



## SEEKING SPECIFIC HONOR

### 6. Using “Fire-of-Fire” – The Power To Change Limitations – As A Way To Fix Our Middos

The root of our task to improve our *middos* is not to work with the *middos* directly. This is because *middos* are not just *middos* per se. Rather, Hashem has made it that *middos* can be changed, and it is honor\fire-of-fire which is the root of this change. Thus, the root of working on our *middos* is the power we are describing here: fire-of-fire, which can change *middos*.

### 7. The Three Areas of Character Improvement

We can now understand a root, fundamental aspect in all of our inner avodah.

The power to enlarge the boundaries of any of the *middos* began with the sin of Adam. Chazal state that when Adam ate from the Eitz HaDaas, he said, “I ate, and I will eat again.” In other words, he continued to want to go past his limits. Every soul in this lifetime as well has this nature of “I will eat again”. Before Creation, there was the raw state of our *middos*, which contained evil that were inherited from the kings of Edom. After the sin of Adam, an additional aspect of evil entered the soul, of breaking bounds. Every lifetime of the soul since then has seen additional aspects of evil which were added onto it. In any case, however, a *middah* can be changed.

To improve a *middah* at its very essence, in its raw state, can only be worked upon if a person accesses the root of the soul.

Most people cannot work on their *middos* on a foundational level even if their current lifetime, but the truth is that there are three stages of *middos*, as we have explained here, and one needs to work on all of them:

(1) The bad *middos* found at the soul root of a person, (2) The bad *middos* which entered the soul after the sin of Adam, and (3) The bad *middos* which have been accumulated on his soul throughout all lifetimes.

### 8. The Depth of Character Improvement

That is why working on *middos* is such a massive task, and this concept is not known to most people. We are describing here the essence of all bad *middos*. When a person is not clear of the difference between the bad *middos* of his soul root and the bad *middos* that became added onto him since the sin of Adam, he won't be clear of what his avodah is, with regards to working on his *middos*.

If a person only has a superficial perspective, he will not care what the difference is. But there is a vast difference between these two groups of bad *middos* in the soul. There is the bad *middah* itself, and there is the “expanded” version of the bad *middah*, which became added onto the soul later, after the sin of Adam. If a person only removes the “expanded” version of the bad *middah*, he doesn't succeed in removing the bad *middah* itself, at its essence.

We are dealing here with a concept that pertains to the roots of all our avodah, and although these are very deep and subtle words, we should learn about it at least on an intellectual level, so that we can have a better understanding of our task in working on our *middos*, at least once in our life.

The difference between the task of working on our root bad *middah*, with working on the “expanded version” of the root bad *middah* which only came later upon our soul, is as follows.

### 9. Three Models of the Stages of Character Improvement

There are several different terminologies that describe our avodah with regards to fixing our *middos*.

According to one model, our avodah is divided between two levels – *is-kafya* (forcing), and *is-hap-c'ha* (transforming). In different terminology, these two concepts are divided between three stages – *hachna'ah* (subjugation), *havdalah* (separation), and *hamtakah* (sweetening). In a third terminology, these three stages are called “*kevishah*” (conquering) and “*tikun*” (rectification) of the *middos*. That terminology is used by Reb Yisrael

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Salanter, and that is the terminology we will use here.

## 10. “Conquering” and “Rectifying” a Negative Character Trait

The power to “conquer” a bad middah is when the essence of the bad middah remains as it is, but a person controls it and tames it, putting restraint on it. The negative character trait is still there in a potential state, but the person has it under control, so that isn’t causing problematic behavior. He has self-control over the bad middah - even though it is still there. A deeper level than this is to be able to “rectify” the middah, to transform it from an evil trait to a good trait.

Reb Yisrael Salanter says that during one’s youth, one has these two abilities, to “conquer” and “rectify” a bad trait, but in old age, one no longer has the task to “conquer” the bad middah, but to “rectify” the bad middah. He explained that this is because when a person is younger, he is more energetic and therefore he has more self-control over himself, so that is the time to engage in “conquering” the bad character traits.

Understandably, this is only true for someone who works on himself to uncover this power. But, relatively speaking, when a person is more energetic, he has stronger self-control over his character. With old age, a person has less self-control over his character, and the traits which he had control over when he was younger will now come out in full force, in old age.

Why does it suddenly explode outward? The middah remained as it was all along. It has only been restrained until now, and now that the person can’t restrain himself as much, the bad middah breaks out again in full force. But if someone already reached the stage of “tikun” on his middos, he has fixed the middah at its root, and he has transformed it from bad to good, so when old age arrives, it remains fixed. That is why tikun hamiddos in old age is more difficult, because it involves hamtakah\ tikun of the middos (for one who reaches this stage in old age).

## 11) It Is Easier To Improve “Extended” Negative Character Traits Than To Improve The Negative Character Traits of the Soul’s Root

To understand this deeply – I will repeat and emphasize that this is one of the deepest points to know about the task of working on middos – we mentioned that there are two different kinds of middos to improve. There is one kind of inner work in which we can improve a bad middah at its root, and

there is a separate work to improve the additional aspects of evil that have been added onto the soul.

These are two totally different kinds of inner work. It is much easier to separate from evil that has become attached to the soul which was not part of the original soul makeup of the person, because this evil was not always a part of one’s soul and therefore it is somewhat less difficult to remove. This is not to say that it’s easy, of course, but it is far less difficult than working to improve the bad middah that has always been a part of one’s soul root.

The negative middah itself, which has always been part of one’s soul root, is part of one’s unique task on this world. It is part of his unique soul root, and he has received specific negative traits to fix, and this “package” that he has received has been turned into a part of his very being, as it were. The truth is that this only relative, because if one has reached deeper parts in himself than his “middos”, his root negative characters are not a part of his being. But since we exist on the plane of “the world of middos”, the root negative character traits in oneself are perceived as part of one’s very being. That is why it is very, very difficult to remove these negative traits.

It is therefore possible that a person is heavily involved in character improvement, but he is unaware of the concepts here and therefore he does not recognize the design of his soul properly – and then what will happen? He will very likely be working only to improve the “additional” negative character traits which have accumulated on his soul, but he is not working with the root negative character trait, which is the main part of his inner work.

The inner way to live life and to fulfill one’s personal duty on this world is to reach one’s root negative trait, the very core and essence of the negative middah itself, and this is the main aspect of one’s duty on this world to change his character, which he must work hard at. One who is not dealing with this part in himself is not really working with the core of his negative character traits, only with additional aspects in his character, which do not represent his main inner work on this world.

TO BE CONTINUED IY”H

FROM ORIGINAL HEBREW SHIUR IN BEIT SHEMESH 2017

דע און מידותיך הדרבה מעשית אש נבון 013  
עבר דאש דאש פריצת המידות ותיקון

### LEARNING ABOUT OURSELVES: EACH STEP IS IMPORTANT

That is why even after one clarifies what his strongest ability is, he should think about it again and clarify for a second time, perhaps discovering that he really has another ability that's stronger. In order to be more precise about it, one needs to list his abilities in order of their dominance.

Even if we minus the errors that can be involved in trying to figure it out, we would anyhow need to do this (listing our abilities in order of their dominance) more than one time. With every time that we recognize ourselves better, we become clearer and more precise about our abilities, and then our internal world in general becomes more clarified to us.

In spite of this, though, we should not disregard any previous conclusions that we have reached so far [as long as we have not found any errors in the order of our abilities and in identifying our strongest ability]. We should not be concerned that maybe our conclusions were mistaken. At whatever step we are at, we can rely on our current assumption. "A judge has nothing except for what his eyes see."<sup>1</sup> The way we should view our assumptions is, as Chazal said, "Honor him, yet suspect him" – on the one hand, we can trust our assumptions after we have thought about it as best as we could. At the same time, though, we should be aware that we haven't yet reached full clarity about ourselves, and that there are still greater and deeper levels of clarity for us to reach<sup>2</sup>

There is a concept that truth has many levels to it. Any truth can become deemed as false, when compared to the level above it that is more truthful. When you see a higher perspective towards something, you see the truth as it is, and then the lower perspective is now seen as falsity, when compared to the higher per-

spective. Yet a person can reach an even truer perspective, "absolute truth", making the previous understanding seem like falsity when compared to absolute truth. Altogether, there are three levels to perceiving anything – through a perception that is either false, true, or absolute truth. What is the difference between truth and absolute truth? When a person reaches a higher understanding and grows to higher levels, whatever he perceived until now as true can now be deemed as false to him. Now that he has become aware of deeper level of truth - which we can't yet reach or act upon practically- he sees that his current level of truth is not absolute, because there is still a more truthful level to reach.

Applying this concept to us- whenever we reach certain conclusions, we should deem it as truth and act upon it. Even if there exists a more truthful conclusion we haven't yet come to, for now it is out of our reach and we can only see it from afar and have a vague awareness of it. We can't act upon an absolute truth that's beyond our understanding. We can only work with truths that we currently understand and are aware of. At the same time, we need to aspire to reach deeper levels of truth, to reach deeper conclusions that are more truthful than how we understood beforehand. When we are able to comprehend a more truthful level, we can turn the absolute truth into a reality, to a level of truth that we can practically upon.

This concept is relevant throughout all of the work of trying to recognize our personal soul. Every step of the way is a certain level of truth for us. When we advance to a higher stage, we reveal more accuracy and depth about different aspects of our personality. We see things that we didn't see until now, and we make absolute truths more tangible to us, turning it from esoteric absolute truth into a practical level of truth that we can act upon. If we understand and internalize this, not only will we avoid confusion and doubts throughout every step of our inner work here, but we will be-

1 Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 6b

2 For every step, we should be davening to Hashem, from the depth of our heart, that we should be zocheh to clarify our souls properly and to reach as much precise self-recognition as possible.

# FINDING YOUR QUALITIES

## SELF-RECOGNITION & SELF-ACTUALIZATION

come filled with joy that we are progressing from one level of truth to another level of truth that's deeper. We are rising through ascending levels of truth, when it comes to recognizing ourselves.

### LISTING OUR ABILITIES

The practical work of listing our soul-capabilities in order of their dominance, and identifying our strongest ability, is comprised of two parts – an external and internal work.

The first step is: To write a list of our different abilities, according to what we understand about ourselves (and as will be explained about soon).

The drawback to this however is that we cannot always be clear of how to do this. One person might make this list from a very general perspective without getting down to details. A second person might write down a list of his abilities (from strongest to weakest) based on which abilities he would like to have more and what he wishes he could be – but not according to what he really is. A third person might make this list according to social and environmental influence.

In any of those scenarios, the person's list will be superficial and not true to who he is, and it will not nearly be an accurate description of his strengths and weaknesses. For this reason, a person has to also do a certain inner kind of clarifying (which we will explain more about later), in addition to merely writing down his abilities. So, after doing the first step (writing down what your abilities are, based on what you understand), there is a second step in which we will have to use certain 'internal yardsticks' by which we can identify if a certain ability is stronger or weaker. That is how we can eliminate any inaccuracies that are likely to come up.

To the degree that we are clarifying what our soul-capabilities are, by using several different 'internal yardsticks', we will reach greater precision and clarity [about our strengths and weaknesses].

Let us first explain more about the first step (writing down our abilities in order of their dominance) and

then we will more explore the second step (internally clarifying what our abilities are).

### STEP 1 - MAKING A LIST OF OUR POSITIVE ABILITIES

After writing Part One of our notebook over a period of time<sup>3</sup>, we will have accumulated a considerable amount of soul-capabilities that we have written about, which we have some degree of understanding of, both from an intellectual and emotional viewpoint [since we have been recording both our intellectual and emotional experiences of our different soul-capabilities]. It is now upon us to collect together a list of all our positive abilities that we have written about until now. Open up to Part Two of the notebook, and write a list of every positive ability in yourself that you are aware of.<sup>4</sup>

There is no need to write down any definitions of these abilities. Just write down the names of the soul-faculties, in alphabetical order, beginning from ahavah (love), emunah (trust), emes (truth), binyan (developing), gemilus chassadim (kindness), diyuk, (punctuality), hodaah (gratitude), etc.

### TWO POSSIBLE METHODS OF LISTING OUR ABILITIES

After we have made a list of all our positive abilities, the next step is to list them in order of their dominance. There are two possible ways of how to do this: (a) List the abilities in the order of strong, in-between, and weak. (b) List them each according to a scale of 1-10 [with number 1 being what you consider your weakest ability, and number 10 for what you consider your strongest ability].

#### NEXT WEEK CONTINUING: FINDING YOUR QUALITIES

<sup>3</sup> As discussed in chapters 6-8

<sup>4</sup> Part One of the notebook also consisted of writing our positive abilities, but if for whatever reason we have also written down our negative abilities (weaknesses, faults, and shortcomings) (see what we explained in Chapter 9, footnote 12). However, in the current step we are explaining, one should only be writing down his or her positive abilities.