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The Deaths of Nadav and Avihu

In *Parashas Achrei Mos*, the Torah says that the two sons of Aharon [Nadav and Avihu] died in their “drawing close in front of Hashem”.

The *Ramchal* in the beginning of *Mesillas Yesharim* writes that the true self-completion of life is to reach *d'veykus* (attachment) with Hashem, and that this is what Dovid HaMelech said, “*And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good.*” The purpose of Creation, on a general level, and the purpose of man specifically, who is the crown of Creation, is to reach closeness to Hashem.

This is what Nadav and Avihu died for. They reached what is described in the verse “*And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good*”, and since they had now reached this purpose, they left the world.

When Does Closeness Come?

If we take a look at the world only superficially, we will only see a myriad amount of creations, many various actions and movements which exist. But if we reflect on our view of the world, and we think into the words of our *Chazal* that describe this, we see that there is nothing for us to do here on this world other than to reach closeness with Hashem. All creations, and man especially, exist in order to bring the world to its purpose, which is that all of Creation should reach closeness with Hashem.

Closeness with Hashem, according to the Sage Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair that is explained in *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*, is not reached until the level that is called *kedushah* (holiness), which the *Ramchal* describes as a constant connection in the Creator, without interruption. It seems to us at first glance that the order of our *avodah* is Torah, then *zehirus* (watchfulness), *zerizus* (alacrity), etc., whereas *d'veykus* and closeness with Hashem can only be reached at the very end of our ladder. That is what it seems when we take a look at *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*, which delineates the steps of our ladder of growth.

However, there is a deeper, truer perspective. When you draw close to something, it doesn't mean you are situated at that level. Closeness means that you have gotten closer from where you are now. The very movement of our life must be towards closeness with Hashem, until we truly reach Him – as is in the verse, “*Return, Yisrael, until Hashem your G-d.*” At that highest level, a person joins the recognition of *tzaddikim*, who have *d'veykus* and closeness with Hashem. But getting closer to Hashem means that one is directing his entire life towards Hashem.

One's deeds need to be mainly directed towards closeness with Hashem. Although there are always spiritual failures, one needs to always have his deeds directed towards this goal, to get closer, and closer, and closer.

The Torah's Light Enables

To explain this in deeper terms, there is the root of our *emunah*, which is to believe with complete faith in the existence of Hashem that He is the Creator of all beings, and there is also the "light" of Hashem, which reveals His presence to us. Light serves to reveal the presence of something, and the revelation of Hashem on this world is called His "light". This is referring to the Torah, which is called "*Torah Ohr*", "Torah of light". The Torah is here to reveal the One who created this world.

When one has a superficial perspective, he might think that the light found in the Torah is for a purpose unto itself, and that it exists only to reveal the light of the Torah itself. But this is a subtle way of separating the Torah from Hashem. The entire concept of exertion in Torah study is to be connected with Hashem, the "Hashem and the Torah are one". The Torah reveals the existence of the Creator and therefore it is called "Torah of light", because it reveals Hashem.

Based upon the above, we can now understand what is meant by the order of steps laid out in *Mesillas Yesharim*, that Torah brings one to *zehirus*, and *zehirus* brings one to *zerizus*, etc. It does not simply mean that a person who acquires the level of *zehirus*, can then proceed to acquire the level of *zerizus*, etc. Rather, it means that the Torah is what brings a person to each of these levels. Thus, the Torah that brings a person to the level of *zehirus* is the Torah that brings a person to *zerizus*, and which brings a person to the level of *nekiyus*, etc.

The Torah is a light, the light of Hashem, which serves to reveal Hashem. It is the light of the Torah which brings a person to *zehirus*, and therefore even in *zehirus* there can be a revelation of Hashem. So *zehirus* is not just the "level" of *zehirus* - it is part of the steps in reaching closeness with Hashem. That means that even in the beginning of one's way, the Torah's light can accompany him and bring him to all of the levels he needs to acquire. A hint to this is that the word "*zehirus*" is from the word "*zohar*" (illumination), alluding to the Torah's light contained even in this first level.

If a person simply wants to gain the trait of *zehirus*, he may succeed in gaining this trait, but it will not be on a deep level. He will simply know how to become more careful which animals can do also. So a person may have acquired the level of *zehirus*, but only on the level of the "animal" soul. But when a person reaches *zehirus* due to the Torah's light which brings him to *zehirus*, this is not the *zehirus* of animals. This is light of the Torah! It is this *zehirus* which is from the word "*zohar*" (light) which can bring him to the higher levels, of *zerizus* through *kedushah*.

The Two Views Towards Life

Whether or not a person is at the beginning of "the ladder", or surely if he is in the middle, there are two ways of how he may view life.

(There is a superficial view towards life, which we are not bothering to explain here. This is when a person doesn't even yet recognize that the purpose of life is closeness to Hashem, which is palpable recognition of the Creator.)

Here we are beginning from a point where a person understands the words of the *Mesillas Yesharim*, that the purpose of life is to have pleasure in Hashem, and that true self-perfection is *d'veykus* in Hashem. After this recognition, there are two different ways of how you view life, from then onward.

Do you have the end goal of life already at the start of your way? When you work on keeping the

mitzvos, working on your *middos*, speaking of the words of the Torah and learning it Torah in-depth – is your goal to get to the closeness with Hashem at the end? That is one way to live life – to have the end goal of life accompanying you in your thoughts, as you act. Your eventual goal is to reach closeness with Hashem at the end.

A second way to view life, which is deeper, is that closeness to Hashem is not only at the end. Rather, in any level you are at, you can find closeness to Hashem, because you are becoming closer and closer to Hashem, with each stage that you progress. Of course, this does not mean that you have reached the final level of closeness with Hashem. That only comes at the end. But you can keep getting closer and closer, with each level that you advance.

In the second path, closeness to Hashem (palpable recognition of Him) doesn't only come at the end. It is already accessed somewhat even in the beginning of your path. Rather, you can keep accessing it, in any level you are found at and working hard to acquire. You are hoping to reach the final level, which is the ultimate level of the closeness, but even in the meantime, you are directing your life closer and closer towards recognizing Hashem, more and more.

When this is the perspective, we can uncover the depth of life.

How We View Davening?

A person is working hard at learning Torah, or he is working hard at strictly keeping the *mitzvos*, or he tries hard to do *chessed*, or in other areas of *ruchniyus*. But throughout the day, we have three times in which we *daven* and speak with Hashem, openly.

Now, if a person is trying to acquire the level of *zehirus*, let's say, and he wants to become more careful in his observance of *mitzvos*, and he is about to *daven*, he might be careful to say *Kerias Shema* and the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei* with full concentration; as well as to concentrate in the other areas of *davening*, as explained in *Shulchan Aruch* and in the *poskim*.

But when a person works hard at the deeper part of life (namely, the goal of becoming closer to Hashem), his entire structure changes. He is working hard at whatever spiritual level he is trying to acquire, and along with this, he is also [cognizant that he is] speaking with Hashem three times a day during *davening*.

It is clear that closeness with Hashem is not some far-off high level, but a level that he can keep feeling more and more. He can keep recognizing the reality of Hashem, more, and more, and more.

Awareness of Hashem When Learning Torah

With regards to learning Torah, the Chazon Ish writes that “the main thing is to know before Whom you are exerting.” When a person learns Torah and he is exerting himself, he may just be doing this for the reward, and it is certainly true that Hashem rewards everyone, but this is not the true, inner kind of exertion in learning Torah. But if he is having inner and truer exertion, then the more he exerts himself in learning, the more he recognizes what is meant by “before Whom you are exerting.”

When a person dedicates his heart to Torah learning, and not just with the physical exertion of the body and with the amount of time he spends learning (which is certainly important, but it is only the external part of learning Torah), he becomes more aware of Hashem's Presence as he is learning.

When a person merits that a bit of the gates of *daas* (inner knowledge) become opened to him, and he sees the world with a clear lens, he recognizes that physical exertion in Torah learning and diligence in Torah learning is not everything. *Chazal* say that “a person cannot learn Torah except in a

place where his heart desires". Learning Torah depends on how much one has a desire in his heart, the will, to learn Torah. In a place where a person's heart desires, there is a strong will to learn Torah, and a person can exert himself in Torah with his heart.

If a person's entire will is to know Torah and to comprehend Torah, this is but one part of learning Torah. But once the inner will for Torah becomes opened in the person – the love for the Torah, and a will to do Hashem's will – the Torah then becomes absorbed in one's innards. The desire for learning Torah then intensifies in the person, and then a person becomes greatly aware of before Whom he is learning Torah, and every time he learns Torah it will be with a sense of renewal. It won't be like yesterday's learning. The greater one exerts himself in Torah, the greater awareness one can reach of "before Whom you are exerting."

When this is a person's perspective towards life, in any level he is at, whether he is at the Torah that brings a person to *zehirus*, or the Torah that brings a person to *zerizus*, etc. or any of the higher rungs in the ladder – his sense of recognition of the Creator becomes sharper.

The barometer that measures this is what a person's *davening* looks like. When a person is in *Shemoneh Esrei*, he is "standing before the King", but if a person doesn't feel that he is now more clearly standing in front of Hashem, it is a sign that his Torah learning and self-improvement are all being done on an external, superficial level. But if a person has a clearer sense of standing before Hashem as he *davens Shemoneh Esrei*, it is a sign that he is more aware of Hashem in his Torah learning and in his other areas of *avodah*.

This is because learning Torah with an awareness of Hashem's Presence will cause a person to feel Hashem's Presence with much more clarity during prayer.

Finding Closeness With Hashem

Closeness to Hashem is therefore not limited to the final levels of *avodas Hashem*. The *Ramchal* in *Mesillas Yesharim*, when describing the level of *chassidus* (piety), says that it means to talk to Hashem "as a man talks to his friend", and this is certainly a higher and more inner level of closeness with Hashem. But even before that level, in the beginning of a person's way, one must be cognizant of getting closer to Hashem throughout his Torah learning, his performance of *mitzvos*, in his *middos* work, and in opening his positive spiritual emotions, etc. All of these areas of *avodah* open another level of closeness with Hashem, and another level, and another level.

Therefore, in whatever level you are at, the focus should not be entirely on what you are trying to acquire, because you must also be cognizant of getting closer to Hashem while you are in the process of acquiring your next more refined level. If you focus only on whatever level you are trying to acquire, you may gain that level, but only superficially, and without reaching the greater purpose.

For example, we can sometimes see that people work on themselves in the areas of *chessed*, or in guarding their speech, or in having a good eye toward others, etc. and various other qualities to acquire, which are all true. But even when people improve in these areas, they don't necessarily open their hearts to the light of the Torah, which is the light of Hashem – the recognition of Hashem's presence.

When a person directs all areas of his *avodah* to becoming more and more cognizant of Hashem – namely, to be aware of Hashem even as he learns Torah – then the more he exerts himself in this area, the more this inner level becomes opened to him.

A Life Transformed

After that, a person's life will look totally different. The levels of improvement which we need to acquire will all be seen differently. The levels of *zehirus*, *zerizus*, *nekiyus*, (watchfulness, alacrity, cleanliness) etc. and all of the *middos* which our *Chazal* describe will be seen in a whole different light.

One will see all of these *middos* as different means that reveal Hashem. As *Chazal* say, "Be similar to Him - Just as He is compassionate, so must you be compassionate."^[1] A person must be compassionate not just because Hashem is compassionate, but because the world was created to reveal Hashem amongst His creations, and in order to reveal Hashem, man must come to resemble Hashem. The trait of compassion should not be seen as a purpose unto itself, nor should any of the other *middos* be seen as a purpose unto themselves, although they are all lofty levels. The purpose of acquiring good *middos* is to resemble Hashem, and in turn, that reveals Hashem amongst His creations, drawing His presence closer to its revelation amongst man.

When we view life this way everything takes on new meaning. The 613 *mitzvos* will no longer be seen as actions that exist as a purpose unto themselves, but as various means which draw a person closer to Hashem, and in turn, to reveal Him within man. When one fulfills a *mitzvah*, he is doing Hashem's will. If he does it correctly and with the right intention, with his heart, and according to the definitions of *halachah*, then such a deed draws a person closer to Hashem. This results in Hashem being revealed within him.

If a person's entire direction in life is to reach this goal, of revealing Hashem within him, his deeds take on entirely new meaning. The gain will be that even if he is not on the higher levels of perfection, and even if he cannot immediately feel the spiritual attainments of his deeds, since he is directing his whole life towards closeness with Hashem, each deed that he does is fashioning him into more of a "container" that can hold the revelation of Hashem - in the world in general, and in man specifically.

When he works on his *middos*, he won't just see this as a job to acquire each of the *middos*, but he will see how each bad *middah* separates him from Hashem and how perfecting his *middos* draws him closer to Hashem and enables Hashem to be revealed in him.

In addition, when a person speaks words of Torah, with the above perspective, he will view the words of Torah he is saying as the being "word of Hashem". As *Chazal* say, "Whoever sits and learns Torah, Hashem sits and learns with him."^[2] When a person is learning the words of Torah (especially if he is learning Torah *lishmah*), it as if Hashem is learning with him, so to speak. Hashem is becoming revealed within him, as he speaks the words of Torah. This is the inner kind of exertion in Torah.

You Don't Always Feel The Revelation

A person builds his entire inner spectrum by one's deeds, feelings, words, thoughts in Torah and *kedushah*, his *ratzon*/will, and his *emunah* in Hashem. However, a person will not always feel that his deeds and Torah learning are revealing Hashem within him immediately. But if the general direction in one's life is to reach closeness with Hashem in whatever one does, then they become a "container" that reveals Hashem in this world.

But this will only be true if he is **cognizant** of this entire concept. Compare this to a person who has performed an act of acquisition, but he did not actually intend to acquire anything. The act is worthless, and he doesn't acquire it. But if a person performed an act of acquisition and he also intended to acquire, the act enables him to acquire it.

All of the deeds that we must we do, and all the parts of our *avodah* that we need to do, are all acts of acquisition - what kind of acquisitions? The 48 ways of acquiring the Torah.

In Conclusion

When we direct our lives towards being cognizant of Hashem's presence in front of us (*nochach p'nei Hashem*), we can merit a general level of purification to envelop us, and then the revelation of the Creator will become more apparent within us. It is the light of the Torah, and the light of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, which can become illuminated in the depths of one's heart. Upon meriting this, a person becomes a "container" that can hold Hashem's Presence within this world.

[1] Shabbos 133a

[2] Berachos 5b

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