress, repeating the cycle. There are essentially three points contained in the ‘*rotzuy v’shov*’ process: first there is a stage of “*shov*” (retreat\grounding), then there is “*rotzuy*” (aspiring\ascending), and after that, the cycle repeats, which leads to a new and higher “*rotzuy*” (higher ascending) than before.

First there is the current stage we are at, which is the point of ‘*shov*’, the ‘ground’ that we retreat to after we pull back from growth. Then there is the point of ‘*rotzuy*’, the aspiration to go higher than where we are at. And finally, there is the next point of ‘*rotzuy*’ that is formed after we complete the first cycle of “*rotzuy v’shov*” – the aspirations to go even higher than before.

Our point of “*shov*” is the ‘ground’ we currently stand on, our current spiritual level. It includes everything we can do that comes naturally to us. Our point of ‘*rotzuy*’ is where we want to get to right now, from our current perspective what levels we would like to reach. These are current aspirations, but they are not within the grasp of our natural abilities, so they require exertion on our part to get to. Our higher point of ‘*rotzuy*’, which comes to us after we complete an initial cycle of “*rotzuy v’shov*”, is the higher aspirations that we strive for after we’ve achieved our previous goals.

In order to be able to spiritually stable, a person needs to be able to contain all three points at once, as opposed to dwelling on any one of these points. Without all of these three points together, there will be no stability.

If a person is consciously focused throughout the day in the highest point – the ‘*rotzuy*’ that comes after through an initial process of ‘*rotzuy v’shov*’ – then his mind is immersed in the heavenly levels he is trying to get to, and he thinks he is there. This will usually lead to becoming delusional.

If someone considered himself to mainly be living in the stage that is a bit above his current level – the point of ‘*rotzuy*’ – although this is not acting as delusional as in the previous scenario, it is still being delusional.

But if someone is aware that he lives on the plane of his current level, he is aware that although he has aspirations to be better, he has not actually reached it yet. He lets his point of “*rotzuy*” be as it is, recognizing that he stands on the point of “*shov*”, not “*rotzuy*”. That is the idea of standing at the point of “*rotzuy v’shov*” at once. This is the stable ‘ground’ he needs to be on, which we described earlier.

Someone who lives only from his point of “*shov*”, without a recognition of “*rotzuy*,” is living in his aspirations, not in his current level. But if someone lives at the plane of “*rotzuy v’shov*” – he knows where he has to get to, but he also knows where he currently stands. This is the ideal kind of situation which we described.

Recognizing The Lines We Don't Cross

What happens when a person has a spiritual failure, in which he falls from his previous level? There are two kinds of falls from our level. Sometimes a person falls just a little bit from his previous level, but sometimes he falls totally from his entire level that he was previously in.

The first kind of fall is very common throughout the day. It is like an ongoing "Days of Hate" that a person goes through, within the day itself. The second kind of fall doesn't happen so often, and it is only experienced from time to time. But it is still existent in every person's life as.

One needs to recognize both of these parts of his life: his current level that he never falls from, as well as the higher levels that he falls from when he's going through a dismal period.

One must know what his *natural* level is, the 'ground' that he stands on, and he must make sure that he never falls from that level, even when he's going through a "Days of Hate" period. This is the idea that *Rabbeinu Tam* writes about, that a person must take with him certain levels that he will continue to keep to, even as he's going through a dismal period in which he feels uninspired. So the 'ground' you must recognize is to know clearly the level that you never fall from – the lines you never cross, even when you're feeling down.

In addition, a person must also recognize the level that is beyond him which he is aspiring to reach, and he should realize that he is not able to reach that level when he's in a dismal period. The point is that he must make sure to have his level he falls back onto when he can't grow as much – the solid 'ground' which he retreats to, when he falls.

(We have mentioned two kinds of 'ground' that a person must identify, but there is really a third kind of 'ground' contained within those two points that a person must also recognize, which we will later explain).

Recognizing Our Three 'Grounds'

There are altogether *three* kinds of 'ground' that a person needs to recognize, in order to remain spiritually stable.

1. The first thing we must know is to differentiate between the things we always are able to do, no matter if we're feeling inspired or not, with the things that we find that we cannot do, when we are feeling dismal.

How do you discern what those areas are? You can ask yourself what you do when your heart feels opened and what you do when your heart is closed. For example, on days where your heart is more open, you *daven* with more vigor, and on days where your heart is more closed, you *daven* with less vigor. But there is a minimum of prayer we do every day, no matter how bad of a day it is – for example, the *halachah* of concentrating when you say the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*. That is the 'ground' we make sure to never fall from, even on a day where we don't feel inspired.

So one must know the bare minimum amount of what he is capable of doing even as he is within a dismal period. This is one kind of 'ground' you need to discover in yourself.

2. The other kind of 'ground' is to identify the areas you are not able to do when you're going through a dismal period. Those are areas that are not naturally within your reach, and that is why you have a hard time with those areas on days (or at times of the day), where you feel dismal.

3. After figuring this out, the next step is to ask yourself what you would do if, *chas v'shalom*, you

were to go through a very traumatic period of your life, where you reach a point of feeling totally broken and empty inside yourself. Ask yourself what you would do if you would ever go through such a period, *chas v'shalom*. Which areas would you still be able to hold onto in your life?

To illustrate, there were Holocaust survivors who were able to hold onto certain practices and strength of character even as they went through the inferno of the concentration camps. They couldn't be on the level they were at before, but they were still able to muster the strength to hold onto certain parts of their life and keep it going strong.

In Summary

In summary, these are the three 'grounds' you must identify in yourself:

- (1)** To know where you currently stand and where you want to get to (which we described earlier in this chapter);
- (2)** To know what kind of level you fall to, when you fall from your previous level (these are your strongest points you are able to hold on to, even as you're amidst a fall from your level).
- (3)** The level that you would fall to when you go through a very traumatic kind of fall, where you fall below even the normal kind of "Days of Hate" and you find yourself feeling totally broken - but there are certain things you are still capable of doing then. Know what those points are.

The third kind of 'ground' is the most difficult to identify. Ask yourself which natures of yourself you would be able to keep even if you were to go through a very hard time in yourself. This is referring to basic parts of your character which are contained in your *nefesh habehaimis*[\[3\]](#); it is not referring to the deeper abilities that your *Nefesh Elohis*[\[4\]](#) is capable of mustering.

To clarify, this is not either referring to which *mitzvos* you would feel like keeping and which of them you wouldn't keep, if you were to go through a very hard time in your life. We are obligated to keep the *mitzvos* no matter how bad of a mood we are in.[\[5\]](#)

What we are talking about is referring to the natures present in our *nefesh habehaimis*. If you were to go through a time in your life in which you would feel totally broken and empty, which natures of your *nefesh habehaimis* can you still exercise, and which parts of yourself are you not able to utilize? That is the third kind of 'ground' you need to discover in yourself.

All of this enables you to know the current level you stand on, which is the idea behind **earth-of-earth-of-fire**, the point we are discussing in this chapter.

In Conclusion

There is a nature of the soul to ascend which stems from holiness, and there is a nature of ascension that stems from the trait of *gaavah* (conceit). Before we address *gaavah* (conceit), however, we must know its nature, which is defined as the desire in the soul to ascend.

We have explained here the rule that all ascension requires firm and solid 'grounding' in order for it to be stable in the first place. We still did not yet explain what to do about the trait of *gaavah* (conceit), which can certainly be a problem even after one has learned how to solidly ground himself before he ascends. At a later point, we will explain what to do about the trait of *gaavah*. But first we must establish the very idea of the 'ground' that must come before that. That was why it was necessary to explain the nature of ascension first, before we explain how to rectify the trait of *gaavah*.

We have described the concepts, and at this point, when we have just begun, much of it will sound abstract and unclear. But we have described here the point of **earth-of-earth-of-fire** in the soul – the idea of ‘stable ground’ that must precede spiritual ascension.

[1] *Shaarei Kedushah 1:1*. Additionally, Rav Chaim Vital there writes that the trait of *gaavah*\conceit branches out into the traits of **(1)** *kavod*\honor-seeking, and **(2)** *serarah*\control-seeking; and that the trait of *kaas*\anger branches out into the traits of **(1)** *kepaidah*\grudges, **(2)** *sinah*\hatred, and **(3)** *machlokes*\strife.

[2] “*rotzuy v’shov*”: the spiritual growth process, which is a cycle of “running and returning”: cycling back and forth between progressing and digressing.

[3] animalistic layer of the soul

[4] “G-dly” layer of the soul

[5] Editor’s Note: To clarify, the Rav responded after the shiur to a questioner, that this shiur is only discussing the ‘failures’ in our *Avodas Hashem*, such as failures in our *middos* and in our enthusiasm of how we perform the *mitzvos*. The fact that a person falls and stumbles into a sin sometimes is a separate issue that is not related to the category of “Days of Hate”, and it is rather part of our general *avodah* of “A righteous person falls seven times and rises”.

Source: <http://bilvavi.net/english/fixing-your-fire-conceit-001-stable-growth>