



MIDDOS & THE 4 ELEMENTS

WHAT WE FRIST NEED TO KNOW

The Torah is entirely Hashem's wisdom. Just like the rest of the Torah, the subject of our middos – its beginning and its end – needs to be understood, even before we work on them. We can't work on our Middos unless we understand them. Just like "a wise person's question is half the answer", so is the understanding of our middos already half way toward working on them.

After understanding what our middos are, we can work on them. "Learning Torah is great, for it brings one to do actions". If our wisdom doesn't affect us practically, it is a lack in our actual wisdom; like the Sages say: "Anyone who says, 'All I do is learn Torah' doesn't even have the Torah."

The first part of working on our middos is understanding their roots, and then we can reach their practical applications. Understanding the roots of the middos isn't quick. It is a great, deep wisdom and it needs a lot of introductions to explain it. First we need to know about the roots, and then we can learn about its branches.

We will attempt, with the help of Hashem, to start from the roots and slowly continue onward with this, as much as Hashem gives us the strength to.

THREE GROUPS OF MIDDOS

We are commanded in the Torah "to go in Hashem's ways." From here our Sages learn that must cling to His middos. We are supposed to resemble Hashem, who is merciful and compassionate. The Sages have thus essentially revealed to us in this that just like all of Creation is rooted in Hashem, so are our middos rooted in the middos of Hashem.

There are three groups of Middos: the root Middos, the soul's middos and the body's middos. The root Middos are Hashem's middos -- the 13 Attributes of Mercy. We are commanded to resemble these middos of Hashem. These are the root middos.

The second group of Middos are the soul's own Middos – Kindness, Justice and Compassion. Just like Hashem has middos, He created the soul with its own middos. Each of our Avos personified each of these

middos: Avraham personified kindness, Yitzchok personified justice, and Yaakov personified compassion. These middos are not middos of the body – they are middos of our very soul.

The third group of Middos are what we are generally referring to in this sefer. They are the middos which come from our nefesh habehamis – our animalistic part of our soul, which is the lowest part of our soul. They are also called our body's middos. They are our negative emotions we know of: anger, jealousy, desire, honor, and so forth.

IT IS ONLY THESE MIDDOS WHICH WE NEED TO FIX

So there are three groups of middos: Middos of Hashem, middos of our soul, and middos of our body (*or lower part of our soul*). The first two groups of middos do not need to be fixed. Hashem is perfect; all his middos are good, and so is our soul only good middos; our soul is pure, and its middos are pure.

It is only our body's middos which need to be fixed. Since Adam ate from the tree – which was mixed with good and evil – our middos have become a mixture of good and evil.

From a superficial understanding, there are seven primary emotions: ahavah\love, yirah\fear, hispaarus\pride, nitzachon\victory, hodayah\gratitude, hiskashrus\connection and shiflus\lowliness. This is the general picture of the middos. Just like Creation was created in seven days, so do we have seven middos. But these are just the external layers of our middos - the inner layers of our middos are called "Daas" (*lit. "knowledge"*).

The Rambam, who codifies the proper conduct of a Jew, describes our middos\character traits as "hilchos de'os" – laws of "Daas." This is because the outer layer of our middos have endless scenarios, but the inner layer of our middos is always one and the same – it is always Daas.

This means for us as follows. Daas is mixed with good and evil in it. As soon as Adam sinned and ate from the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil", all middos have become mixed with good and evil; Daas still remains at the core of the middos, but the outer layers of our Middos are a mixture of good and evil.

MIDDOS & THE 4 ELEMENTS

For example, the middah of gaavah\arrogance can be holy, such as when a person uses gaavah for holy reasons; it is written, “And his heart was high in the ways of Hashem.” This is called gaavah d’kedushah. A person can use gaavah for evil, and this is the kind of gaavah of which Hashem says, “I and him cannot dwell under one roof.”

The middah of kaas\anger as well might either be for good or for bad. If a person is only showing anger outwardly to reprove someone, but he doesn’t feel an anger in his heart, then such anger is commendable; we also find that Hashem has a moment of anger every day, and this is obviously holy. Anger is evil, though, when a person gets angry and loses belief in Hashem – the Sages say that such an angry person is like an idol worshipper.

The same goes for the rest of all the Middos. We can always find instances in which they are either used for good or bad.

Had Adam not eaten from the Eitz HaDaas and instead have eaten from the Eitz Hachaim, then all our middos would always be good. Once Adam ate from the Eitz HaDaas, all our middos became mixed with evil.

To summarize so far, there are three kinds of middos.

1. There are middos of Hashem, which are always completely good.
2. These are the middos that also exist in the depths of our soul, and they are totally pure.
3. There are also middos which stem from our body – in other words, our nefesh habehamis (*the animal layer of our soul*) – and these middos are a mixture of good and bad. It is this third category of middos which we seek to improve – this is where the area of tik-kun hamiddos lies.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS ‘BAD’ MIDDOS

Having clarified that all our middos are a mixture of good and evil – for they are all rooted in the Eitz HaDaas – we can understand another fundamental which our Rabbis taught: there is no such thing as a “bad” middah or a “good” middah. The whole issue with our middos is how we are using it.

Daas, by essence, is always good and positive. When it is used wisely, it is called what we call “good” – but when misused, it is what we call “bad.”

Our Rabbis identified Daas as the power to lead (*hanhagah*). Moshe Rabbbeinu personified Daas, and he is the leader of the Jewish people – the “faithful shepherd” of Hashem.

That is true for the general, collective soul of the Jewish people.

But when it comes to each person as an individual, daas is our power to “go in His ways” (*V’holachta b’drachav*). It is an ability in a person to lead himself and guide himself. If a person goes in the right way, his daas is called daas tov, “good” daas. If he is going in the incorrect path, his daas is daas ra, “evil” daas – like the students of Bilaam, who misuse their daas.

These are the words of our holy rabbis. They are clear matters. Now we will continue to the next step of this.

THE ROOTS OF THE MIDDOS: THE FOUR ELEMENTS

The words of Rav Chaim Vital, in his sefer Shaarei Kedushah, are well-known: Man is made up of the four yesodos\elements – fire, wind, water and earth. He writes as well that these four elements are the roots of our middos. Arrogance and anger come from our fire. Forbidden speech comes from our wind. Desires come from our water. Sadness and laziness come from our earth.

In these words, Rav Chaim Vital has defined our middos: they are all essentially an outcome of its root element. For example, anger is not just a middah of anger – it is a result from an imbalance in the element of fire in the soul. Evil desires are a result from an imbalanced element of water, and sadness comes from an imbalanced element of earth, and so forth.

Our middos that we identify – arrogance, anger, forbidden speech, desires, sadness, laziness, etc. – are just the outer layer of the middos. The inner layer of our middos is the four elements – fire, wind, water, and earth. The four elements are the roots of our middos – which are the branches. Thus, fire is not a branch of arrogance; rather, arrogance is a branch of fire. Water is not the branch of desires – it is the other way around: desires are a branch of water.

From the words of Rav Chaim Vital, we see the deep approach to improve our middos: instead of working on our middos, we must work with their roots – which are the four elements. Tikkun Hamiddos is thus essentially all about fixing our fire, our wind, our water, and our earth.

For example, a person wants to get rid of his gaavah. From the superficial perspective, he needs to do just that – get rid of his gaavah. But the inner perspective is that he needs to fix up his element of fire. If a person wants to stop having lustful desires, the inner approach is to fix his element of water, as opposed to attempting to get rid of his desires.

When a person works to improve his middos, the question is: Is he working with the branches of the problem, or with the roots of the problem?

MIDDOS & THE 4 ELEMENTS

A person has to get to the root of the problem.

A person can do this either by directly tackling the root of the problem and then working with the branches, or he can at least start by working with the branches of the problem until he gets to the root of the problem. Either way, he must deal with the root of the problem at some point. Just working on the branches of the problem will prove unsuccessful.

We can see many people try to work on their middos and don't succeed. The Kotzker Rebbe zt"l said that this is because such people are trying to "break" their bad middos, and then they end up with "two" bad middos...

Why aren't people successful in improving their middos? It is because the person is only trying to fix the branches of the problem, not the root of the problem. A person has a lustful desire, and he wants to get rid of these desires by trying to break his desires – but this is only working on the branches of the problem. The root of the problem here lies in the element of water, which is the root of desire.

Therefore, if we want to define what it means to work on our middos, working on our "middos" is an incorrect definition! Working on our middos really means to work on our four elements of the soul: fire, wind, water, and earth. To be more precise, it is fire, wind, and water which are the active elements, while earth acts as a container for them.

The middos are really hidden – they aren't revealed to us. We see our middos, but we don't see their essence, which are our four elements. We can all see and identify anger or arrogance or forbidden speech or sadness. But we do not see their roots – the elements behind them.

Our Rabbis found a hint to this. Fire in Hebrew is *aish*. Water is *mayim*, and wind is *avir* (*air*). If we take the first letter of each of these three words, we get "emesh", which means "yesterday" in Hebrew. In other words, the three active elements of fire, wind and earth are always like yesterday – gone before we can even identify it. The four elements are hidden from us. People may have heard about the four elements, but do not actually identify with them.

As a result, people have misconceptions when they try to work on their middos. They attempt to break their middos – the middah itself, without uncovering its root element. A person might look through many sefarim for advice on how to work on any of his middos: how to work on anger, how to work on arrogance, etc. But to try to work on oneself in this way lacks a basic understanding of our middos and how we work on them.

We need to start by learning about our yesodos\elements, not about our middos. From learning about our elements, we can come to learn about our middos – with the help of Hashem. We need to first learn what fire, wind, water, and earth are about. Then we need to see how each of the elements are actually comprised of the other three, and how each of the elements can be used in a healthy and unhealthy way. We need to learn how to steer our unhealthy usages of the elements in a positive and healthy direction.

That is tikkun hamiddos.

THIS DOES NOT APPLY TO THE MIDDOS OF HASHEM

We will emphasize here that when we discuss the four elements, as we mentioned before, we are not speaking about how Hashem uses these elements. Although we find sometimes that Hashem is called "a consuming fire" or a "wind of Hashem", and other such places, we are not speaking about the Creator here or even about His middos. We are also not speaking here about the four elements of our neshamah – the higher part of our soul, which is completely spiritual.

We are discussing here only the middos which stem from our body, which are our physical emotions. It is our physical emotions which are made up of the elements of fire, wind, water and earth.

There are elements which are lower than the kind we are discussing, and these are the purely physical elements we see. This is the dirt we walk on, the water we drink, the air we feel and the fire we cook with. We are definitely not discussing these four elements, which are entirely physical.

Anything in the material world is made up of the four elements. Everything contains in it some warmth (*fire*), some movement (*wind*), some moisture or coldness (*water*), and some structure (*earth*). The table and chair in front of us contains each of the four elements – but we are not coming to explain what this is. We are discussing the four elements of our soul – the fire in our soul, the wind in our soul, the water in our soul, and the earth in our soul. It is an entirely different class of its own.

HOW THE ELEMENTS COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER

As we have brought from our teachers, each of the four elements has its own nature. The nature of fire is warmth and dryness. The nature of wind is warmth and moisture. Water is cold and moist, while earth is cold and dry.

Each of the four elements this divides into two classes: it is either

MIDDOS & THE 4 ELEMENTS

hot or cold, and it is either moist or dry. These natures define the four elements.

Everything is made up of opposites – there is a good and evil side to everything. Hashem created an opposite for everything. If there is warmth, there is coldness. If there is dryness, there is moisture.

The two root elements are fire and water. Fire is hot and dry, while water is moist and cold. By contrast, wind and earth each take one of the natures of each fire and water. Earth resembles water in that it is naturally cold, and it also resembles fire in that it is dry. The earth gets its coldness from water, and it gets its dryness from fire. Wind gets its natural heat from fire, and it gets its moisture from water. To be more specific: heat is rooted in fire, coldness is rooted in water, moisture is rooted in wind, and dryness is rooted in earth.

Fire and water are natural opposites – we do not ever find a combination of them. Water puts out fire, and fire heats up water and evaporates it. Fire and water are always the classic example of opposites, according to the Sages; that is the phenomenon of the heavens, which are called *shamayim* – a combination of the words *aish* (fire) and *mayim* (water).

However, the other elements of wind and earth can serve as a bridge between them and maintain equilibrium in between the fire and water. How can we see this? The element of earth in the soul gets warmth from fire and moisture from water, or it gets dryness from fire and coldness from water. In this way, the qualities of fire and water can be put together without putting each other out.

If the world (*and our soul*) would only have fire and water in it, we couldn't exist. For this, we have wind and earth. Wind can sustain fire, as we find that the wind can blow fire in a certain direction. Wind can also direct water by making clouds from the moisture of water. "Difficult waters can be taken care of, by the clouds." From this we see that wind can combine with both fire and water. Earth can also combine with fire and water and take qualities from each.

Thus, the elements of wind and earth serve to combine the various middos.

THE REAL MEANING OF "GOOD" MIDDOS

Let us make this matter clearer. What exactly is a good middah, and what is a bad middah?

In the beginning of this chapter, we have said that a good middah is when we use the middah positively, and a bad middah is when we use the middah negatively. That is a proper, general definition. But to give a more detailed definition, a good middah is when we

combine a middah with its opposite. A bad middah, by contrast, is when we fail to combine a middah with its opposite.

We can give an example for this from Chazal, concerning the middos of Hashem. It is written, "Serve Hashem with awe, and rejoice with trembling." Chazal explain this to mean, "Where there is rejoicing, let there be trembling there." What is the meaning of this statement? Many explanations are given, but there is one that applies to our current discussion: good middos are middos that can work together with an opposing middah.

For example, fire and water, the classic opposites, are combined to form heaven. For this reason, Hashem is called "He who makes peace on high." In Heaven, the angels only have good middos, because in Heaven, opposites can come together in harmony. But on this world, fire and water do not combine, and thus we find bad middos on this world amongst people. Bad middos are essentially a product of failing to synthesize opposing middos.

In this lays a deep and basic understanding about "good middos" and "bad middos." Simply speaking, we think that anger or jealousy are bad middos, and that nothing good can be said of them; and that good middos means to benefit other people by acting refined. This is true, but there is a deeper definition to our middos.

If we have a superficial perspective and merely look at our middos as "middos", then we a good middah means to use a middah for a good cause – such as to use *gaavah* for a holy purpose – and a bad middah is to use a middah for evil purposes. But if we have the inner perspective on our middos – which is to see the elements behind them – then we can see either a middah that results from a combination of two opposing elements (*which will result in a good middah*), or we see a middah that results from a separation of these elements (*which will result in a bad middah*).

For this reason, someone who achieves perfection of character is called "adam shalem" – "perfect man". Someone who has attained that balance between all his various middos has succeed in combining opposite middos, and thus he gains the title of adam shalem.

In order to achieve this equilibrium, we need to understand the natures of each of the elements. We also need to know be aware of all the opposite natures in different elements we encounter, and then we can see how to combine them.

If we are to succeed in combining all the various middos together and to attain this equilibrium, we first need to see how the various natures of the elements contradict and oppose each other.