



Published on www.bilvavi.net

[Home](#) > Bilvavi Part 6 - Chapter 03 Nullifying Your i

Bilvavi Part 6 - Chapter 03 Nullifying Your i

Many Ways, One Goal

The essence of life is Hashem, who is found in our heart. Our mission is to reveal Him from within ourselves. There are many paths to get there.

Generally speaking, the mitzvos are the ways to get to Him. There are 613 Biblical commandments and 7 Rabbinical commandments; if so, there are altogether 620 ways to reveal Hashem.

Each of our forefathers had their own way as well. Avraham Avinu figured out the whole Torah by himself (*Beraishis Rabbah* 95:3), and that was one way. The Torah which we received at Har Sinai is another way. What both ways have in common, though, is that they are both about how to reveal Hashem.

The *Nefesh HaChaim* explains that the giving of the Torah didn't add anything new to our goal; the goal always remains the same - revealing Hashem. What the giving of the Torah revealed was how to get to Hashem, but the inner point, which is to reveal Hashem, never changes. It was unaffected by the sin of Adam.

The constant search always remains: to search for Hashem. The ways to get there are many; before the sin of Adam, there was a certain away to get there, and after the sin, the plan changed. Avraham Avinu's path was *chessed*, Yitzchok Avinu's path was *gevurah*, and Yaakov, (who is *emes*) is the synthesis of these two; Moshe Rabbeinu is the inner dimension of Yaakov's path. But the goal of getting to Hashem always remained the same.

The many ways to serve Hashem are only "garments" of the inner point they cover over, which is to search for Hashem. "Just like all faces are different, all *de'os* (opinions) are different" - there are many paths to "know" Hashem, but the common denominator between all the paths is that a person has to become close to Hashem. How we look for Hashem differs with each person, but What we look for is always the same.

This should be very clear. When we learn *sefarim hakedoshim*, especially the works of *Chassidus*, a person usually attempts to find himself in it. A person thinks, "My soul is rooted in Avraham Avinu, who is *chessed*", or "My soul is rooted in Yitzchok Avinu, who is *gevurah*." This is dangerous because people try to base their entire life on all kinds of speculations.

We must all know, however, that we have only one goal - to become close to Hashem. Where to start is a different issue, but what we search for should always be the same.

The Danger of Thinking About Yourself

The words here are deep matters about how to work with our soul.

Usually, when a person is more involved with Avodas Hashem (serving the Creator) and he seeks to improve, what happens is that he begins to become very self-absorbed. He thinks about himself all the time – about his spiritual situation, and he is totally absorbed in himself.

Now, if someone isn't an internal kind of person, he doesn't have this problem, and he just goes about his way with life. He also has desires for glory, but he's not immersed in himself, and he's just leading a superficial kind of life. He looks for outer kinds of desires, and he isn't connected to himself to begin with. He experiences jealousy, desire, and a longing for honor, but these are just desires to enter outside one self. A superficial person doesn't have the kind of problem we are describing.

Only an internal kind of person, who really seeks to serve Hashem better, is faced with the danger of becoming too self-absorbed. An internal kind of person really wants to know his soul, and he is critical of himself, as he is involved regularly with making a *cheshbon hanefesh* (soul accounting); each to his own. He wants to know who he is.

On one hand, this is wonderful; Chazal say, "Know the G-d of your father and serve Him", and it is written, "*From my flesh I see G-d.*" A person indeed must know himself well and what his soul is, so he can figure out in which way he should serve Hashem. Without this internal self-examination, a person just lives a superficial life.

On the other hand, when a person enters himself and he begins to clarify who he is, he wants to know very much what his "I" is, and this is apt to make him become very self-absorbed, and it can have disastrous results. It can either make person become very broken and sad, and if this doesn't happen, the opposite will happen - it can make him become haughty and arrogant, because he thinks he knows himself so well. Either of these is not the proper way we want to achieve.

When a person is too absorbed in himself, it can be said of him in a subtle sense the statement of Chazal, "I and him cannot dwell under one roof." Chazal say this of a *baal gaavah* (haughty person), but the root of haughtiness is when a person is absorbed in himself, and thus it can be said that Hashem doesn't want to be with someone who is self-absorbed.

When a person is truly humble, he doesn't that he thinks he's a nothing. True humility is that a person doesn't think about himself at all – he's not thinking about "I." He thinks only about Hashem, the Torah. and how to help other Jews – both physically and spiritually – and he takes his mind off himself.

When a person thinks very much about himself all the time, this itself prevents him from reaching the goal, which is to be close to Hashem.

"Ani" Vs. "Ayin"

We said in the beginning of this chapter that there are many methods on how to begin serving Hashem, but the end goal of all these ways is always the same: Hashem. What we really mean is as follows.

A person's "I" (*ani*) is to be used as a tool to get to the purpose, which is to reach Hashem. Our mission is not solely for the sake of building our "I". Just to be in it for the sake of developing our self is like how "the building of children demolishes" (Nedarim 40a). A person only reaches perfection

when he is totally divested of his ego; instead of *ani* (I), he has reached *ayin*, “nothingness.” Perfection is not when you build your “I” – it when you leave your “I”.

Perfection is not about building your “I”; it is rather about negating your “I”. This does not imply that one should feel low about himself; it is instead that a person should realize that he doesn’t live for himself, and that he is not meant to think and worry about himself.

This is the ideal situation which we are trying to achieve. The more a person enters into Avodas Hashem, if he becomes more self-absorbed in the process, although he gains in that he has left the materialism of this world, he has harmed himself in a way that is very hard to come out of.

If a person isn’t aware of this as he starts out in his Avodas Hashem, he will suffer from his self-absorption until the end of his life. This is like what is written, “*Until elderliness and old age, I will endure.*” His “I” will prevent him from any true progress, and his whole life he will only be interested in how his “I” come into the picture.

The recognition we are supposed to have, though, is that when we want to search for closeness to Hashem, we should know that this is the common goal of whatever we are doing. The more a person purifies his “I” and leaves his ego, the more he will leave with Hashem in his life, and come to the recognition of *Ain Od Milvado*, “There is nothing besides Hashem”.

“Your Face, Hashem, I seek”

We are stating this point at the beginning specifically, and not at the end. Simply speaking, our mission is to first build up our self and then nullify it. But it is really more than that. Instead of entering our “I” and then leaving it, it’s better to stay outside of the “I” altogether. This is because we must be clear in what we are searching for: are we just searching to find ourselves, or are we searching to find Hashem?

When a person hears that he has to work on his *middos*, if he has only a superficial perspective, he will likely groan to himself, “Oy, I have so many faults, I am full of so many problems I need to fix.” It is indeed true that no one is perfect, and that we all have areas we need to work on. If you ask a person why he wants to work on himself, he might respond, “Because I want to give pleasure to Hashem.” But the truth is that he is only working on himself for the concern of his own well-being. He views “working on himself” in the same way that he has to fix a broken machine. He is aware that “working on yourself” and “getting to know yourself” is part of serving the Creator, and thus he thinks about himself a lot and does all kinds of outer actions to try to improve himself.

This is an erroneous attitude.

We need to correct this outlook from the start and clarify what the goal here is, what we are really trying to arrive at.

If someone is really searching for Avodas Hashem, he must know that it’s not about himself. You don’t need to find yourself, and the only search you need to have is to search for Hashem.

When people want to know, “Who am I? What am I? What is my *shoresh haneshamah* (soul root)?” – people have all kinds of questions like this – it shows that the intention isn’t for the sake of coming to better their Avodas Hashem. They are seeking knowledge about themselves, and that is not the true depth of Avodas Hashem.

The proper attitude to have about self-knowledge is that knowing about yourself can definitely enhance your Avodas Hashem, but to be aware of what we are really searching for – Hashem. It is

written, “Your face, Hashem, I seek.” One should not be looking for his “I”, but for Hashem! Our mission is not to build ourselves; it is rather to realize that there is nothing else other than Hashem, and that we search for nothing other than Him.

Forgetting About Your “I” Is Personal Redemption

These words – that Avodas Hashem is not about you – can make a great change in your life. It can greatly help you – or it can backfire and make you sad.

If a person accepts these words in the way he should, he will feel like he has become free. When a person is involved in Avodas Hashem and he is immersed in himself in the process, upon seeing the words here he will feel like he is leaving Egypt. Many people who are involved in Avodas Hashem indeed feel like they are trapped inside their souls, and they want to be free of themselves.

When a person truly realizes the words here, he no longer thinks so much about himself, and he feels free inside.

Of course, a person still has to make a *cheshbon hanefesh* (soul accounting), but if one has succeed in leaving his ego as we have said, he will only have to do it for ten or fifteen minutes a day; the rest of the day, what is he thinking? Either he is free to think about Torah, or about Hashem. The point is that he will no longer be thinking about himself.

This will feel like a personal redemption inside oneself – when you forget about your “I” completely.

The truth is that even if a person would try to understand himself more and more, he would get even more confused the more he enters inward, and he will never succeed in knowing himself. The soul is “a piece of Heaven from above”, and just like we cannot comprehend Hashem, so is it impossible to fully understand our soul.

We are not only referring to the knowledge of secular psychology, which explains the lowest parts of our soul. Even in what our Sages revealed to us about our soul, we still don’t know what our soul is, because our soul is so deep and vast. “Hashem, the Torah and the Jewish people are one.” Our thoughts cannot comprehend Hashem, and the “Torah is vaster than the sea”; so is it impossible to understand our soul. If someone is trying to clarify his soul, he should know that he is dealing with something that he will never fully understand.

Maybe a person will counter: “Just like we try to understand the Torah even though it is so deep and vast, so must we try to understand our soul as much as we can!”

That is true, but we must know one thing. If a person is trying to understand the Torah, and he isn’t looking to find himself in it – he learns Torah *lishmah* – then he is fulfilling the purpose of Creation, which is to connect to the Creator. But if he learns it for personal reasons, like to gain honor, then he doesn’t become close to Hashem through learning the Torah.

The same attitude we must have when trying to learn about our soul. If we are trying to understand our soul in the same way that a person can look at another person – in other words, if we remain outside our ego – then we can enter this field of study. But if a person wants to know his soul simply because he wishes to enter deep into his self and understand himself – for that sake alone – then this comes from an egotistical desire, and he’s not acting *lishmah*. He will become very self-absorbed, and he will think the whole time that he is gaining and adding onto his knowledge, but he’s really just gathering air. All his work will be based on a faulty basis.

The goal of whatever we do, as we mentioned before and in the last chapter, is always to find

Hashem. This is the groundwork for all that we want to build upon. When a person wants to build a structure, he first needs a foundation. Hashem has to be the foundation of anything; the goal must always be about Hashem.

When a person builds all his Avodas Hashem based upon his "I" – his main interest is in getting to know himself better – than of him it can be said, "I (Hashem) and him cannot dwell under one roof."

If these words are understood well, they will make a total overhaul in your life.

Naturally, when a person wants to become close to Hashem, he starts by trying to develop his "I", but this is an erroneous mindset.

It is written, "*And as for me (v'ani), closeness to Hashem to me is good.*" It's possible that a person just focuses on the part of the possuk that says, "*as for me*" (v'ani), and he's not focused on the part that says, "*closeness to Hashem*"!

We do not mean to imply that if a person feels that he has some personal interests (*negios*) that he should disengage from Avodas Hashem, and never enter inward into himself. *Chas v'shalom!* Our intention here is rather to give the proper outlook on how to build our plan. If one feels that he has personal interests in this other than closeness to Hashem, he should *daven* to Hashem that these interests be removed, so that his motivations in this will be pure.

There is a very big difference between someone who has some *negios* to someone who is engaging in this only due to his *negios*. If a person basically has the right goal, which is to become close to Hashem, even if he has some *negios* as well, then he can *daven* to Hashem about this; there is actually no person who doesn't have some *negios*. Even Moshe and Aharon were commanded not to take *shochad* (bribery), and even the greatest *tzaddikim* can be affected by taking a bribe. No one can say he is totally pure from personal interests.

But if someone is only involved in Avodas Hashem entirely because he is concerned about self-knowledge, then everything he does will be based on his ego, and when everything stands on his *negios*, his plan will never come to fruition. Not only will it never finish – it never starts!

By contrast, someone who has the right thinking is aware that he also has some *negios*, but he is working to break them, and he knows that he needs Hashem to help him, and he implores Hashem for this. His Avodas Hashem will last, because he is truly searching for Hashem, not to find "himself."

This is the benefit that results from forgetting about your "I."

"The End of the Action Is First In The Thoughts"

If someone has a strong amount of ego in him, he will not enjoy hearing this. Since he's only in it for himself, when he hears that Avodas Hashem is not about "you", he is likely to lose all his interest in Avodas Hashem. He thinks to himself: "If I'm not getting anything out of this, what's the point?" It could be that he wants to become a great person and reach high levels, but it's all a kind of haughtiness (albeit subtle and more spiritual). Such aspirations don't purify a person.

We cannot run away from the truth. In the future redemption, we will see that the world was all created for Hashem's sake, and not for our sake. "*On My behalf I created.*" (Yeshayahu 48:1). The redemption will essentially be a personal redemption that will take place in each person's soul. When this point is revealed to each soul, Moshiach will then come. This inner point is the understanding that all of the universe was created by Hashem for Himself. **We were created for Hashem, not for ourselves.** This point will be fully understood in the future – and *that* will be the redemption.

When a person understands that he was created for Hashem, not for himself, he will be able to search only for Hashem and not for himself. So when all is said and done, every person has to learn to forget about himself, and to stop being concerned for his well-being. Understand that the center of our life should be Hashem, and it's not about you.

This is the goal of all our Avodas Hashem: not to arrive at your "I", but to be totally nullified of your "I" and to be integrated with Hashem, which is the state of *ayin* (nothingness).

If a person can't come to terms with this revelation, then there he will not be helped by any Avodas Hashem.

We all have to arrive at this understanding, and eventually, all of us will get there and become integrated with Hashem, divested totally from our ego. The only issue is, will we choose this on our own, or will we be forced to accept this fact by being purified through intense suffering, both in this world and in the next...?

We are not describing a "nice quality" to have, nor are we describing an act of *Chassidus* (piety). We are describing the very reality of Creation. These words are actually contained in the words of the *Mesillas Yesharim*, in the chapter about Chassidus (piety). But that doesn't make these matters "Chassidus." The *Mesillas Yesharim* already writes at the very beginning of his sefer that that we must realize that life is all about becoming close to Hashem. If so, the words here are not some high level that only comes later. It must be worked on even in the very beginning stage of Avodas Hashem.

If a person isn't prepared to accept that at the end of all this, he will not receive anything personally, and he thinks that he is doing a favor for Hashem by working on Avodas Hashem - then he is working against Chazal. He won't succeed.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner wrote in the name of the Vilna Gaon that if a person doesn't have any trace of *lishmah* (pure intentions) in his learning, he is prohibited to learn Torah! One is permitted to learn Torah *shelo lishmah*, if his intention is to arrive at *lishmah*. What does *lishmah* entail? It is when a person isn't learning to find himself, but Hashem. Although a person always have some *negios*, Chazal state that one should learn *shelo lishmah*, and one is not allowed to excuse himself from learning Torah with the fact that he isn't entirely *lishmah*. But we must know even at the beginning of learning that the purpose of learning is to eventually arrive at *lishmah*, and without this intention from the start, the Vilna Gaon writes that it is prohibited to learn Torah.

If a person never figured out that the purpose of learning Torah (and all of Avodas Hashem) is to arrive at *lishmah*, then all his learning is based on *shelo lishmah*, and such a person is actually not allowed to learn Torah. This is not *Chassidus*; it is the basis of Avodas Hashem. A person is allowed to begin with *shelo lishmah* if he aspires for *lishmah*, but as we know, "the end of the actions is first in the thoughts", and thus *lishmah* has to be our goal from the start.

What should first be in our thoughts? We need to know if the reason that we search for Hashem is because that will give us more gratification, or if we are searching for Hashem to find our His will.

These words aren't new. They are already written by the Vilna Gaon, as well as in all the *sefarim* of Chassidus. They are just written there in much shaper terms than how we have said it here. We must all know that our goal is to arrive at *lishmah* - both in how we serve Him and in learning Torah - and *lishmah* means that one isn't thinking about himself, but about Hashem. This is life itself, this is reality as it is!

It's possible that a person is learning Torah and abstaining from worldly pleasures, but he's still missing the whole point, because he isn't aware of the words here. A person might be learning a lot of

Torah, but that doesn't necessarily mean he is looking for Hashem in his life. Maybe he thinks, "One day, I will get there..."

Such a miracle doesn't happen by itself; if you never think about what *lishmah* is, you don't just go from *shelo lishmah* to *lishmah*. Although the sefarim describe the change as a miracle, this miracle never happens if you don't have a plan to get there.

Why Don't People Succeed?

This point is one of the big reasons that people never arrive at the truth, even though they are looking for Hashem in their life. People can work very hard for many years at trying to grow - each to his own - but only few people reach the true connection with Hashem.

Why? People claim it's because of laziness. We cannot say this is incorrect, but there is a more inner reason that holds people back. When a person wants to grow in Avodas Hashem but he has never fully clarified what he wants to achieve, then he won't be successful. You have to know what it is exactly that you want to achieve, before you embark on an endeavor.

This Needs A Long Time of Thinking

Maybe a person will say, "Okay, I tried a day or two to clarify what my goal is. Now what do I do, *l'maaseh* (practically speaking)?"

This question shows a lack of understanding what Avodas Hashem is.

Avodas Hashem is not a building contract. Although there is a rule that "the heart is pulled after the thoughts", and we need to do actions to influence our heart and purify it, we must know that this is only part of our job, and it is also not where we must begin with.

The beginning point is that before we start to work on ourselves, we need to know to where we are trying to go.

In order to accept this, if a person is truthful, then he should realize that it can take months even to think about this point. A superficial person will think "What's the big deal?" when he reads this, and immediately try to start improving Avodas Hashem. But if a person is truthful, he can feel that his soul wants the opposite. How many tears a person must cry in order to arrive at even a small percentage of truth, to really want to be in this for Hashem and not for himself!

There is nowhere else to run to. Hashem is here. It is just that we must not become wrapped up in ourselves, and then we will feel Hashem. If you nullify your "I", you will then feel Hashem every second in your life next to you.

This is an internal self-examination. It is a question of what we are really looking for. Even if a person understands the concept of nullifying his "I", is he actually prepared to give up his "I" in order to reveal Hashem in himself? Or does he want both - he wants Hashem, but he also wants his ego to remain...?

It's not that a person has to make a space in his heart for Hashem. That's not enough. If there are still traces of ego in a person, Hashem cannot enter there, and the soul will not be able to truly feel that there is nothing else besides for Hashem that exists.

If we want to feel Hashem in our self, we have to get rid of our "I". The more *lishmah* we uncover, the more room we give to Hashem to be revealed in us.

Chazal say that “There is nothing besides for Hashem – even in the space of the world.” There is an empty space in ourselves which doesn’t allow for Hashem to enter into it, and this is our traces of ego. But a person can give even that up for Hashem and allow Him to enter.

The words here require a lot of thought. Without this internal clarification process, it’s not possible to truly serve Hashem. If a person has at least ten percent, or even less, of a desire to give himself up for Hashem, he can then begin to truly serve Hashem.

May Hashem merit all of us to give up our self and give Him space to enter our souls, and through this, we will all merit the revelation of *Ain Od Milvado* – how there is nothing besides for Hashem.

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/bilvavi-part-6-chapter-03-nullifying-your-i>