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## Droshos - The Nature of Torah Psychology

### ***Knowing Ourselves: Our Lifelong Task***

*Baruch Hashem*, we have merited to keep growing higher together, on a general level in *Avodas Hashem* and on a specific level, in recognizing our soul.

Besides for learning *halachah* each day, the first general fact that a person must know is that in order to truly serve the Creator, we also need to become clearer about our inner world. This is the root of all *Avodas Hashem*.

The clearer a person becomes about his soul, the more precise his *Avodas Hashem* will be. Without proper self-knowledge, even if a person learns Torah and performs the *mitzvos*, he will not get to the purpose of life, which is to recognize Hashem.

Self-knowledge is a lifelong task. It's not an issue if "I recognize myself" or not. It's not a black-on-white answer. There are levels and levels of self-knowledge. Each day of a person's life must be spent trying to get to know oneself better.

### ***Men and Women With Regards To Self-Knowledge***

People spend many years trying to learn about matters that are outside of themselves. But the true kind of life that both men and women need to pursue is to pursue the understanding of the human soul. The main *mitzvah* of a man is to learn Torah, and he also needs to devote some of his time to understand the soul. Women, who do not have the *mitzvah* to learn Torah, have a greater obligation to grow in their understanding of the soul and gain clarity of this inner world.

Although it is also necessary sometimes to learn about worldly matters and to know how to make a livelihood, the main body of learning should be spent on learning about the soul. The soul must be learned about more and more.

### ***Not A New Way***

This concept [self-knowledge] is rooted in the Torah, and it is not some idea that came from the nations of the world. It is not a new way. It was traversed by our leaders of the past.

We have merited with the help of Heaven to explain these paths, but you should know that it is not only the path of our Rabbis alone. It is the path that every Jewish soul needs to go on, especially in our generation. We don't need to turn to other sources for this that are found in the gentile nations,

which are inappropriate sources for us.

The Jewish people have the Torah of Hashem, and all of our life needs to follow the Halachos of the Torah, as well as the path of building the soul that is defined by the Torah. The ways of the Torah to build our soul have been explained to us by the leaders of the past generations.

### ***The Neshamah and Nefesh HaBehaimis***

The way of the Torah in building our souls consists of two factors. One part of ourselves is our *neshamah* (the Divine soul), which is the pure part in us that is called *cheilek eloka mimaal*, the “portion of G-d above” that is manifest in us. The other part of ourselves is the *nefesh habehaimis*, the “animal” soul, which is our lower aspect.

The nations of the world do not have the level of pure *neshamah*, therefore, their information about self-knowledge is based upon the knowledge of the *nefesh habehaimis* alone. By contrast, the way of the Torah, which is meant for the Jewish people, incorporates the *neshamah* aspect in our self-knowledge. We also have a *nefesh habehaimis*, though. Therefore, we must learn both about our higher aspect, our *neshamah*, as well as our lower layers of the soul, all the way down until the *nefesh habehaimis* layer of ourselves.

### ***Understanding Our ‘Nefesh HaBehaimis’***

Practically speaking, when we begin our journey of self-knowledge, we must start with knowing our *nefesh habehaimis*, and work our way upwards towards the *neshamah*. It is like Jacob’s ladder footed on earth, whose head reaches the heavens. We start by working with the lower levels, working our way upwards towards the higher levels. It is a step-by-step process. The lowest step which we begin with is to directly work with our *nefesh habehaimis*, which exists both in the gentile nations of the world as well as in a Jew.

The “*nefesh habehaimis*” is called so from the word “*behaimah*”, animal, for it exists in animals as well.<sup>[1]</sup> It also exists in a gentile. The *nefesh habehaimis* of a Jew, however, is different than the *nefesh habehaimis* of an animal and a gentile. Although these all have the title ‘*nefesh habehaimis*’, there are three levels to it: 1) Animal; 2) Gentile; 3) Jew.

The *nefesh habehaimis* of a Jew is able to receive the light of the *neshamah* and thereby be improved. Sometimes it remains by itself, and sometimes it joins with the *neshamah*. Even when it remains by itself, though, the light of the *neshamah* can still have somewhat of an effect on it. Thus, even the *nefesh habehaimis* of a Jew is more elevated than the *nefesh habehaimis* of a gentile.

That being the case, it is insensible to learn about our *nefesh habehaimis* from the gentiles, because they do not have all the information we need.

### ***The Three Steps of Self-Knowledge***

Our task of self-knowledge – with regards to knowing our *nefesh habehaimis* – consists of three parts. The first part is to learn the teachings of our Rabbis about matters of the soul. The second part is to analyze these matters intellectually and understand them, so that we are clear in these matters. The third part is when we are experiencing these matters; to identify these matters within our own awareness.

Those are the three general steps of recognizing our *nefesh habehaimis*. Each step needs to be learned calmly and patiently. If we grab too much knowledge at once, we don’t get anywhere. This is true in general when it comes to acquiring Torah, but it is especially true when we try to learn about

the subtle matters of learning about our soul; especially when we learn about the *nefesh habehaimis*. We need to slowly acquire this information and slowly become clear about this information.

The point is not just to gather many tidbits of knowledge, but to feel that our inner world is becoming clearer. If someone feels that he is just gathering knowledge but that it's not changing him inside, it's a sign that he's not learning the information correctly. He must slowly learn the information and try to understand it and be clear in it.

Since this study involves the uses of our intellect and emotion, it is a slow process. We need to learn about these matters slowly and clearly with our intellect, and we need to experience these matters in our emotional experience as we go through life. But although it is a long process, it makes us clearer as we go along. The study of it must eventually bring a person to the point of clarity where he feels that he is getting to know himself better and better.

In summary, the first step is to clarify the information and understand it. The second step is to identify these matters in oneself and connect to them experientially. The third step is to feel a calmness that comes from being clearer in these matters; to the point that the study of one's soul is giving him *yishuv hadaas* (a settled mind) and *menuchah* (serenity).

The path we are describing is not a one-year or two-year program where you graduate at the end and you get a degree. It is a lifelong task. It is not like learning other courses, such as trying to become a doctor, where it takes a few years to finish and then you get a doctorate. It is a lifelong study, which changes you internally, as you go along.

As you learn about your soul, you get closer and closer to reaching your essence. It makes us stop being superficial and to become more internal. Slowly but surely as we learn about ourselves, we get closer and closer to finding our essence - which is the path that leads us to the complete recognition of Hashem.

*Amen, V'Amen.*

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH THE RAV**

*Q1: When Adam and Chavah sinned, was it that all of us committed the sin with them and therefore we are responsible to rectify the sin? Or it wasn't our sin and it was just the sin of Adam and Chavah, and it is just that we need to rectify the sin of Adam and Chavah?*

A: The first option you guessed is correct. All of us were once part of Adam's soul, so all of us were in the act of the sin. It is like if part of your body does something - you don't look at it as a mere part of your body that did it, rather, it was you that did it, since there was a part of you that did it.

*Q2: If a person was born secular and became a baal teshuvah, why is he responsible to rectify his past now and correct any mistakes he's still making, when there was no way for him to know until now about the mistakes he was making?*

A: There is a lengthy discussion amongst our *Gedolim* about what it means to have the status of a "captured child" (*tinok shenishboh*) growing up in our times and how far this definition goes. If a child is raised secular today, is he totally innocent, because he can't help his ignorance? Or is he not that ignorant, because every person ultimately encounters Jewishness all over the place, and therefore he's not totally innocent (and therefore he still had free will to improve until now)? The truth is that only the *Beis Din* upstairs in Heaven can know how much free will he really had, depending on his

unique circumstances; if he's totally innocent, partially innocent, partially guilty, or totally guilty. There is no person on this world who can know for sure how to judge anyone's situation. Only the *Beis Din* in Heaven knows what each person's situation is and how the person is to be judged.

*Q3: But regarding the changes that a person needs to make now in his life, is he now responsible for his past?*

*A: One must do whatever he can do right now to change himself from the present onward, and he needs to change his life retroactively - whether he was guilty until now, or whether he was totally ignorant and innocent for his actions until now. As we said before, only the *Beis Din* in Heaven can judge his past, and there is no one on this world who can know if he was responsible until now for his past. But what is in his free will right now is, to change himself from this point onward.*

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[\[1\]](#) *Vilna Gaon's commentary to Yeshayahu 11:1*

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