

AVOIDING INNER BRIBERY

לא תקח שוחד כי השוחד יעור עיני הפקחים
 “Do not take a bribe, for a bribe sways
 the eyes of the wise.” *Shochad* (a bribe)
 doesn't allow a person to see some-
 thing objectively as it is since it over-
 powers the rational intellect. When a
 person is bribed, he will hear and see
 the facts differently, now that he has
 become biased in how he views the
 situation. The way he perceives reality
 becomes distorted, once he takes the
 bribe.

Just as a *dayan* in *bein din* must
 avoid a bribe, so must we avoid brib-
 ery in our *nefesh* (soul). The personal
negios (self-serving motivations) that is
 an inevitable human weakness which
 affects any person. Every person has
 situations where he must judge and
 decide what the correct course of ac-
 tion is. Not only must we “judge” oth-
 ers favorably, but we must always try
 to judge every situation correctly, by
 seeing two options in front of us, be-
 coming aware of what the *emes* (truth)
 is and what the *sheker* (falsity) is, and
 then decide - just as a *dayan* first has
 to see both sides before deciding.

A person has to know how to decide
 between good and bad, between truth
 and falsity, and this is essentially our
 power of *bechirah*, free will. To the
 extent that one purifies his heart, he
 will be cleansed from internal *shochadl*
 bribery, from *negios*. We can never be
 totally “clean,” and for this reason,
 our *Gedolim* always greatly suspected
 themselves of ulterior motivations.
 We have no comprehension of how
 our *Avos* and *Gedolim* were suspicious
 of their motivations, but our Sages re-
 vealed this to us and that is how we
 know about it. Rav Dessler describes
 it as *tzeil haguf*, “body-shadow”, that
 even the greatest *tzaddikim* are some-

what affected by the hold of the *guf*
 (the body), and that is why a *tzaddik*
 is never perfect.

Someone told me he opened a *Kolel*,
 and he said, “I did it 100% *l'sheim sho-*
mayim.” Not even one of our *Gedolim*
 ever believed that he did something
 entirely *l'sheim shomayim*! If only we
 could even come close.

When a person is constantly aware
 of any personal *negios* he may have,
 he comes to realize how far the *yetzer*
hora can go and that there is no way
 to run away from it, because it resides
 deep in our hearts. Just to give an ex-
 ample, Reb Chatzkel *zt”l* gave a lot of
 talks about the topic of *emunah*, and
 later in life he became suspicious that
 perhaps all of his talks about *emunah*
 were because of his first impression
 of Reb Yeruchem Levovitz when he
 heard him speak about *emunah*. Our
Gedolim suspected themselves like
 this, but the average person cannot be
 on this level. He would become too
 aggravated with this kind of constant
 self-probing. But we can at least re-
 alize that there is often falsity in our
 motivations, and we can at least no-
 tice it when it's glaring. Even when
 we choose to do something good, we
 should become aware of any self-serv-
 ing motivations as to why we are do-
 ing it. Never should we fool ourselves
 that we are doing something 100%
lishmah (for the sake of Hashem).

Our *avodah* is to try as best as he can
 to purify our heart from any self-serv-
 ing desires and motivations, and along
 with this, a person must also *daven* to
 Hashem regularly for a *לב טהור*, a pure
 heart.

The Ramban says to learn Torah and
 then one's mind is more purified, and
 then one can reach the point of *hishta-*

vus (equality), where he sees two equal
 options in front of him and then he
 can decide properly. But one should
 not think that he has reached *hishtavus*
 when he tries it. Rather, on his own
 current level, he can reach a point of
 clarity where he can decide accurately.
 No one totally reaches *hishtavus*, be-
 cause there is always a *yetzer hora* that
 remains in the heart, and no one is on
 the level of Dovid HaMelech, who
 said *לבי חלל בקרבי*, “My heart is emptied
 within me”, he emptied the *yetzer hora*
 from his heart. For this reason, one
 must always feel dependent on Hash-
 em, in order to arrive at any truth.
 This is how one can come to realize
 how much he needs Hashem. We are
 totally dependent on Hashem even for
 the smallest decision, because there is
 no way of knowing on our own if we
 are choosing correctly.

One must try to get to truth as much
 as he can, but he must also realize that
 he is always far from reaching the
 truth on his own. Then he will begin
 to feel how much he needs Hashem
 for everything. Instead of simply feel-
 ing lowly and discouraged at realizing
 how far he is from truth, one can use
 this humbling realization to become
 inspired even more to *daven* better
 to Hashem for help, and to come to
 feel totally dependent on Hashem.
 The more a person realizes how easi-
 ly he can be swayed from seeing the
 truth, the more he becomes aware
 of the inevitable human weakness of
 acting for self-serving purposes. But
 even more so, it will cause him to feel
 even more dependent on Hashem, for
 he will realize how much he utterly
 needs Hashem in order to act cor-
 rectly, and in turn, that is how a per-
 son will become more *davuk* in Him.
 (from “Bilvavi On The Parsha”)

Q&A – GENERAL AVODAS HASHEM

QUESTION *How can it be that a person davens for siyata d'shmaya in his ruchniyus but his tefillos aren't being answered? I feel so frustrated because I keep asking Hashem for certain things that were very important to me. I don't understand how it can be this way. In the physical world, if a person knows the right people and he has the right connections, he can get what he wants. So why is it that I daven to Hashem, who can give me anything He wants and who can make anything happen, yet my tefillos never get answered? I feel like I daven and I daven, but that there's no relationship here between me and Hashem, when I don't get anywhere with my tefillos, and it's all very frustrating to me, especially because I am davening for success in ruchniyus. I feel like only people who have zechusim are able to achieve a real relationship with Hashem...*

ANSWER Creating a relationship with Hashem is the fundamental of life. It is the proper way to live life, in addition to keeping the *mitzvos*, learning Torah and fixing our *middos* and other important aspects. A relationship with Hashem is attained by training ourselves to talk to Hashem throughout the day, every so often. If a person always does this, earnestly and with *emunah*, he will gradually feel Hashem. Also, the calmer a person becomes in his *nefesh*, he will find it easier to talk to Hashem in a way that opens his heart. One needs *emunah* that Hashem gives a person what he needs, when he needs it, and in what way. All of the things that a person is missing are all for the purpose of providing one with the tools to become more and more connected with Hashem. A person can connect to Hashem because of what he has, and a person can also connect to Hashem from what he doesn't have. It is not within our understanding to know why we are missing certain things, and why it's taking so long. We just need to know that it is because of what we are missing that we can connect more to Hashem – whether through *davening* hard, or through having more *emunah*, and other ways.

QUESTION *I have gone through so much challenges and suffering in my life and I am continuing to go through so much. I might know that it's all from Hashem and that it's all for my good, but how do I know that Hashem still loves me?*

ANSWER It would be worthwhile for you to sit down and write everything that's going good in your life, all the good parts of your life. Then think into it, about what Hashem has given you. Think about it, then verbalize it. Then, start thanking Hashem for each detail. From then onward, your *avodah* is to have *emunah* without understanding how everything that happens to you is all for your good. We can partially see and understand how certain things were for our good, but there will always be parts of our life in which we cannot see and understand how they are for our good too. In order to 'digest' that everything that happened to you is for your own good, it won't help if you try to understand it intellectually. You need to strengthen and internalize the *emunah*, the belief, that everything Hashem does is good!

QUESTION *Due to previous negative experiences I had in which I felt abandoned by my parents and by others who were close to me, I keep having continuous fears of being abandoned by others. How can I remove these feelings from my heart?*

ANSWER Whenever a person is emotionally dependent on another person, he can feel abandoned by that person. There is an external solution to this problem, which is by improving the relationship with one's parents, and then you can feel that even though you felt abandoned by them you can still feel that they were with you all along, and that they didn't leave you in how they felt about you. Even though they did actions of abandoning you, by dwelling on your emotional closeness with them and how they are emotionally close to you as well, like this you can feel that they didn't abandon you in the emotional sense – because you have strengthened the emotional connection to them.

However, there is also a more inner solution to this. (1) Strengthen your own inward connection that you have with your own self. To the extent that you do that, you will be less emotionally dependent on others. (2) Strengthen your connection with HaKadosh Baruch Hu: "For He will not abandon His nation", and then a person can feel how "I have never seen a righteous one who was abandoned [by Hashem]."

QUESTION *How do you stay balanced between doing ratzon Hashem with being socially accepted by your friends?*

ANSWER You need a close relationship with only 2 or 3 friends, and with everyone else you just need to have a light, casual relationship with them and to be respectful to them.

QUESTION *How do we serve Hashem lishmah and what does it mean? If I want to make Hashem proud of me, is that called serving Him lishmah since it's really about me?*

ANSWER That is called *lishmah*. In every major thing that you do, try to do it with some minimal intent of doing it *lishmah*, meaning that you should try to minimize any personal *negios* (self-serving motivations) in doing it.

QUESTION *Is a person today supposed to mainly connect to Hashem and he doesn't need to be that busy with finding a rebbi and getting guidance from a rebbi?*

ANSWER A person needs to build and develop his *nefesh* (soul), so that he will be stable, and along with this one needs to connect directly to Hashem [i.e. talking to Hashem], and along with this, one also needs to connect to Hashem through having a *rebbe* – but not **only** through having a *rebbe*.

QUESTION *Does every person today have to be a yachid (individual)? Or are we certainly able to find tzaddikim in our times whom we can turn to for advice on what to do in the Acharis HaYomim (final days)?*

ANSWER One needs very much to build himself as an individual, and in addition one should also enjoin himself with *tzaddikim*.

QUESTION *What should a person do if he doesn't have a Rebbe and he wants to make for himself a rebbe and he wants to receive guidance for living? Or, on a very simple level, what should one do when he needs to find someone whom he can ask all his questions to? Does a person need to choose one person whom he will make into his Rebbe, or can he receive from many different teachers so that he can have a more integrated approach towards life?*

ANSWER The Gemara says that when it comes to knowing the Torah's information (*girsas*, the text) one should only have one teacher for this, but when it comes to in-depth understanding (*iyun*) one should learn from several different teachers of how to think. It is possible and it is appropriate for most people to receive different aspects of thinking from each teacher he learns from. Each person is different when it comes to how many different Torah teachers they can learn from, because there are some people who become confused from learning several different approaches. So each person needs to learn Torah from different teachers depending on how much he can handle and to what extent.

QUESTION *If a person has a nature to see faults in everyone and therefore he also sees faults in his rebbe, is that a sign that he can't follow this rebbe? Or should he just work on his bad middah of seeing faults in others and he should continue to follow his rebbe even though he sees faults in him?*

ANSWER He needs to work on his *middos*.

QUESTION *Is a person supposed to learn a lot of sefarim hakedoshim or will this just confuse a person? Or will this just confuse a person when he learns so many sefarim and he is trying to understand all of them?*

ANSWER This is relative to each person. Each person needs to discern how much he can handle, according to his level. Usually, a person needs to first read through *sefarim* superficially and later he should go back and analyze better what he has learned. There are some rare individuals who can first learn some *sefarim* in-depth and then finish a lot without analyzing them.

QUESTION *In our generation a person comes across so many different paths in avodas Hashem, in all of the countless sefarim and weekly parsha sheets, etc. How can a person figure out which particular approach in avodas Hashem he is supposed to take?*

ANSWER A person should stick to one approach for a certain amount of time, and he should only be involved with that approach. During that period of time, one should become familiar with that approach very well, with the way of thinking that is behind that approach, and he should also act upon that way of thinking. A person first needs to clarify the way of *avodas Hashem* which he was brought up with, or, he should become clear about the way of *avodas Hashem* that is closest to his heart.

After a person has become very familiar with a certain way of thinking in *avodas Hashem*, he needs to think about it and see if it's for him or not. He should determine this based on con-

templating it a lot and also *davening* to Hashem for help about it. The more a person searches for truth, and his motivations are pure, to that extent a person will be *zoche* to clarify if a certain path in *avodas Hashem* is for him or not. If it seems to a person that a certain path in *avodas Hashem* is indeed for him, he should practically act according to that path.

And, if it seems to a person that a certain path is not for him, he should continue to clarify other paths of serving Hashem and see which of them are meant for him. In addition to this [even if a person hasn't yet found his path of serving Hashem], one should determine, based on his intellectual and emotional abilities, if he has the energy to learn about another way or a different view.

If one is able to do this, he should learn about it for a certain period of time. One can keep going like this, learning about another way and another way, throughout different periods of time. Like this, one can clarify to himself better and better which path is for him. By seeing a wider scope of the different approaches in *avodas Hashem* that exist, a person can clarify better which of them is the path that's for him. Every person needs to clarify with himself how much he can encompass. This is because there is a rule, "*Too much oil extinguishes the flame*".

And, even when a person does have the ability to encompass a lot of different approaches, he should only learn about one approach at a time, for a certain period of time, before moving on to learning about a different approach. (This is besides for one's current approach in *avodas Hashem*, which a person needs to be acting upon, in any case).

QUESTION *How are we to understand how the big, thriving Torah communities also have a lot of problems, i.e. children who feel too pressured from the high standards of the community where learning Torah is everything (Baruch Hashem) and because of the pressure on them they don't do well?*

ANSWER There is never any path of serving Hashem that will work for everyone. Every path will always help some people and harm others at the same time. This is all the mysterious ways of Hashem Who created the world and runs it.

QUESTION *I have a nature to be very lazy and slow-moving. How can I start doing things quicker and to act more on what I know I need to do?*

ANSWER (1) Get up from bed in the morning very quickly. (2) Eat a little less than you usually do, so that you will feel physically lighter. (3) Every day, do two things quickly, with the awareness that you are trying to access the ability of acting quicker. (4) Every so often, walk at a little bit of faster pace than you usually do. (5) Every day, do a few small actions which gladden you and which make you feel lighter. (6) Think a lot about the purpose of life, and repeat the words of the Mishnah, קצר והמלאכה מרובה, "The day is short, and there is a lot of work to perform." (from the Bilvavi Q&A Archive)

PREPARING FOR THE YOMIM NORAIM

It is brought in *Shulchan Aruch* that when one *davens*, he should think about the greatness of Hashem, and how small he is. What does this mean? Are we supposed to look at ourselves as lowly beings?

The truth is that a person has to have simultaneous views at once. We are lowly and great at the same time. We all have certain bad *middos* (character traits), and that can help us understand how lowly we can become. But we are also loved by Hashem, for we were created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in His image. In our actual essence, we are all great. We are lowly in the sense that we are materialistic, and we also have bad *middos*. We have certain human weaknesses and shortcomings. But our soul is called a *cheilek eloka mimaal*, "a portion of G-d from above."

When you make a self-accounting and you want to improve, what are you thinking about? Are you just thinking about your faults that you want to change? Or are you also realizing that you have greatness in yourself- that you are a *tzelem elokim*, that you have a *neshamah* which is called a *cheilek eloka mimaal*? If you look at yourself as just a lowly being that's drawn towards physicality and bad *middos*, then you won't be able to ever reach self-perfection. You need to first focus on how you are good, how you are primarily a *neshamah* - your soul is pure, for it was placed in you by Hashem.

Of course, you must know your faults, and every person must do *teshuvah* for his *aveiros*. But you need to view yourself as mainly being a good person. If you view yourself as a good person, you will have an inner source in yourself to draw forth great spiritual strength to improve in Torah, *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven) and holiness. If you don't connect to that inner source and you instead focus on your lowly aspects, you have nothing to draw forth inner strength from, because it doesn't do anything for you when you aren't aware of it. In order for you to survive life and also live a true kind of life, you need to feel that you are precious to Hashem, for you are a *tzelem elokim*, and your essence, which is your *neshamah*, your soul, is always pure.

It can be compared to a stone covering over a well with pure water underneath. We have rough layers covering us, but beneath the surface lays our pure *neshamah*. Our faults and our bad *middos* definitely exist, but our inner 'wellspring' is completely pure, good, and *kadosh*.

Where do you think your thoughts and feelings come from? Do they come from your lower aspects of your existence, or

from your pure soul? We definitely have actions, feelings, and thoughts that come from the bad parts, but the real issue is for a person to *know* where they actually come from. When a person lives superficially, he does not view himself as being a basically good person. He is aware that he has a lot of thoughts and feelings that aren't good, so he thinks "I'm not a good person." When a person takes the other extreme though and he views himself as only good, completely ignoring his faults, this is *gaavah* (conceitedness) and it is a negative trait, and he lacks self-awareness. By contrast, when a person is living a true life, a life of *pnimiyus* (inwardness), he is living from a pure place in himself, and that is where his thoughts and feelings will mainly be coming from. His thoughts and feelings will become much purer, when he experiences himself through the good, pure place in himself (the *neshamah*). Of course, it can still happen that he will sometimes experience bad or improper thoughts and feelings, but for the most part he will have pure thoughts and feelings.

When a person lives an inner kind of life, and not a superficial kind of life, he gains inner strength and he becomes stronger on his inside. If one lives superficially and he gets strength from his self-image, this can only be *gaavah* (conceit). But one who lives inwardly (when he is regularly connected to his *neshamah*) he gets his thoughts and feelings from a pure place in himself. The *avodah* of each of us is to reveal that completely good and holy part of ourselves. Often people are living superficially, with a superficial way of how they perceive themselves, and they don't realize that there is a pure place in themselves. They also see others who are not truthful and they are influenced by how others think, and they lose belief in the pure part of themselves. If one doesn't believe that there is a pure place in yourself, he won't be able to get to it.

We must all know that even though we have faults, there is a place inside of us which is totally pure. A person who hasn't become conscious of it hasn't revealed it, so he will view himself with somewhat of a low self-image, a false way of viewing himself. When one reveals the pure place inside himself, he will view himself with true self-perception. He will know that he is a *neshamah* and that he has a pure being and he contains a greatness within him.

How will we be able to deal with the coming year, and all the situations that it will bring? If we get ourselves in touch with the pure place inside of us, then no matter what we will face this year, we will be able to keep returning to that pure place in ourselves and connect to its *kedushah*.

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