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The Senses Stem from Thought

Previously, we spoke about the mental abilities of the soul, which are *chochmah*, *binah* and *daas*. Below the thinking abilities of the soul are the *middos*, the character traits and emotions. However, before we progress to discuss the *middos* and emotions (and how to detach from them), there is another part of the mind which we need to discuss.

Besides for the mental abilities of *chochmah*, *binah*, and *daas*, there are more details that are part of our mind: the five senses [sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste]. This is a vast subject, and we will only cover it a little bit of it.

The Vilna Gaon^[1] explains about the senses at length when he lists the seventy forces in the soul. These include the senses of seeing, hearing, smell, and speech. These four senses stem from the mind, and two more senses branch out of the original four: touch and taste.

Therefore, when we learn about how to detach from the mind, besides for knowing how to detach from our thinking abilities, we also need to learn how to detach from the senses.

Detaching from the Sense of Sight

The sense of sight consists of two kinds of sight. In sight, a person can use his intellect to see information through his mind. There is also a lower kind of sight, in which a person sees something through his physical eyes, and this information gets sent to the eyes.

The *Ramban* writes that one's eyes should be pointed downward, but that the heart should be pointed toward the heavens. We also find this in the case of Rebbi, who didn't look out of his four cubits. When a person looks at the ground and he doesn't look upward, what he sees is experienced through his eyes.

To give a general description of this, the Vilna Gaon lists two kinds of sight. One kind of sight is a kind of sight which can be felt. Another kind of sight is a lower, physical kind of sense, which is part of twelve general senses.

We can 'wear' and 'remove' our sight at times. We 'wear' our sight through simply seeing, and we can 'remove' it when we detach from looking at things. This can be done by closing the eyes.

Closing the eyes is actually a kind of sense. *Chazal* refer to this as “sleep”. There are two abilities in our eyes – our ability to see, and our ability to sleep. When we see, we are detaching from our sleep, and when we sleep, we are detaching from our vision.

Closing the eyes has two uses. One use of it is when we close our eyes to avoid seeing something forbidden to look at. There is a higher kind of closing the eyes, and that is when a person closes his eyes simply for the sake of not seeing something.

Thus, we detach from sight by closing the eyes, and we detach from closing the eyes by seeing regularly. It is not simply that we are detaching from either kind of sight. It is that when one does this, he is really returning his sense of sight to its root, which is the thinking mind.

When a person gets used to closing his eyes, he will find that his power of thought has become sharper. Why? Simply speaking, it is because he has learned how to concentrate. Before he learned how to concentrate, his soul was scattered (he had “*pizur hanefesh*”), and now that he’s not scatterbrained anymore, he can think better.

But there is a deeper reason to why his thinking improves. It is because by detaching from vision, he has returned the sense of vision to its root, which is the mind.

When a person sees something and focuses on it, he narrows his vision toward it and he can see it better. This is because by taking away some of his vision, his thinking gets sharpened, and now he can see even clearer.

Detaching from the Sense of Hearing

The sense of hearing is also rooted in the mind. There is also a second sense of hearing that is more physical, as the Vilna Gaon said regarding sight.

When a person detaches from his hearing, his thinking improves as well, in the same way that detaching from sight helps one’s thinking improve. The simple understanding of this is that by closing your ears from what you are hearing, you can concentrate better. But the deeper understanding of it is that by closing your ears from hearing, your sense of hearing returns to its root, which is the mind, and that is why you are able to think better now.

Detaching from the Sense of Smell

The sense of smell is also rooted in the mind. Our nose can smell, and it also can have *charon af* (“anger of the nose”). There is a kind of anger in which a person is seething through his nostrils; this kind of anger is called *charon af*, anger of the nose; it is also known as *roigez* (wrath).

There is a discussion for itself how to remove anger, and now is not the time we will discuss it; hopefully we will return to discussing it (generally speaking, there are two solutions to anger. One solution is by revealing *emunah*, and the other solution is by revealing our true *ratzon*).

To detach from our sense of smell, we can close our nostrils and instead breathe through the mouth.

This connects us to our thinking, in the same idea as we mentioned regarding the senses of sight and hearing: by disconnecting from smell, we return to the root of smell, which is the mind. Detaching from the other kind of “smell” – anger – is another discussion, and it is different. We will hopefully get to it later.

Detaching from Speech

Our mouth has two abilities: speech and taste.

The sense of speech also stems from the mind. The *Gemara*^[2] says that the *chashmalim* (angels) have times in which they function and times which they don't function. From here we see that there are times in which a person uses his speech, and times in which a person detaches from speech. How can a person detach from speech? This is by closing your mouth from talking, which returns you to your thoughts.

When a person talks too much, his mind gets muddled and he can't think straight. Sometimes this happens the other way around – when a person isn't thinking enough, he just talks and talks, because he's not even thinking! By being silent, not only does he concentrate better, but his thinking has sharpened, because he has returned his speech to its root – his thoughts.

If someone is more in touch with his thoughts, he will find that it's difficult to talk so much. He will find talking to be a contradiction to thinking. At a deeper level, he will even find that when he talks, he has fallen from his level.

Thus, there is a need for us to detach sometimes from our speech. Speech needs to be “worn”, which is when we talk, and it also needs to be “removed”, which is when we are silent. When you get used to silence, you will find yourself thinking better. Silence returns your “speech” to its roots, which is the mind, and that is why silence helps you think better.

There is a deeper understanding of this, and that is that by silencing your talking, you gain speech within yourself. There is a kind of talking that a person can reach in which he talks within himself – it is written, “*I spoke with my heart.*” This ability can be reached when you silence your talking, which reveals the “talking of your heart”.

Detaching from the Sense of Taste

Our mouth has another ability: taste. Our mouth can be used in an outward way, which is when we speak. It can also be used in an inward way, which is when we swallow. Swallowing is essentially the ability to taste something.

Taste is rooted in *ta'anug*. This is also a deep discussion. *Ta'anug* is a deep force in the soul that is revealed through taste. When it comes to learning Torah, the *taanug* of learning Torah is revealed when a person has the *Taamei HaTorah* – when he “tastes” the “reasons” in the Torah. When you know the “reason” (*taam*) of Torah, you are essentially “tasting” it.

One way to detach from taste is in the way we described earlier, which is to remove *ta'anug* by having *ameilus*. Now we are speaking of another way to detach from taste, which is by holding back from eating something.

These are the roots of this discussion, but it is really a much bigger discussion.

The Middos/Character Traits and Emotions

Below the senses of the soul are the seven root *middos/emotions*, which are: *ahavah/love*, *yirah/fear*, *hispaarus/pride*, *netzach/victory*, *hodayah/gratitude*, *hiskashrus/connection*, and *shiflus/lowliness*.

There are three abilities in our soul which are the root motivations in a person: *emunah* (belief), *taanug* (pleasure), and *ratzon* (will). These three abilities make up the first, highest “garment” of our soul which wraps around the essence of the soul, *havayah*.

The second “garment” of the soul, which wrapped around the above grouping, consists of the three abilities of the mind: *chochmah*, *binah* and *daas*.

The third garment of the soul, which wraps around the above grouping, is the *middos*/emotions. Below the point of our *middos* and emotions are the actions we do.

Feelings and Imagination

The *middos* have two roots to them, and this is a fundamental point. If this point is not understood well, then one’s *middos* will not be properly developed.

The first root of the *middos* is: the *middos* themselves, which are otherwise known as the emotions/feelings (“*hergeshim*”). There is also a more inner root of all the *middos*: the faculty of *binah*, and to be even more specific, the power of *tevunah* (imagination). Imagination and emotions thus have the same root.

Fixing the Middos and Uprooting Imagination

Reb Yisrael Salanter wrote that unless a person works on himself, he is roaming around in his imagination. The imagination is the very root of all our *middos*/emotions. If someone just works on his *middos* without working on uprooting his imagination, he will have a bunch of “branches” without a “root.”

The *middos* themselves are just the branches of the *middos*; imagination is the root behind all our *middos*. We therefore have to work on the root problem of our *middos*, which is: our imagination.

Yet, if we just work on uprooting your imagination without trying to work on the *middos* separately, then although we will have the root, we will still be missing the branches.

Therefore, the real way to work on yourself is to work on both: to work on uprooting the negative imagination, as well as to work on your individual negative *middos*. This will give you both the root and the branches at the same time.

Examples

For example, a person has the *middah* of *ahavah*/love. When it comes to actions, love manifests itself as acts of *chessed* (kindness). When it comes to our *middos*, love manifests itself as the feeling of love. If a person hasn’t uprooted his imagination yet, then he is only “imagining” that he loves – he doesn’t really have the *middah* of *ahavah*.

The same goes for the *middah* of *yirah* (fear). When a person is afraid of something, this either comes from a true fear, or it is just coming from an imaginary fear. If he hasn’t yet uprooted his imagination, his emotion of fear is just coming from imagination, so it’s not a real fear.

Imagination - The Root of Evil Character

A *middah* means “measure.” Imagination, though, comes and stretches the measurements of each *middah* and shows a person that there is “more” over here than the proper measure.

This is the root of all negative *middos*: the imagination.

When Adam wanted to sin by eating from the *eitz hadaas*, what did he do? He was essentially trying to compare himself to Hashem; comparing is “*dimayon*” in Hebrew, which is the same Hebrew term

for “imagination”. Here we can see the root of all evil – *dimayon*, which is imagination/comparing.

If this fundamental point isn’t understood, we won’t be able to work on our *middos*.

Detaching From The Middos/Emotions

In order to work on our *middos*, we need to see how each *middah* is a “*middah*” – “measured.” If we don’t see the limits of each *middah*, then our imagination is at work, and we won’t be able to work on our *middos*.

For example, let’s say a person is trying to break his habit of overeating. He accepts upon himself a certain diet so that he won’t come to indulge in eating. Simply speaking, he has begun to work on his *middah* of *taavah* (desire), but it is more than that. What he has essentially done for himself is that he has placed a limit on himself: he has recognized how a *middah* must be measured.

He becomes aware of the limits of each *middah*, and he sets up rules for himself when it comes to a *middah*. He sees how the “*middah*” is a “*middah*” – it is measured, and it has limits.

Perfected Imagination

There is a deep ability in a person to reveal how everything is really unlimited, and this is to reveal the *Ein Sof* (“Endlessness”) of Hashem in everything. This is actually done through *dimayon*. Chazal say “*hevay domeh lo*”, that you should “resemble” Hashem. When you live your life in a way that you are trying to resemble Hashem, this is the perfected kind of *dimayon*, and it is our ultimate goal. We need to use this as well in order to work on our *middos*.

Working On Our Middos: A Double Task

Imagination, though, comes and breaks the rules of the *middos* – it doesn’t reveal Hashem through them, and instead just seeks to break rules.

Working on our *middos* thus includes realizing the limits of each *middah*, as well as the goal of trying to reveal Hashem through each *middah*.

To give a general description, the first part of our *avodah* of fixing out *middos* is to fight our imagination, which seeks to break rules. The second part of our task is to learn how to use *dimayon* for good – to use our *middos* in a way that will make us “resemble” Hashem.

This is how we “detach” from negative *middos/emotions*. We “remove” our *middos/emotions* by realizing the limits of each *middah*, and we “wear” our *middos/emotions* by expanding them to become *middos* that resemble Hashem. We can also “wear” and “remove” them in the other way.

This needs more understanding, and soon we will explain it better. We have just established the roots of this discussion.

[2] Chagigah 13a

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