

What Shovavim Is All About



These days of “*Shovavim*” are just like every other “*sugya*” (section of *Gemara*) that we should try to understand. When we learn a *sugya* of *Gemara*, we try to understand it, and we feel satisfied when we do understand it. But when we learn matters of our *sefarim hakedoshim*, we often don’t understand what’s going on, and we are left with a feeling of not being satisfied. We “know” about these matters, but they just don’t feel right.

Let us learn about the *sugya* of these days of “*Shovavim*”, what it’s all about.

The root of the matters of “*Shovavim*” is found in the *Gemara* in Tractate Eruvin¹, that after the sin, Adam separated from Chavah for 130 years, and during that time, demons and evil spirits came onto the world. The *Gemara* says that the reason for this was because there was sperm that exited his body – by accident, of course – and because of this, demons and evil spirits were created.

There is much to discuss about this *Gemara*, but what applies to us is as follows. Why did sperm exit Adam’s body? Simply speaking, it wasn’t his fault. This is the simple understanding, and it is true. But the deeper understanding of this is that after the sin, his thoughts became negatively affected. Because his thoughts weren’t as pure as they used to be, some of his sperm was able to exit him.

The *Gemara*² says that one should not entertain lewd thoughts during the day, because then he will experience nocturnal emission at night by accident. What happens to a person in middle of his sleep is not in his control; that is not what the person is doing wrong. What the person did wrong was that

¹ Talmud Bavli Tractate Eruvin 18b

² Talmud Bavli Tractate Kesubos 44a

he had the evil thoughts in the first place. As soon as Adam ate from the *Eitz HaDaas* (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), he was now able to think about evil. The very fact that a person can think about evil greatly damages our mind.

When a person has sinful thoughts during the day – for example, if he has lustful thoughts about someone else’s wife, which is called “thinking about a world that isn’t his” – it is a sign about what’s going on inside himself. Sinful thoughts reveal what’s going on in a person’s inside.

When a person’s thoughts aren’t thinking enough about Torah, they wander to all sorts of places – and eventually, the thoughts will begin to think about sinful topics.

In Kelm, during *Shovavim*, the Yeshivah accepted upon themselves that they would learn Torah for many hours on end, consecutively and without interruption, to atone for the sins of *Shovavim*. The depth of this matter wasn’t just so that they should endure some physical suffering by learning without interruption. It was because by learning for many consecutive hours, they would be able to gain total control over their thoughts – and this rectifies the sins of *Shovavim*.

The more a person learns how to train his thoughts and concentrate on Torah learning, he will be in control of his mind, and he will then entertain less and less sinful thoughts.

Baruch Hashem, in our generation, people are starting to improve. Many people are involved in *Shemiras HaLashon* (guarding our speech) and this helps also to fix *Shemiras HaBris* (guarding our holiness). But we can also learn to learn how to build our thoughts, and to protect the holiness of our thoughts.

Besides for “talking in learning”, a person needs to “think” in learning as well. Thinking in learning is a higher level than talking in learning.

Reb Yeruchem Levovitz *zt”l* once said that “nothing comes from a *masmid*.” What does this mean? It means that it’s not enough to “sit and learn” all day; a person has to build his mind to think Torah. One’s mind has to always be thinking about Torah. People think that they have to work on not having

any *bittul Torah* during *Shovavim*. But it's unrealistic for any person to never to have *bittul Torah*. Can anyone say he never wastes time from learning? Is anyone like the Vilna Gaon, who never wasted a moment in learning?!

Rather, the *tikkun* that we need is to **think** more in learning! When a person leaves the *Beis Midrash* – what is he thinking...? The inner essence of *Shovavim* is to become aware of what we are thinking. If we become aware of our thinking, we will see where our thoughts go to.

The *sefer Nefesh HaChaim* writes that when a person has sinful thoughts, his soul leaves him. Ever since the sin of Adam, our thoughts are able to wander from place to place, to places where they shouldn't think about. Our true power of thought is called *chochmah* – the kind of thought that gives us *chiyus*/vitality. There are people who know a lot of Torah, but their actual thoughts are found outside of Torah.

The way to fix the *Bris Kodesh*, during the days of *Shovavim*, is to purify our thoughts – to always think about Torah-related thoughts.

Of course, we have many things that bog us down in life. We have a family to take care; we have jobs, and we have all sorts of things that don't let us concentrate on Torah. But even if we aren't actually sitting and learning the Torah, our thoughts can still remain focused on Torah [which we will soon explain how]. Hashem wants us to guard our thoughts, to keep them protected.

When we have to stop learning Torah to take care of something, the next time we go back to learning, it should be that we are returning to the very same thought we left off with.

When our thoughts are always thinking about Torah-related topics, our thoughts will be protected from wandering to thinking about areas they shouldn't enter.

Once a person asked Rav Shach *zt"l* about how he can rectify the sin of not guarding the *Bris Kodesh*. Rav Shach responded, "I never heard of such a thing (of damaging the *Bris*)."¹ What did this story mean? Since Rav Shach never stopped thinking in learning damaging the *Bris* was unthinkable! He never

had a problem with *Bris Kodesh* because his mind was always protected from thinking any sinful thoughts – he was always thinking in learning.

Our *avodah* is to learn how to gain focus in our thoughts, to train ourselves to always think in learning. This is a deep *avodah* – and the entire structure of our soul depends on it!

Don't try to “fight” the unwanted thoughts. People who are always trying to fight their unwanted thoughts end up suffering from a mental illness. Instead, calmly gain control of your thoughts. The way you can do this is by always returning to the previous thought in Torah you left off with.

Our main task during *Shovavim* is not to involve ourselves in “*segulos*” (charms), although “*segulos*” certainly have a source in *Chazal*. *Segulos* are not the point of *Shovavim*. What we need to develop is the holiness of each Jew, and this depends on guarding the holiness of our thoughts. We can do this by training ourselves to always think in learning – on a constant, continuous basis.

Even “*shemiras einayim*” – guarding our eyes - is not the goal; guarding our eyes is only the external part of our *avodah*. Although it is certainly true that we must guard our eyes – as the *Gemara* says, that one should avoid a path in which he will see improper sights – that is just the external part. The inner part of the job is to guard our thoughts. Guarding our thoughts – *kedushas hamachshavah* – is the essence of *kedushas Yisrael* (the holiness of the Jewish people).

May we merit from Hashem to build our mind properly – to learn Torah both verbally and mentally, and then our thoughts will be guarded, which will protect our *Bris Kodesh*. And through that, we will merit the coming of *Moshiach*, Amen.