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## Fixing Your Fire [Honor] - 005 Dependent On Honor

*Earth-of-Water-of-Fire: The “Heaviness” and “Permanence” That One Attaches To The Pleasure Found In Honor*

With Hashem’s help, let us continue to learn about the trait of *kavod* (honor), a branch of the element of fire. Now we will discuss honor that stems from **water-of-fire**, and we will begin with “**earth**”-of-water-of-fire.

Honor stemming from **earth-of-water-of-fire** refers to the heaviness and the permanence that one has in the pleasure found in honor. The honor itself is fire; the “water” aspect of honor is the pleasure found in honor; and the “earth” within this “water” is the heaviness and permanence that one may have in the pleasure of honor.

*Honor (Fire) Is More Dominant In Old Age*

Let’s explain this matter at its roots.

Our life is divided into two stages – childhood, and adulthood. During childhood, we do not have mature minds, for we are small-minded then (*katnus mochin*), and when we get older, we mature and we gain some level of maturity of mind (*gadlus mochin*).

In our childhood and teenage and adolescent years, our most dominant element is usually water (pleasure). The trait of desire, which stems from the element of water, is most apparent in the younger years of our life. Although fire can also be an active element in the younger years, it is mainly water which is active during this stage of life. Understandably, the element of water will manifest differently in each person, according to his unique nature and soul root. But in general, the childhood and teenage years are dominated by the element of water.

When a person matures, especially when he is in the second half of his life, his element of water usually weakens. Chazal state that “when desire ceases [in old age], peace in the home ceases.” The element of water is strong in one’s younger years and at a certain point in one’s life, it weakens, and this is the case with most people.

When water weakens, its opposite element, fire, becomes stronger. That is often why adults, who have usually matured since childhood, will have more displays of the traits of conceitedness, anger, and honor. Their element of water has weakened, and in its place, their fire has increased. The traits of fire are conceit, anger, and honor, so when people get older, these traits are much more manifest.

This is a deep, internal change that one goes through in life. However, not all adults become aware of this change. If a person remains immature and his mind hasn't developed that much since he was younger, he has a 'disparate' view towards everything, and he doesn't see "a bigger picture" of things. But when a person gets older and is now more mature, he sees things from beginning until end.

An immature person sees only from his current point, so he will only see his own desires, wants, and yearnings of this moment. He lives more for the moment, and this is all the more so with children, who live in their current desires and can't see past them.

In contrast, a person who has matured in life has become a bit deeper, and he doesn't only live in the moment. He sees the bigger picture of life, the beginning and end of things, and the point between the beginning and end which he is found in, so he's not stuck in details of the moment. He is capable of thinking about death and that we are heading towards the grave, as Chazal teach, that one should always be cognizant of the day of death.

### *The "Sudden" Changes of Old Age*

If one is unaware of this concept, he will find the various situations and stages of life to be unmanageable, finding himself "suddenly" in a new stage of life. Such a person, when he hits old age, will find it very hard.

Reb Yisrael Salanter said that there are two stages in improving our character: "changing" the character traits, and "conquering" the character traits; but when old age arrives, a person has a weaker amount of control over his character, and when he "suddenly" finds himself in this stage of life, he will have a tough time dealing with it. He may not want to admit to the changes that have suddenly arrived. If he does admit to it, it will feel sudden to him and thus very difficult to handle.

If you keenly observe the world around you, you can see many old people in the world who are in a pitiful situation - they have realized that old age has suddenly come upon them, as if it has fallen on top of them.

In childhood, a person played games and had fun. In the intermediate stages of life, either a person sits and learns Torah during the day, or, if he doesn't merit this, he goes out to work. But one day he may suddenly find himself out of his job; or if he was in *Kolel*, he suddenly realizes that he is an "older *avreich*" who is not needed by anybody; this is most likely to happen in the case where he is not an exceptional Torah scholar, and he has no more individual life of his own anymore, for whatever reason.

He finds himself one day suddenly "gone" from the world [as the Sages say of who is a hundred years of age, who is considered "gone" from the world], feeling that he has no purpose on the world anymore. If he has children and grandchildren who give him honor, he will be fine, but if this honor is not a consistent basis, he feels unimportant, not needed, with nothing to live for, with no reason to get up out of bed in the morning for anything.

This is in contrast with a person who lives an inner kind of life, who will not have this problem in old age. But here we are speaking about a person who has lived superficially before old age set in. He may have learned Torah and *davened* every day and he kept all the *mitzvos*, but with each passing day, he was simply taking life as it comes. He did what he had to do, whatever was necessary to be done and whatever was desired from him, but he was simply "flowing" along with the various "movements" of life. *Baruch Hashem*, he has raised children, he has made them *Bar Mitzvah*'s and weddings, and he even has grandchildren. "*Baruch Hashem*", "*Baruch Hashem*", "*Baruch Hashem*"....

....

One day he suddenly finds himself in a situation where everything has changed. He finds himself getting easily irritated, and no one around him knows what made him angry. He has become more obsessed with his pride, and he wants more honor from others. People don't understand what he wants and they are at a loss of trying to understand what he really needs.

Most people do not develop this problem when they are younger, but if you ever speak to some of the older people in the world – not a superficial kind of conversation, but a soul kind of conversation, where you speak to them about what's going on inside them – you can see that they are choosing to ignore thinking about what lies ahead of them. They would rather think about their past, instead of thinking about what will be with their future.

This is not an issue of how much Torah learning a person needs to fill up his time with when he gets older (although that is also a very important issue). The real issue is with the entire perspective that the person has towards his life. If a person before old age has never thought about what he must do with his life, he will have a very hard time dealing with the changes that old age brings.

In contrast, if he had been clear of how life is supposed to look, he will have a much easier time settling into old age. Of course, Hashem can bring changes to any person's life in spite of all a person's planning and thinking. But Hashem has given us free will, and within our free will, we can choose what kind of life we will want to lead, and to plan and direct ourselves accordingly.

We have been brief here about this, but it is describing a more all-inclusive perspective towards life, of how a person must see life; of how he goes about his own reality.

### ***Avoiding The Disillusionment In Old Age: Awareness About The Path of Life***

Most people, when they think about old age, will think about it in terms of how they will benefit from their pension. But if someone is deeper, he thinks about what his life in general will look like, what it will look like until then, and what it will look like after that – and even more so, to think about what will be with his soul after he is buried in the grave, and before Whom he have to give an accounting to, in the world of truth.

To describe this briefly, if a person is able to have a mature perspective towards life, this is called *gadlus* ("greatness", or maturity). He sees all of life as a "*tahalich*" (path), and therefore he sees the details of life as interconnected, as opposed to random, scattered information. He is aware that our reality began with the six days of Creation, with the creation of Adam, and that it continued throughout all of history, until now; and that it will continue with the era of Mashiach, the resurrection of the dead, the World To Come. That is how he sees creation, and his own life.

This is a more basic kind of awareness, and we are not referring to high levels of perception and wisdom, which are only reached by those who have *ruach hakodesh*. Here we are talking about a simpler level of awareness towards what life is about, of the inner meaning of life – where one *experiences* the interconnectedness of the details in his life.

### ***Why Honor May Dominate In Old Age***

Therefore, if a person had a strong amount of "water" (desire and passion) in his soul in his younger years, when he hits old age, where the element of fire gets stronger, the "water" and the "fire" will clash unpleasantly, as they are contradictory forces. The "water" will weaken to the "fire" which gets stronger in older age, and the "fire" will become dominant.

For this reason, even if a person wasn't that prone to the traits of anger, conceit and honor-seeking in his younger years, when he gets older, it is very possible that he will now become prone to these traits. This is what is meant by the words of the Gemara, "An elderly man in the home, is discord in the home."

A new stage begins when a person hits old age. It is not simply a change in *middos* (character traits). The person remains with the same *middos* as before. It is just that now everything will be weighed by him in different terms, and therefore the way he handles things now will be different, based on the various circumstances in his life.

### *Knowing Your Source of Pleasure*

Therefore, let us understand the following deep point.

A person really cannot live without receiving some kind of pleasure. If a person would live without pleasure, he would be kind of dead. Each person needs different amounts of pleasure, and the source of pleasure differs with each person. But every person must know where he gets pleasure from.

Most people, when they think about where they derive pleasure from, will discover that that it is a physical, material kind of pleasure. If a person mainly gets pleasure from the various physical pleasures available on this world, he must know that this is a big problem for the soul. His soul will have a hard time making the transition to the Next World, and when the soul has become attached to physical pleasures of this world, it suffers from this in the grave (*chibut hakever*). But besides for this problem, he will also find himself suddenly one day without a source of vitality. He had been getting his vitality from a materialistic source, and when he finds himself in a stage of life where he can't get those pleasures [such as in old age], he will feel no reason to live.

Unfortunately, anyone who is familiar a bit with what goes on in the world today knows that there are people who are lax in the area of *shemiras habris* (moral purity), *Rachmana litzlan* (may Hashem save them), who, when they enter old age, require medication to calm their nerves. They had been living for certain lusts, which they derived their entire pleasure in life from; as soon as they are in a situation where they can't get those lusts, they find it so unbearable that they wish they could die. Some people even think that it is a kindness to help these people die, to put them out of their misery, *Rachmana litzlan*. Indeed, they are miserable, because they see no reason to live anymore, when they can't get their lusts that they are used to. There are even places in the world today where people who wish to die can go to others for help in ending their lives.

It is shuddering to think about this. But there are people who have nothing but lusts and materialistic desire in their life, and they feel that this is their entire life, so they feel there is no point in living if they can't get those desires anymore.

Most people do not get to that extremity, of course. But the problem can exist on a smaller degree with many people, where the attitude is the same: to live for various physical desires. When old age arrives, those desires are no longer within their reach, and it becomes very hard for them to live. Most of the time, a person is not conscious of this attitude when it exists; he might not be aware that he is living for physical desires, especially if he keeps Torah and *mitzvos*. If he does not observe Torah and *mitzvos*, it is surely the case.

But in either case, the person considers physical desires to be his main source of vitality and pleasure in life, and when old age arrives, he will feel like a dried-out tree, with nothing to live for. Even if he learns Torah and keeps all the *mitzvos*, if his main source of vitality did not come from his Torah learning, from doing Hashem's will - at a certain point, there will come a time when he will feel that

he has nothing to live for.

When he does reach that point, there are either one of two possibilities. Either he had such strong desires until now and therefore his element of “fire” has never been exposed, and now that he cannot fulfill his physical desires, he sees no reason to live. Or, since he cannot fulfill physical desires anymore, his “fire” will now make its appearance, and therefore he will greatly pursue honor, as we have been discussing here. He will also find himself more irritable, and more conceited, which are both negative results of fire.

### *In Summary*

In summary, we find two kinds of people. One kind of person has a strong amount of “water” and he doesn’t have that much “fire”, and therefore he is more drawn towards physical desires, and less drawn towards spiritual desires such as honor. When such a person reaches a point where he can’t get his desires, he will lose his zest for life. Others are born with more “fire” in their souls – even at a younger age, when the physical desires are stronger, they are more drawn towards the spiritual desire of honor; when they get older, their desire for honor greatly increases.

The pleasurable feeling of honor is not introduced to a person at the age of seventy. Rather, a person identifies with it already at a younger age, and slowly he begins to identify with it more and more, deriving pleasure from it. Although physical desire is stronger in a person’s younger years, he will still be able to enjoy honor, even though honor will not be his strongest experience of pleasure.

When a person gets older and he is at the point where he is less interested in physical desires, honor will gain more of a place in his life. Usually, the loss of interest in physical desires is not a result of spiritual self-work. Rather, it is a natural byproduct of getting older and becoming more mature. If a person had learned in his younger years to identify with the pleasure in honor, it will get stronger as time goes on, and when he gets older, he will suddenly find himself placing great importance on receiving honor, and he won’t be able to understand how this situation has come upon him so suddenly.

But as we are explaining, it does not come suddenly. Rather, it is because when a person gets older, his element of water becomes weaker and his fire becomes stronger; in addition, it is also because the desire for honor had been there all along, and it has slowly made its appearance, and now when the person is older and more mature, it has become stronger. These two factors together cause honor to become the main point of a person’s life, in his older years.

### *When People Become Dependent On Honor*

A large amount of older people live entirely off honor. They don’t have that much physical desires to fulfill, so they will live off the good feeling of whatever honor they receive. (This is in contrast to a person who formed an inner connection to his Torah learning and to the *mitzvos*, he has true spiritual vitality, and that’s a different story altogether.)

Most people, in their old age, live off the honor that they receive – from the way they are being treated by others, from the way others are relating to them, from the good feeling that others give to them, from the honor that others give to them; and that is where they get their vitality from.

If an old person is doing nothing with his life all day, there are people who try to recruit others to befriend him, to say a kind word to him, to give him a compliment, to give them some form of honor. One kind word can keep him going from one Shabbos to the next.

If a person understands what we are saying here and he doesn’t want to run away from true life, he

understands that unless he lives deeply and he makes inner improvement, there is a likely chance that he will end up like most people, as described above.

### *1- Enjoying A Higher Form of Pleasure*

Therefore, the ideal way to live is as follows.

The words we are about to say are particularly relevant to rectifying **earth-of-water-of-fire**. The “fire” here refers to honor, the “water” refers to the pleasure in honor, and “earth” of water-of-fire is when a person is regularly used to the pleasure in honor, to the point that he is tied down to it, with a kind of permanence.

The way a true life looks like is as follows: A person needs to be able to develop some kind of pleasure in life that is not physical. As long as a person only knows of physical, sensual pleasure, it will be unbearable to him when he can no longer get his physical desires, such as when he gets older, when his physical desires weaken. Therefore, the sensible person makes sure to develop a higher kind of pleasure.

Examples may include deriving pleasure from Torah learning, from doing the will of Hashem, from love for others, from prayer, from kindness. Each person can find his own higher form of pleasure. The common denominator between all situations, however, is that a person should be able to have a form of higher pleasure in his life that is consistent. This is necessary for anyone who wishes to live a true life.

Of course, to reach a level when a person is divested of all physical desires, is a very high spiritual level, which only rare individuals reach. But every person must be able to enjoy a higher form of pleasure than the physical, and it is absolutely necessary. If not, what is the point of living? He won't be able to traverse life correctly.

So the first, basic point one needs is to find a higher form of pleasure, which he gains vitality from. The gain of this will be that when he gets older and his physical desires weaken, he will still retain his deeper sources of pleasure, and even more so, those higher pleasures will become stronger. Old age weakens only the physical body, not the inner forces of the soul. Therefore, deep pleasure can remain even in old age.

Many times a person's soul faculties are also weakened in old age, because when a person lived life with a very physical orientation, the physicality of the body dominated the soul so much that the soul is subjected to the body, which causes the soul to descend to the level of the physicality of the body, and it is thereby “weakened” along with the body. But if a person developed his inner, spiritual world, old age only increases his spiritual maturity, as it is said of Torah scholars, who become wiser with the older they become.

The idea of developing a source of inner pleasure that goes beyond the physical is the rectified form of the element of “water” (pleasure), which, when developed in the younger years of life, can last into old age as well, even after the physical body and desire are weakened. Such “water” never weakens, because it is not subject to the physical body – it is a deeper, inner form of pleasure which was beyond the physicality of the body to begin with, so it will remain even after the physical energies of the body weaken.

That is the first part of the remedy.

### *2- Learning How To Detach From A Need For Honor*

However, developing a deeper form of pleasure alone will not be enough to counter the desire for honor which becomes more dominant in old age. This is because even the rectified kind of “water” (spiritual pleasure) cannot completely douse the element of fire that has become stronger in old age. When the physical body weakens in old age, the element of water\pleasure is always somewhat weakened by this, and therefore “fire” will dominate. In the lowest part of the soul, the “animal soul” which is connected to the physical realm, the element of water will weaken, and in turn, the element of fire is strengthened.

Therefore, in addition to the first part of the remedy explained earlier, a person must also work on trying not to become too attached to the pleasure of receiving honor.

When the pleasure of honor is experienced, naturally, a person will want to continue to experience it, on a permanent basis. This will create a dependency on honor, the problem that we have described here at length. One should therefore train himself to detach from the need for honor.

Even if one is not on the level of “Run away from honor”, and certainly if he isn’t yet on the level where he doesn’t care about insults, one can reach this more basic level, of detaching from the need for honor. A person can form a space in his soul where he doesn’t need to be constantly honored, just as we discussed with regards to desire, where a person can form a space in him where he doesn’t need to always fulfill a certain desire.

Even if a person is in a place where he is always receiving honor, he can form this space in himself, which doesn’t need honor.

### *Being Able To Endure Insults*

Taking this further, one can have a space in himself where he not only doesn’t need to be consistently honored, but he can feel okay with insults. (And the truth is that every person anyhow will need to form a space in himself where he can handle insults.)

Of course, this will not help for handling extreme shame, and it is a high level if one can endure such insults (though there are certainly ways to accomplish it as well). But any person needs the basic level this, of having a space in himself which can handle insults. One can try working on this in areas where it is easier for him to accept the insult.

At first, it will feel painful to endure an insult, and he will inwardly cringe at it. When one is at this first stage, he should bear in mind that the suffering atones. But after getting used to this idea, one should then realize that the ability to endure insults is really building his soul, because it is helping him detach from the need to always be honored.

Each person is insulted on a different degree, depending on the situation and his personality. There are times where Hashem sends embarrassing situations to a person, where he will hear himself being insulted. Some are capable of being silent to insults, because they know that it is the will of Hashem to remain silent and not respond to the insult. Others can reach a deep place in the soul which does feel the pain of the insult, but they are happy even as they are being insulted, because they are aware that it is helping them detach from a need to always be honored.

This very idea (enduring insult), as any sensible person can recognize, is the root of rectifying the trait of honor.

### *Practically Working On This Concept*

Practically speaking, one should work on this in two stages. The elementary stage of it is to be silent

to insults, bearing in mind that it is the will of Hashem not to respond to the insults. The deeper level, after working on the first level, is to do so with the awareness that it is helping you detach from a need to always be honored. The goal of this is to form a space in your soul which can endure the pain of insults.

### *In Summary of the Two Steps in Detaching From the Dependency on Honor*

One therefore needs to develop the two points in him that we mentioned, which are two opposite extremes from each other: higher, non-physical pleasure, as well as knowing how to detach from the pleasure of honor.

If honor controls a person and he cannot detach from it, he is totally in the hands of the evil inclination. But if he can both identify the pleasure in honor as well as detach from it, he is balanced between the two extremes, and although he is still far from being detached from the need for honor, he will at least be on the level of being able to endure insults. He will be able to receive the insult, just as much as he can receive the pleasure of honor.

Of course, the insults will still feel hurtful to him; at times, it will certainly feel very painful. But at least he will know how to detach from the pleasure in honor. He can be above honor, because he has come to the realization that the need for honor doesn't have to control him.

### *Thriving In Old Age*

If a person works on these two points together – developing a space in the soul that knows of higher pleasure, which is not connected to the physical, along with developing a space in the soul that can endure insults – when he reaches old age, his spiritual element of “water” will strengthen, so his higher source of pleasure will remain intact; and although his “fire” will increase, it will not control him completely.

He might identify more with a need for honor, but the need for honor won't control him, because he will also be able to have a higher pleasure in enduring insults, for he can feel some degree of joy in it, when he knows that honor doesn't control him.

When this is all worked upon with an inner awareness about life, each year in a person's life will be another step in this lifelong process, and he will become mature on an inward level, slowly throughout his life. In this way, when a person reaches old age, he will understand that his element of “water” has naturally weakened, and that his element of “fire” has strengthened; he will have an inner awareness of where he must get to.

Understandably, the element of fire is always stronger in old age, but as we have explained here, it doesn't have to cause a person to completely be controlled by a need to always be honored (earth-of-water-of-fire). Instead, a person in old age can be well-equipped to deal with the need for honor when it comes, and he can train himself from his earlier years to detach from this need for consistent honor. He can have an inner awareness towards it already from before, to be “Who is wise? The one who sees what will be”, to prepare for himself the way that he needs to traverse when the time comes to traverse it.

Then he will be able to detach from the need to always be honored – before it arrives, as well as while he is going through it – and through this, he will not be permanently attached and weighed down by a need to be constantly honored.

### *In Conclusion*

In the younger years of life, often a person isn't that driven by a desire for honor, and therefore much of the words here will seem far from a person when he's in the earlier stages of life. Others will strongly identify with the words here, because they have more fire in their souls and therefore they identify well with the desire for honor.

But even those who don't identify with the words here should understand that the time will come when these matters will be relevant, when old age arrives and the need for honor will then make its appearance. One needs to become aware of how life is supposed to look like, the long path that life is - and to build his life accordingly, now; so that when the future arrives, he will be well prepared for it. Then he will thrive and be energetic even in his old age.

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