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## Getting to Know Your Thoughts - 001 Basis of Building Thought

### ***Our Goal - Reaching Our Soul So That We Can Become Close To The Creator***

We will attempt to study the power of *machshavah* (thought) in a person.

*"The end of actions is first with thoughts"*. First we need to learn what the purpose of this study is before we learn about what it is.

The purpose of learning about our thoughts is not for the sake of developing our thoughts, but it is only a **tool** to reach a greater purpose – to reach **our soul**.

There are three parts to the soul – the *Nefesh*, the *Ruach* and the *Neshamah*. To be specific, the *Nefesh* is located in the liver, the *Ruach* is in the heart, and the *Neshamah*, which is the Godly intellect of a person, is located in the brain<sup>[1]</sup>; the *Neshamah* is the highest part of our soul. Building up our mind is thus essentially to reveal our *Neshamah*. The reason why we should want to reveal our *Neshamah* is because we want to become close to Hashem. The Rambam<sup>[2]</sup> writes that we are attached to Hashem only through our minds, and that is why we should want to develop our mind.

In short, that is the purpose of this book. We will now, with the help of Hashem, begin to explain the foundations of how we build our power of thought.

### ***Our Thoughts Can Take Us Beyond Our Limits***

What are our thoughts? Thoughts are termed by the Sages as “a bird flying in the sky.” A person can be lifted up by his thoughts and fly away from where he is, when he thinks of something that isn't in front of him.

All of the physical senses – such as smell, hearing, and speech – have limits. The root of all senses is the brain, but the brain itself can go above limits. Thoughts are not limited to any one place or time – a person sits in one place, but his thoughts can go to another place. This is why thoughts are called “a bird that flies in the sky”, because thoughts can fly above all boundaries!

However, the disadvantage to our thoughts is that we can fly too much with them. Our thoughts, if unbalanced, will be unstable and fly around too much, just like birds that can fly wherever they please.

We are referring to the problem of *dimyonos* – imagination. When a person's thoughts take him too far, he enters into his imagination. Reb Yisrael Salanter<sup>[3]</sup> wrote that a person's imagination roams around to go wherever it pleases – which is detrimental. Our thoughts can take us away to faraway places that we should not go – the imagination. Most people who have not worked on developing their thoughts are wandering around with their mind, and their minds are lacking stability.

When it comes to our abilities to act and talk, most people are able to stay focused. But when it comes to our thoughts, people usually don't focus and go from one subject to another in their minds, and all this takes places very quickly.

This is why we see that most people who haven't worked to build their thoughts have a problem in that their heads are wandering around all day with all types of thoughts. They are lacking a stability in their thoughts.

When it comes to our actions, we don't jump too quickly from one action to another; we stay focused on what we are doing before we start something else. When we talk, we usually do not jump from one kind of conversation to another within three words; we focus on the topic at hand. But when it comes to thoughts, we think many different things in one minute!

This is unlike our actions and our speech, which we usually don't lose focus on. Of course, our actions and our speech could also use some improvement, but with our thoughts we can see clearly that we are jumping around too much.

If a person goes over what he thought about the entire day, he would discover that he thought about

thousands of different things each day. Our thoughts literally fly around like birds in the sky.

### ***Forming A Place In Our Mind To Build Our Thoughts***

If we don't develop our thoughts, they wander to far-away places that we shouldn't go - places which our mind doesn't belong in.

It is written (Mishlei 24:3), "*With wisdom you shall build a house.*" In order to build anything, one needs wisdom. If a person's thoughts are roaming around, he lacks structure to his mind.

The root of this is really because ever since Adam sinned, the world became mixed up with good and evil, and so our thoughts as well are all mixed up. This affected our thoughts to become shaky and unstable, lacking a certain groundwork to hold it up.

In order to build up our thoughts properly, we need to first build a foundation to lay the ground upon. Just like when you want to build a building you first clear a big space on the ground so you can have a foundation to build it on, so do we need spiritual groundwork in order to build up our thoughts.

This is the root of beginning to build it - we need the ground to build it upon. Without this solid foundation, our thoughts will not last, just like a building that isn't founded on anything; it will topple over.

If we try (and with the help of Hashem, we should succeed) to build and understand what this groundwork for our thoughts is, then we will be able to have the groundwork to be able to build our thoughts. But before we learn how to actually build our thoughts, first we must know what the groundwork of it is.

### ***The Effect Of Our Thoughts***

Before we` build up our thoughts, first we need ground to lay upon its structure. This groundwork we need is essentially to enter a new world. We need to enter a whole different world if we are to begin building our thoughts.

The ground we need to build upon our thoughts with is not from this physical world. Just like if you go to the moon you will find different material there than on the earth, so will we need different material to build our thoughts -- a spiritual kind of material. We will explain what this is.

What is this groundwork we will need? People usually think that thoughts aren't real. We think, let's say, if we have to do something or not...but what we actually think doesn't seem to be reality. But the truth is that thoughts are real. How do we see this?

The Sages (*Avodah Zarah* 20b) warn a person not to think lewd thoughts during the day, because if he thinks such thoughts, he will become contaminated at night. Why does this happen? It is because when he had these thoughts, these thoughts were like reality to him. The reality of these thoughts are revealed at night in his sleep.

Thoughts are reality. In the example of one who thinks about forbidden thoughts, we see this in an evil usage. But the very reality of our thoughts can be either evil or good.

In the case of one who thinks evil, he is laying the "ground" for his thoughts by giving in to his thoughts for an evil desire. The evil thoughts are then built up on this ground, and eventually he will commit evil acts as well from those thoughts. He absorbs the evil thoughts during the day, which lays the groundwork for the building of further evil thoughts.

From a superficial viewpoint, thoughts seem to be intangible. But from an inner viewpoint, which is the truth, there is nothing more clearly felt than a thought.

### ***Thoughts Experienced Through The Imagination***

If we don't consider our thoughts to be tangible, then we cannot build our thought. If a person only imagines that he is building something, when he's done imagining he will see that he hasn't built anything.

If a person is still at the level of imagination, then even his very thoughts are imagination, and he can't build anything. He will only be imagining that he is building up something. Such a person, even if he is in thinking mode and not in imagination mode, is at the level of imagination, and thus all his thoughts are built upon imagination.

When a person lives in imagination, like when he is in a dream, it is clear that it's imagination. But the truth is that a person can still be in his imagination even when he's actually thinking, because his soul is still at the level of imagination. He has no groundwork to lay his thoughts upon and he doesn't realize the reality of thoughts. If a thought isn't perceived as real, it can essentially be defined as imagination.

This we can see from toddlers who play with each other a game. As they play, they are living in a world of imagination. In their eyes, imagination is reality. It is not only children who are like this, but all people are like this if they do not properly build up their power of thought. It is written (*Tehillim* 126:1), "*We were like dreamers.*" Imagination mainly takes place in our dreams, but all people who do not develop their minds are thinking entirely through the prism of their imagination.

When a person is imagining something, he knows for sure it's in his imagination. But when a person thinks that he has to do something, he thinks that this is a definite thought and not in his imagination. But really, he is in a sense still imagining it, because his soul is still at the level of imagination.

To illustrate what we mean, let's say a person has a dream about something, and then he wakes up in the morning. He knows for sure that what he dreamed about isn't real. But then you can have a person that dreams that he got up in the morning and went to daven. Although he's dreaming about a thought, for all purposes it's still imagination, because he only dreamed about it. This brings out the idea we are saying, that even when a person thinks about something, it is still rooted in his imagination, because his very thinking is still at the level of imagination.

It is written, "*For you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return.*" A man, *adam*, which comes from the word *adamah* (earth), comes from the word *dimayon* (imagination). This shows us that a man by nature is linked to imagination.

Although we all have the power to think and the power to imagine, our thinking is generally experienced through our imagination when we don't work to develop it. If we don't have the groundwork to build our thoughts, then all our building will be based on imagination, and all our work will just be imagined. The Gemara tells of a story in which two people were sitting on top of an island, and suddenly the island flipped over and there was no more island. It was really a whale, and they had been sitting on it all along without realizing. If we don't consider thoughts to be real, we can't build anything upon it, and any improvement we will try to make will just be imagined.

Of course, if you ask any person if his thoughts are being imagined or not, he will answer no. He will say that a thought which you don't consider real is definitely not being imagined, and it must be that there are three kinds of thoughts: real thoughts, unreal thoughts and imagination. If he thinks so, then even his thoughts are being imagined.

In order to build up our thought we first need the groundwork for it. This is when we consider thoughts to be real.

### ***How We Can See The Reality of Our Thoughts***

In order to realize this reality we are saying, we need to contemplate it a lot. But even before we do that, we need something else that precedes it.

To illustrate, at first a person has a small space of ground and builds a little structure on it. Then if he wants to make it bigger, he clears more ground so he can expand his structure. So the first little ground we will need to start out with is to realize that thoughts are a reality and they are not being imagined.

We can see this from the example of imagining evil thoughts during the day, which have effects on a person at night. When it comes to evil, it is clear that thoughts have a real effect on reality, but when it comes to good it is not so clear to us if thoughts affect reality. This is because the power of thought has fallen to evil, as a result of Adam's sin.

Chazal say that "sinful thoughts are worse than sin." How can this be? It is because a sinful thought is not just to think about sinning, but it becomes a reality to the person. The reality of these evil thoughts are revealed to the person, so in a sense, just to think about it is worse than committing it. The thoughts are a higher power in a person than one's actions, and thus a sinful thought is considered a more grave error than the action of sin itself.

If a person has thought to eat *chametz* on Pesach but he didn't commit the sin, he is not as bad as someone who did commit the sin, for all practical purposes. But when it comes to certain sins, such as idol worship and lustful thoughts, Chazal consider the thought about it to be worse than committing the act. To think about idol worship is just as bad as committing it, and to think lustful thoughts is like committing it because it causes a change in the body that brings one to sin.

When one absorbs this, he begins to enter the world of thought. We are not yet speaking how to build the world of thought, just how to begin entering it. If a person begins to absorb this concept just a little, he already is beginning to realize that thoughts are real, and he has the groundwork with which to build his thoughts on.

Until now we have explained how our soul can view our power of thought; now we will speak about it on an intellectual level. But we should stress here that this can only be comprehended if one is ready to accept that there is a reality called thoughts.

We all know that the ground is real. We can sense it. How can a person know that thoughts are real?

We have three parts to our self: our actions, our speech and our thoughts. Our actions we are aware of. Our speech might be considered like actions; there is an argument in the Gemara if speech is an action. If you ask someone if speech is real, he might not be sure. Yet we can bring proof that speech is real, because Chazal say that Hashem carries out what *tzaddikim* say. We also know that a person can use his speech to acquire something, like calling an animal to come to him. Although this is hard for us to understand, still we know that speech is real.

But when it comes to our thoughts, a person doesn't consider them to be real at all. We don't see our thoughts, and we don't know what others are thinking. We have a hard time knowing what our own thoughts are. People thus have a hard time seeing how thoughts are real.

How can we then see the reality of thoughts, using our intellect?

When Hashem created the world, He created it in three steps: first He used his wisdom, then His speech, and then His actions. These are the three parts to the world - wisdom\thought, speech, and action.

If Hashem used thought to create the world, this tells us something about thoughts. We think that thoughts are just a tool we use to do something, but really, thoughts keep something going.

To illustrate, we don't see thoughts in a table; we are just aware that someone had to think in order to make this table. Although that is true, there is more to this. Really, if there would be no thoughts even presently in this table, it can't exist!

This is something our mind needs to understand: when you see something in front of you, be aware that it is made up of three things: the action in it, the speech in it, and the thought in it. Hashem created each thing with action, speech and thought; there is still a thought present in each thing.

The classical example of this is the miracle with the *Aron* (Ark) that it was able to lift itself and didn't need others to carry it. Inside the *Aron* were the *Luchos* (Tablets). The depth of this is that inside an action, there are thoughts. The thoughts are the wisdom in something, and it is the wisdom behind something which keeps it going.

Everything is intertwined with action, speech and thought. The world stands on Torah - from the actions of Torah, from our speech in Torah and from our thoughts in Torah. The *sefer Nefesh HaChaim* says that if there would be one second in the world without learning Torah, the entire universe would collapse.

Superficially, this means that when a person learns Torah in one country, his learning supports another person on the other side of the world. Although that is true, it is not because of merits. It is really because learning the Torah is what supports a person. The Torah, which is the power of thought in the world, is behind everything to keep it going.

The thoughts are the essence of a matter; they are clothed by our speech, and our speech is clothed by our actions. The thoughts of something are at the core of a matter; that is why we can't see them. We only see the outside layer of something, which are the actions. But the essence of something is the thought that lays in it.

To illustrate, the Aron had three layers: the innermost layer, which was gold, the middle layer which was wood, and the outer layer which was gold. It would appear to someone that the Aron is the outer layer which is gold, because he only sees the outside. But really, it was lifted by a more inner layer, which was lifted by an even more inner layer.

Whatever I see, I am only seeing the outer layer of what it really is, which are the actions. Inside the actions there is the words of Hashem that created it, and inside that are the thoughts of Hashem that keep it going. The essence is always the thoughts. Just like the Aron was "lifted its carriers" - its entire importance is attributed to the fact that it contained the *luchos* inside it, which is the Torah - the power of wisdom and thought - so do the thoughts contain all actions. The thoughts are the essence of everything and they keep everything going.

### ***Thoughts Carry Our Body***

We must realize that there is a reality of thoughts. It's not that a person should feel that he has thoughts in him; that is still a viewpoint of the body. He must realize that his very essence is thought, and that his body is only a garment.

Chazal even say that where a person's thoughts are, that is where he is found. Of course, our body and our speech cover our thoughts, but it is our thoughts which carry us - just like the inside of the Aron lifted the outside of the Aron. It is not our body which is carrying us.

The proof to this is that when a person dies, his soul leaves him and the body is helpless.

It's not that that we have a body and that within our body is a brain, and that within our brain is our thoughts. If that would be the attitude, then we are saying that our body is the basis of everything, and it is our body which is holding our thoughts. The true perspective to have is that it is our thoughts

which carry the body; the groundwork upon which everything is based is the thoughts.

If a person thinks that he just has thoughts **in** himself, he will never be able to understand how he is in essence a reality of thought, and he will never be able to see how thoughts are real. The true outlook one needs to have is that he **is** a reality of thought.

Chazal say that a person is where his thoughts are. Our thoughts are clothed by our body, and it is our thoughts which carry our body.

This is the first step in entering our world of thought: we must form a basis in our minds for building our thoughts, which is by realizing the reality of our thoughts. We must realize that we are our thoughts, and it is our thoughts which guide us.

### ***Seeing Thought Behind Everything***

Now that we have understood what we have said until now, we can make this more practical.

A person is capable of thought. How does a person look at everything in his life? Reb Yisroel Salanter said that each person sees things through his perspective. A shoemaker walks through the street and notices people's shoes, a carpenter notices the quality of trees and a glassmaker notices windows.

When a person looks at the world through a truthful prism, he sees thought and wisdom in everything. He looks at a table and sees wisdom in it. He looks at a flower and doesn't just see a flower, but he sees the wisdom behind it.

One time the Chazon Ish was looking at a flower, and he became amazed at it. Then he stopped. It seems that he was doing this because he wanted to see *niflaos haborei*, and he stopped looking at it because he had reached a high level. But there was more to this. It is because when a person lives in a world of thought, like the Chazon Ish, he sees thought in everything. He stopped to examine a flower because he wanted to see the wisdom behind it.

When a person is inclined to want to see the wisdom behind everything, this is the groundwork to building up a world of thought. In order for a person to have the groundwork, he must see all of creation as a great wisdom.

The Chazon Ish also remarked once, "I do not know anything that is simple. Everything I know of is a complex *sugya*."

This was because the Chazon Ish saw wisdom in everything, thus everything was deep and complex to him.

How can a person know if he is at this point? We will give a simple example how to train oneself to do this.

Let's say a person sees a dollar in front of him. If he is a regular person, he sees it as money he can use, and if he is a businessman, he sees it as a business transaction. Both people see it as money. But a deeper person thinks: Why isn't this forged? What is money made out of?

We do not mean that this should be how we spend our entire life and think how each thing came about. We are just saying that we should begin to look at simple items and see wisdom behind it. When a person doesn't think into things, is it because he is so immersed in his learning? That is not why. It is really because he never thought into something before. He never thought about how money works because he never thought into simple things.

The basis to building up our thoughts is to see the wisdom behind everything. It's not that we have to understand everything; it is just that we should know that everything contains wisdom. We can know that everything has something more to it that we don't know of yet, or we can think that we simply don't have the time to think into it because we're immersed in our learning; but the point is that we should know that everything we see has depth to it.

This has to change our view on life. It is not only Gemara which is deep and complex; everything is complex! Sometimes people come to me and say, "I have a simple question...", and I tell him, "The question might be simple, but my answer is not simple." It is already a mistake to assume that any question is simple. There is no such thing as a simple question. Everything is complex, deep and a *sugya* for itself.

Let us stress again that we do not mean for one to sit and reflect upon the wonders of creation. This is impossible. What we want to accomplish here is, how do we view anything? Just like a shoemaker always notices people's shoes, so must a thinking person notice the wisdom of everything.

The Rambam says that people who thrive on wisdom cannot survive without Torah. This is not

because such people search for wisdom; it is because they see everything as wisdom. It is written (*Tehillim* 104:24), “*All of them You made with wisdom.*” There is wisdom hidden in everything and that is what gives it existence.

### ***We Cannot Build Our Thoughts Without This Groundwork***

This attitude is what enables a person to have the groundwork for building up his world of thought. It's not that there is wisdom in something; it is instead that everything in reality is in essence a kind of wisdom. Wisdom is what keeps something going, thus the groundwork of something is its wisdom.

Let us repeat that we cannot build our mind without the proper groundwork. There are people who search for wisdom but do not succeed in building it. What is the reason for this? There are many reasons, but the root reason is because they do not see that the essence of everything is wisdom.

A person might know that there is wisdom contained in the Gemara on his *shtender*, but when he goes out into the street, he thinks that there is no wisdom to be found. This is incorrect; there is wisdom in everything we see. Hashem created all of Creation with wisdom. When this is a person's attitude, he can live in a reality of wisdom.

If the attitude is merely that there is “wisdom contained in everything”, he will not be able to live the wisdom of everything, because he views reality and wisdom as two separate things. The real attitude to have is that the **essence** of everything is wisdom.

This might sound very far away from us when we hear this the first time and maybe a little too lofty, but it is a question of how to live our life.

Chazal say that “Hashem, the Torah, and the Jewish people are one.” There is much depth to this statement, but it pertains to us now as follows: the Torah is entirely wisdom, and if the Jewish people are part of the Torah, it is because we have the power to see everything as wisdom.

“Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world.” Everything Hashem created is a kind of wisdom. Everything has a physical garment over it, but the basis of each thing in creation is the wisdom that lies in it. This is the beginning of entering a life of thought.

This is just the beginning of how we enter the world of thought – we haven't learned yet how to build it. In the coming chapters, we will learn how to build our thoughts, with the help of Hashem.

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[1] *Sefer Tanya*.

[2] *Moreh Nevuchim*.

[3] *Ohr Yisrael, Letter 30*.

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