



Getting to Know Your Thoughts - 018 Imagination Used for Holiness

Holy Imagination Is To Reveal What Already Exists

In the previous chapter, we explained how imagination can either be detrimental or positive. Generally, when a person imagines something new that doesn't exist, it is detrimental, but when a person expands an already existing concept further, it is a positive kind of imagination. If imagination is being used to make up something new, it cannot be positive. The only one who can make something new is Hashem, the Creator of the world.

Holy imagination is permitted because the person isn't coming up with something new; he is connecting himself to something that already exists. He is simply revealing a new perspective in something. This is in contrast to unholy imagination, which is when a person comes up with something that doesn't exist.

That is the basic idea we have said, and now we will elaborate on this.

Connecting To The Unlimited

This world is limited. A person by nature is limited, but there is a way for a person to connect himself to what is above our limits. One of the ways is to do this is through utilizing the imagination.

The prophets had an ability to picture Hashem (*Beraishis Rabbah* 27:1). Humans are limited, while the Creator is unlimited; the prophets connected to the *Ein Sof* (Endlessness) of Hashem, which is above the limits of a human being.

How can a human, who is limited, connect to the *Ein Sof* of Hashem, Who is unlimited? One of the ways is through utilizing the imagination in a positive way. This was the greatness achieved by the prophets, who used their imagination to connect to what was beyond their limits.

Let us explain this a bit more.

We have in our mind the the faculties of *Chochmah*, the root of our *seichel*/intellect, and *Binah*, the root of our imagination.

Our *seichel*/intellect connects to Hashem in a different way than we are discussing. With the intellect, a person connects himself to the *Chochmah*, and since *Chochmah* is endless, this gives a person a connection to the *Ein Sof* of Hashem.

But we are currently discussing a different kind of connection to the *Ein Sof* – the connection through our power of *Binah*, the root of our imagination.

Chochmah and *Tevunah* (which is lower use of *Binah*) are different in that *Chochmah* gives a person is to conceptualize something without picturing it, while *Tevunah* is to picture an image in order to

understand it. *Chochmah* arranges information to a person, but it doesn't give a person a picture of it. *Tevunah* is what gives a person a picture. Now we can understand that imagination [when it used for holiness] is essentially giving a person a picture of what is above the limits of the world.

Chochmah uses our intellect. It is able to connect a person to the unlimited as follows. A person is able to comprehend a lofty concept a little, and by holding onto a little of the concept, it is like he is holding onto all of it. Even though the intellect is limited, the intellect is able to understand a little more each time. The whole entire idea of the intellect is that a person uses his intellect to try to understand something which is unlimited and endless.

But with *Binah*, a person is picturing something. A picture by definition is something which is limited. If something is unlimited, it doesn't have a picture. But if it can be pictured, it must be that it is limited. How then can a person picture something which is unlimited?

This is where imagination comes in. Imagination is the force which expands one's limits. How does this work? The imagination isn't really overcoming one's limits, but what it does is give a person a new picture, something more than before. This is the deep definition of holy imagination.

Defining Evil Imagination and Holy Imagination

The question is, how can a person picture something which doesn't exist? If it does exist, and a person is picturing it, then it's not imagination! So why is it considered using the imagination?

If a person can't see something which is real, so he imagines it instead, it isn't totally imagination. Why? Total imagination is to imagine something which doesn't exist. If a person never saw a chair in his life and he imagines how it must look – and he succeeds in imagining it – can we say that it's all his imagination? There is some use of imagination here, but it's not total, because the chair exists. Total imagination is to imagine something which doesn't exist and tries to picture it.

But this begs another question. If imagination is only considered imagination when it's total, then how can it ever be holy? Isn't a total imagination always a lie?

There are two answers for this.

One reason is as follows. If a person imagines something for holiness, and he is **aware** that he is still within the **bounds** of imagination – then it is holy and proper. There is nothing wrong with this. It is only if the person in his imagination considers what he is imagining to be real – **then** his imagination is evil.

Those are the rules for holy imagination – as long as one is aware that it's not real, the imagination is positive and it is being used for holiness. If a person thinks that what he is imagining is actually happening because he is imagining it, he is acting mentally ill.

Still, it is very hard to understand how imagination can ever be holy. If it's not really happening, then why are we allowed to imagine it?!

Holy Imagination - Connecting Yourself To What Is Beyond

In all of Creation, there are two kinds of forces: a *koach*, potential force and a *poel*, active force. Reality is a *poel*; imagination is only a *koach*. In actuality, what we imagine for holiness isn't taking place; it is also something that can potentially happen. By contrast, when someone imagines for evil purposes, he is saying that it is actually taking place in reality when it isn't.

To illustrate this idea, we know that there are many different ways to combine the letters of the *Aleph-Beis* (*tzirufei ha'osiyos*). We do not know how to combine them, but in potential, there exists many different ways to combine them; we just aren't aware of them and don't know how to do it. In the future all will be revealed; but a person's imagination can show him all the different potential ways to combine them.

The prophets received their prophecy through the holy kind of imagination. They would take the holy letters that they received and combine them, forming ideas. They weren't inventing anything new – they were simply collecting and combining all of the facts in front of them, forming the conclusions based on already existing ideas. Thus, holy imagination isn't anything new; the only thing new here is the way they would combine their information, but they weren't inventing anything from the imagination. They were expanding a potential concept.

So holy imagination is for a person to connect himself to a place that is beyond where you are. The holy kind of imagination is the power to conjure up images and pictures of something that **already** exists. This is also known as *Tziyur*, the ability to imagine the World-to-Come by thinking about it in a very real sense.

The Sages say that *techeiles* is blue, because when a person sees the blue color, he will be reminded of the sea, which reminds him of the sky, which will remind him of the *kisei hakavod* (Throne of Glory) – and this will bring one to have fear of Heaven. This is clearly the use of imagination; no one has ever seen the *kisei hakavod*. But since every person's soul is rooted in the *kisei hakavod*, a person can connect himself to this unseen reality by using the holy kind of imagination. In such imagination, a person isn't coming up with anything new. He is merely combining all the information in front of him and expanding it, until he arrives at a greater conclusion of what he started out with.

To summarize: If I am connecting myself to a reality that does not exist, it is evil imagination. If I am connecting to myself to a reality that exists, just that it is above my comprehension – that is holy imagination.

Only Emunah Enables The Holy Imagination

Now that we have understood that, we can come to understand a deeper point.

In our mind, there is *seichel* (intellect) and there is our imagination. Our intellect is based on reality; it proves to us that something exists, even if we don't really comprehend it. If our intellect cannot feel the proof of something, then we cannot connect to the information using our intellect. A person would swear that he saw something, because his intellect has proved it to him and he is willing to swear over it.

Imagination works differently. In the evil kind of imagination, a person imagines something which doesn't exist and attempts to turn it into reality. This is actually the roots of idol worship! By contrast, holy imagination is to imagine something which exists, but it is something which is above one's comprehension, and through the imagination, one can connect himself to that reality.

If something is above one's comprehension, then his intellect cannot prove that it exists. So how does a person know that it does exist? This is the role of *Emunah*. *Emunah* is what is enabling one to connect to facts he doesn't see.

Holy imagination makes use of our *Emunah*; it shows a person that certain fact exists because he believes in it, even though he has no comprehension of it. If a person can't comprehend a certain concept, how can he connect himself to it? Through *Emunah*.

Holy Imagination Requires Emunah

Having understood that, we can speak about another point which results from this.

Emunah is the power we have which can shatter boundaries. It is brought in the *sefarim hakedoshim* that "The point where the *seichel* ends is where *Emunah* begins." A person's intellect brings a person up until where he can really understand, and a person's *Emunah* is able to take him and connect him to the point beyond his intellectual comprehension.

On a deeper note, *Emunah* is necessary in order to shatter any limit. Even a person's *Chochmah* requires *Emunah* if a person wants to connect to the *Ein Sof*. When a person understands as much as he possibly could, he has reached the end of his *Chochmah*; he believes that really his *Chochmah* is deeper than what he actually comprehends, so he uses his *Emunah* to connect to what is beyond his comprehension. This is essentially because a person believes that the Torah is vaster than the earth and the sea – he uses his power of *Emunah* to believe that there is more to what he is capable of understanding.

Since holy imagination can only work through *Emunah*, and holy imagination goes beyond our intellectual limitations, it is thus self-evident that holy imagination and *Emunah* work together. *Emunah* is what shatters the limits, and the holy imagination is how a person pictures the information of what is beyond the limits.

It seems that *Emunah* and holy imagination are the same thing, but they are not. Holy imagination is based on one's *Emunah*, step-by-step. The first step is that a person believes that a certain concept exists. When a person is told that a certain animal exists in another country and he has never seen it, he can believe the person, but how does he know how it looks? He imagines how it must look. So a person's power to believe, *Emunah*, is what gives a fact credibility, and then a person's imagination comes and pictures the fact.

This we can see from the statement of *Chazal* that looking at *techeiles* reminds a person of the *kisei hakavod*. No one has ever seen the *kisei hakavod*, so how does this work? It is because we have *Emunah*, and we know that it exists. Then we use our imagination to picture it, by seeing *techeiles*.

The point from all this is to realize that imagination can only be holy if it is coming from our *Emunah*.

How Holy Imagination Can Be Dangerous

However, even if a person has *Emunah*, imagination can always be dangerous, even when it is being used for holiness.

It is written (Devarim 4:15), "For you did not see any image on the day Hashem spoke to you at *Chorev*, amidst a fire." Hashem gave a special warning at Har Sinai that we must not make anything in His image; this was because at Har Sinai, the Jewish people were all prophets and were able to picture beyond their understanding. When a person is at this level, he is warned by Hashem not to picture the *Ein Sof* of Hashem.

An ordinary person, who only recognizes what he is familiar with, isn't capable of picturing Hashem; for him there is no such warning. But there is a warning and prohibition from Hashem to a person who is more advanced and has reached *Emunah*: he can imagine what is **until** the *Ein Sof* ("Endlessness") of Hashem, but not the actual *Ein Sof* of Hashem.

On a simple level, this is because such a person (who has indeed reached *Emunah*) is in danger of getting caught up in his imagination. But on a deeper level, we need to be cautious with our

imagination, even if we already have *Emunah* and even if we are using it for a holy purpose; a person is not allowed to picture Hashem, even if he has *Emunah*.

If a person does not build his imagination upon his *Emunah*, he is missing a part of the equation. That is one kind of problem. But then there is a more complicating problem, and that is when one already has *Emunah*. Such a person is in danger of picturing the *Ein Sof* of Hashem, and to such a person there is a special warning.

Therefore even when we do have *Emunah*, we must be cautious and not try to picture the *Ein Sof*. Until that point, we can use our imagination – but not beyond that.

Holy Imagination Protects A Person From The Yetzer hora

It is written (*Tehillim* 104:24), “All of them You made with wisdom.” If everything is up to Hashem, how do we have any free will? We will explain this.

The *Gemara* (*Sotah* 2a) says that a person only sins when a *ruach shtus*, “spirit of folly” enters him. On a simple level this means that a *ruach shtus* enters him and removes his wisdom. The Ramchal writes (in *sefer Derech Etz Chaim*) that if people would really know what a sin is, no one would ever sin. How is it then that people could sin? It is only because a *ruach shtus* enters a person and makes a person lose his mind temporarily.

But on a deeper note, it is because a person only sins when he imagines something; if a person wouldn't imagine, he wouldn't come to sin!

Before we spoke about the *Yetzer hora* (the evil inclination); we mentioned that the whole influence of the *Yetzer hora* to convince a person to sin is through the imagination. For example, the *Yetzer hora* caused the people to sin by showing a picture of Moshe Rabbeinu's coffin in the sky, which put them in a state of despair.

The *Yetzer hora* uses imagination to get people to sin; the only way we can really utilize our free will on this world and have a chance against evil is by fighting the *Yetzer hora* with its very strategies. We need to develop our own kind of holy imagination and fight our evil imagination, which the *Yetzer hora* uses to attack us with.

Even if a person has *seichel*/intellect as well as *Emunah*, without developing holy imagination a person doesn't stand a chance against evil temptations.

The *Yetzer hora* bases all its tactics to get us to sin, through getting us to imagine. *Chazal* say (*Nedarim* 32b) that “At the time when the *Yetzer hora* is present, there is no one who can remember his *yetzer tov*.” When evil begins to tempt a person, a person's intellect leaves him and instead a *ruach shtus* enters him.

What should a person do then when he is being confronted with evil passions of the *Yetzer hora*? What remains left in a person when his mind is gone?

The only thing a person can have left in him when he has no intellect is his imagination. If he has developed a holy kind of imagination, he will be able to have protection from the *Yetzer hora* when it comes.

How does this work? We mentioned before that the intellect remains in a person because of our power of memory (*zocheir*). Our imagination, however, is retained through our power of “protection” (*shoimer*). So even when a person loses his memory of what's right and wrong, his imagination is

protected. If he has a holy kind of imagination, his holy imagination remains imprinted in him even when his intellect is gone.

The more a person has worked to develop a holy imagination, the bigger mark he leaves on his mind, and the more *Yiras Shomayim* (fear of Heaven) he will have to fight the *Yetzer hora*.

In a time of *mochin d'gadlus*, a person has more *Yiras Shomayim*, because a person's intellect is working. But when a person is in a weak state of mind (*mochin d'katnus*) – how can a person fight his *Yetzer hora*'s evil thoughts? The *Yetzer hora* is attacking and waging a full-fledged war with the person; how can a person fight with no mind?!

The way to fight is by using one's imagination. This is an inner fight between the two kinds of imagination inside you. Your holy imagination will be fighting the evil imagination – it will be a war with the two kinds of imagination. So you have to develop your weapons before the enemy attacks...

This is the real meaning of *Yiras Shomayim*; it is the imprint left on a person even when his thinking mind isn't functioning right now. If a person only develops his intellect but he hasn't developed the imagination, then he will only win over the *Yetzer hora* when his intellect is working. In a time of *mochin d'katnus*, though, his intellect is gone, and he has no ammunition with which to be protected from the *Yetzer hora*.

The Sages^[1] say that “the wicked are ruled by their Evil Inclination”. What does this mean? The depth of it is that wicked people are the ones who fall into their imagination; they will thus always lose to the Evil Inclination. But the righteous prevail over the *Yetzer hora* – how? Because they have *Emunah* together with their imagination. This leaves an **imprint** on them even when they lose their intellect, and that imprint is known as *Yiras Shomayim*.

The power of *Yiras Shomayim* is accessed by the righteous – and for all who have *Emunah*, together with holy imagination – and this can fight the *Yetzer hora*, even when one's intellect has left him.

The *Yetzer hora*'s entire strength is the power of imagination that it uses on a person. When a person doesn't have *Emunah*, his imagination isn't strong enough to overpower the evil imagination of the *Yetzer hora*, and he falls to the *Yetzer hora* in a weak state of mind, like when he is in a time of *mochin d'katnus*.

This is the function that our lower kind of holy imagination serves.

The Higher and Lower Kinds Of Holy Imagination

In the previous chapters, we have addressed one kind of holy imagination, which was a higher kind of imagination. But now we are discussing the lower use of our holy imagination, which is to use our imagination to fight the *Yetzer hora*.

In the first kind of holy imagination we have been discussing, a person is able to transcend his limits. The second kind of imagination doesn't take a person beyond his limits, but it serves a different purpose: to protect one's mind. This is necessary for a person to protect himself from evil desires (the *Yetzer hora*).

If a person doesn't learn how to use his imagination to protect himself from the *Yetzer hora*, then he has “successes and failures.” When he is in a time of *mochin d'gadlus* – when he is in a higher state of mind – he will overcome evil desires, but when he is in a time of *mochin d'katnus*, the lower state of mind, he will fall....

The only thing that can protect a person from the *Yetzer hora* is to develop the holy kind of imagination.

How Hashem helps a person overcome the Yetzer hora

The *Gemara* (*Sukkah* 52a) says, “The Evil Inclination of a person gets stronger every moment, and if not for Hashem helping him, it would be impossible to overcome it.” Why is it impossible to overpower the *Yetzer hora* without the help of Hashem?

On a simple level it is because the *Yetzer hora* is an angel, while we are only human beings, and we cannot fight an angel, who is much stronger than us. That is true, but now it is clearer to us: the *Yetzer hora* succeeds in taking away a person’s intellect, and the person is left only with his imagination. Since he has no intellect, it’s as if he’s not a person; he has no *Chochmah* left in him right now, and his imagination by itself cannot help him.

It is written, “*A tzaddik falls seven times and gets up.*” If a person is always in control of his mind, he will be able to win against the *Yetzer hora* – he can fall, but he also “gets up.” But the average person isn’t always in control of his mind, and when the *Yetzer hora* comes, he always falls. He loses his free will, and what does the *Yetzer hora* do? It takes away his mind and makes him imagine. This is the problem; what can we do about this, and how indeed can we deserve Hashem’s help?

On a simple level, the way to understand this is that a person receives *Siyata D’Shmaya*, direct assistance from Hashem to fight the *Yetzer hora*. This is true, but there is more depth to this.

The deeper understanding of how Hashem helps a person fight the *Yetzer hora* is as follows. When Hashem helps the person, He gives him new abilities to fight. These abilities are beyond the normal limits known to a person. With these new God-given abilities a person is able to fight the *Yetzer hora*. The question is: how does a person enable himself to receive the help from Hashem?

This is when we try our best to fight it. When Hashem sees we are trying, He helps us. How do we try?

There is a statement in *Chazal*, “Open for Me an opening the size of a needle, and I will open for you an opening the size of an entranceway.” There is also a statement in *Chazal*, “It is not upon you to finish the task, but you are not exempt from being idle from it.” All of this is true, but we must understand how it works.

By developing a holy imagination, a person receives help from Hashem and acquires the ability to go beyond the normal human limits of the mind. The entire issue during the fight with the *Yetzer hora* is if a person will try to develop a holy imagination **before** the *Yetzer hora* attacks, when his intellect is working properly – when he is in a state of *mochin d’gadlus*. If a person developed his holy imagination, Hashem helps him when he is in a time of *mochin d’katnus*, when the *Yetzer hora* attacks; the person will then be able to go above his limits and overpower the *Yetzer hora*’s evil kind of imagination.

The Only Way To Fight The Yetzer hora

There are two ways that people have to fight the *Yetzer hora*. One way is unsuccessful, and the other way is the one that works.

The unsuccessful way is when a person simply tries to “avoid” the *Yetzer hora* and makes “boundaries” for himself so that he won’t encounter the *Yetzer hora*. For example, a person will daven a lot to Hashem to be saved from the *Yetzer hora*; this can definitely help him avoid the *Yetzer hora*, but what will he do when the *Yetzer hora* comes to him? A person’s boundaries that he has set up for

himself cannot be enough to protect him from the *Yetzer hora*, who is unlimited in its power. The *yetzer hora* is a mighty angel whom it is impossible to defeat with even the strongest human perseverance.

If someone with unlimited strength is fighting you, how do you fight such an enemy??

The successful way is to fight the *Yetzer hora* with the same kind of tactics it is using! If the *Yetzer hora* is using forces against you that are unlimited, you can only fight it with an equally opposing force that is unlimited.

When a person is being tested with a difficult temptation, the only way he can overcome it is only if he has developed a holy imagination before the situation comes. Without holy imagination, a person will definitely fall to the *Yetzer hora*.

When a person is facing an evil temptation, he loses his very free will. If so, what is our free will on this world? Our whole free will is to *choose to prepare for battle*, **before** evil strikes.

You can't come to a war without any weapons. You can *daven* to be saved, but there isn't much you can do if you didn't prepare. When you go to war, you need to prepare for it; you can't come into a war without any previous training. You need a lot of preparation before the enemy strikes if you want to defeat it. This is a full-blown war, and it needs training before the enemy attacks. The way you train for this war is through developing a holy imagination beforehand.

This is our entire choice on this world whenever we speak of how to avoid the *Yetzer hora*. If we try to develop a holy imagination beforehand, we will have help from Hashem when our mind is weak and the *Yetzer hora* attacks. We need to develop our holy imagination, in addition to our *seichel* and our *Emunah*, which we spoke about earlier.

This is the way that people with *Yiras Shomayim* used to fight the *Yetzer hora*; they worked very hard on developing their holy kind of imagination.

We are **not** giving advice here on how to win over the *Yetzer hora*. We cannot tell a person **exactly** how to fight the *Yetzer hora*. When the *Yetzer hora* attacks a person with evil imaginative thoughts, it is an internal war; it is a war going on in one's very imagination, and it is a fight between good and evil imagination. But what we can tell a person is to learn how to **prepare** for war - by **trying to develop** a holy kind of imagination, a person can have a chance against the *Yetzer hora* when it attacks.

Our Goal Is To Develop A Constant Reality Of Holy Imagination

How does a person develop the holy kind of imagination?

There are people who develop their holy imagination, but only because they want to be able to fight their *Yetzer hora*. We cannot say this is incorrect to do, but that shouldn't be our entire purpose here. Holy imagination isn't only necessary as a tool to fight the *Yetzer hora*.

It is true that we need to fight the *Yetzer hora*, but we need to build up our holy kind of imagination for other purposes as well. We are trying to achieve a **constant** state of holy imagination - to **live** it.

How can a person do this?

Most people have a disconnection between their intellect and their imagination. They are either using only their intellect or only their imagination, and do not see a connection between the two. But the

true way to live is by “clothing” our intellect with our imagination.

We will give a simple example of this. When a person is learning in *Gemara* about a case in which an ox gores a cow, he should picture the cow and the ox and how they are goring each other. Anyone can picture this, because everyone knows what an ox and a cow is, so they can also picture a scene of goring (even though most people haven't seen this happen).

A person should get used to picturing something, both with his mind and with his imagination. This is a very basic kind of imagination. If you know how something looks, get used to picturing it with your mind more. This will get you used to imagining something. (We must warn that sometimes a person can get carried away with his imagination and imagine things that are improper, so a person should be careful.) As you get used to doing this more, you will be able to acquire an ability to give a mental picture to everything. The more and more a person does this, the more he develops his imagination.

It is impossible to give specific instructions how to do this, but there is one thing which applies to all people: whenever you encounter information, picture it also. This is called *temunas haseichel* – “picture of the mind.”

We must mention again a warning: these matters are very subtle, and if a person overdoes it he will end up picturing something which really he shouldn't be picturing. For example, he will want to picture how the angels look, which is dangerous to do and causes one to live in his imagination.

In Conclusion

Let us summarize what we have learned about the holy kind of imagination.

Imagination is holy when a person isn't making up new facts. It is to connect oneself to something which exists, and what it essentially accomplishes is that it reveals a fact to a person. It is not actually taking place, but it shows a person the idea behind it.

In order to reveal potential concepts, we need to get used to picturing facts, both with our mind and with our imagination. As we get used to this, we are able to train our mind to actually picture the facts. This will get our mind to work together with the imagination. This refines our imagination more and more. The more we use our minds to picture a fact, the more refined our imagination will become, and it will be able to be a tool for our mind.

We have been brief about this last detail (*temunas haseichel*) because it is usually meant for certain individuals who are at the level of doing it. We have thus only given the general outline of the concept without getting into too many of the details.

May Hashem merit all of us to reach the most perfect kind of Chochmah, Binah, Tevunah - and to the holy kind of imagination.

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/getting-know-your-thoughts-018-imagination-used-holiness>