

Purifying Our Thoughts



Exile of Our Thoughts

The time period called Shovavim includes the weeks of Torah reading from *Parshas Shemos* through *Parshas Mishpatim*.¹ We can reflect on our *avodah* during these days. We went through exile, and we await redemption. What exactly is it that happened to us in galus (exile)? And what is the geulah (redemption) really about?

A person is comprised of a body and soul. Our eyes see, and our soul can also see. We need to learn how we can see through our soul. An animal only sees through its body.

Our eyes saw that when we went into exile there was a physical enslavement, which could be seen with our physical eyes. But what did our soul see then?

The Sages state the Egyptians had devious thoughts to harm the Jewish people. In this statement lies the spiritual description of the exile which we will try to understand.

The physical exile was the “bricks and mortar,” but the spiritual aspect of the exile was that the Egyptians had evil thoughts of doing evil. The deeper meaning of this is that their evil thoughts placed an exile on our holy power of thought. What happened as a result of this exile to our thoughts? We know that after the exodus, the Jewish people came to *Har Sinai* to receive the Torah, and their souls flew out of their bodies. When this happened, they essentially left all the influences of ‘Egypt’ in their souls.

They left their enslaved power of thought so that they could receive the holy *chochmah* (wisdom) of the Torah. **That** was essentially the redemption.

They had difficult labor which was the physical exile. They didn’t feel confident in Moshe and that was their spiritual exile. The impurity of Pharaoh engulfed them when they were in Egypt, and that was really

¹ The word “Shovavim” stands for the Torah portions of *Shemos*, *V'eira*, *Bo*, *Beshalach*, *Yisro* and *Mishpatim*.

why they didn't believe in being redeemed. When they left Egypt, they left behind this impurity as well, becoming instead the "servants of Hashem." They were released from the evil thoughts that dampened their faith in Egypt.

Exile of The Thoughts - Today

We will now try to understand how this applies practically to our soul.

The great level we reached when we stood at Har Sinai didn't last. After the sin with the Golden Calf, the people fell from their great spiritual plateau. Thus, in a sense, we didn't have a complete redemption from Egypt. Do we have the 'bricks and mortar' today that we were enslaved with in Egypt? From an inner perspective – yes! In the time we live in, we are exiled! **The “exile of thoughts” is when a person thinks about This World and has desires for it.**

Rav Chaim Volozhiner² explained the statement of *Chazal* that "Torah and derech eretz³ together are good for protecting a person from sin." This sounds simply like it keeps a person from being bored, but the deeper meaning is that even during the time of one's involvement with matters of derech eretz, there should be Torah. So even one who is involved with 'bricks and mortar' (labor/work) can still think about Torah, matters of holiness, and Hashem. The question to ask ourselves is: When one is taking care of his various physical matters, what are his thoughts focused on? What is he thinking about?

The Avodah of The Days of “Shovavim”

The days of "Shovavim" are a period of gaining holiness of thought. The superficial part is to protect his eyes and his heart from straying after lewd thoughts, as we know, but it is much more than that. The point of all this is really about preventing your thoughts from thinking about things you **don't** need to think about.

We are all in the "bricks and mortar" of This World; we have no choice, because we are inevitably involved with This World, so we have physical labor. But where are our thoughts? What are our thoughts focusing on...?

If our thoughts are only about This World, then we lose our connection to the spiritual. But if we make sure that our thoughts and feelings are connected to the spiritual even as we function physically, then we are

² author of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*

³ *Avos 2:2* In this context, "derech eretz" translates as "work". In other contexts, *derech Eretz* refers to proper behavior.

still connected to our spiritual dimension. And this will be true even as we are taking care of our down-to-earth physical needs.

The more a person is connected constantly to the holiness of his power of thought, his thoughts can connect him to his place Above even as his body is doing something purely physical.

Beginning The Day With A Pure Thought

Now let's make this concept practical.

A person gets up in the morning – what does he do? He says, “*Modeh Ani*.” However, one needs to think about the words before he says it.

How can a person think? His hands are still unclean, because he hasn't yet washed his hands. What should he think about? Should it be about the fact that he is about to say the words...?

Thought must precede speech, as the Ramban says. When a person slept, he didn't think, because imagination takes over when we sleep, as the Vilna *Gaon* taught. When a person gets up in the morning, he has a hard time thinking because his mind has been dulled the entire night by imagination. What should he do about this? He should think of something **true** and **pure**.

If the beginning of the day begins with true thought, then a person leaves the “exile” he is in, even though he's involved with a world of action. And the truer the thought is, the more a person can penetrate into his heart.

One who is not aware of this concept lives with either action or speech alone. He only thinks before doing an action or before he speaks. But such a life does not really use the power of thought that much. When our power of thought is only used to think just before we do something (physically or verbally), our mind is not being used enough, and what will happen? Imagination will take over.

But when a person wakes up in the morning and he awakens a true thought within himself, he essentially leaves the “exile” of his thoughts.

What should a person think about when he gets up in the morning? It can be a thought about the purpose of life, or it can be a thought about Hashem, or it can be about fear of Hashem or love of Hashem. The day should then continue with thinking about this thought that you woke up with.

This half a minute a day of thinking, permeates the rest of the day. With a little bit of thinking a truthful thought, you can connect the whole day with that thought.

This does not mean to keep thinking the same thought over and over again throughout the day. It is rather to keep reminding yourself of the first thought you began the day with: the thought that preceded all the actions of the day.

In Conclusion

Although there are many forms of *avodah* during Shovavim, we have stressed that the depth behind utilizing these days of Shovavim is, at its core, about sanctifying our power of thought

What does a person remain with from this world? What does he take with him? He only takes with him his holy feelings and his holy thoughts. When a person connects himself to holy thought, this is the meaning of the term of our Sages, “One who is a *Ben Olam HaBa*” (one who will merit the World To Come). From our body’s view we are found in the “world of action.” From the view of our soul, however, we are found in our thoughts.

Thought is an inner matter. One who connects to thought is connected to an inner world even as he lives in this physical World. When a person damages the Bris Kodesh, the inner problem is that he has damaged his faculty of thought. The way to rectify it is to return to the holiness of thought.

Yaakov *Avinu* called Reuven “reishis oni,” (first of my offspring), for it was his very first seed; the Sages state that Yaakov did see not keri (emissions) in his entire life! The depth of this is that we have a power of reishis, to return to our beginning source, that the reishis (beginning) of our thoughts can be holy.

In this way, we can connect the entire day with the first thought of the day. Understandably, it needs to be done slowly and in steps, and patiently. This will connect a person to the power of holy thought and in turn purify the thoughts. This is the root method and the depth behind the days of Shovavim.