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Before Reflection, First Be Happy and Calm

We have explained that each person must set aside at least once a week time for introspection. During this time, one should think of the vanity of this world, and how being tied to this world takes away our mind from thinking about what's important. In this chapter, we will explain at length about how a person can disconnect from this strong attachment to this physical world.

When a person is sitting and reflecting about the Creator, even if he has put a halt to the noise of his daily actions, it is still hard to calm down from everything. When a person lacks inner calm, he won't be able to properly reflect into matters, and he won't get to the desired goal.

So what we have to know, firstly, is how we can get to that inner calm in order to be able to think properly.

The first thing we can suggest for this is that a person shouldn't attempt to jump straight into heavy thinking about Teshuvah and Avodas Hashem. Rather, for the first fifteen minutes of this time, he should sit calmly. This is not just to be idle; it is to be calm as a preparation for doing Teshuvah and improving one's Avodas Hashem. One should think to himself very calmly that he is preparing himself to do Teshuvah. After fifteen minutes, when he is already somewhat calmed, he can begin to think about what he has to think about, in the way we have explained in the previous chapters.

But there is another suggestion that is advisable here, and it is double the gain. This is that one should think: Maybe today is my last day on earth!

Don't be depressed about this. It should instead make you feel happy inside.

The question is, how can such a thought make you happy? How can you not become morbid when you think about such a thing? The solution to this both involved both a superficial approach and an internal approach. We can give one piece of advice, though, that can help a person reach inner calm, as well as doing Teshuvah as a way to awaken your happiness, in a way that doesn't cause any sadness.

The advice is that after fifteen minutes of sitting quietly, it would be good to listen to a stirring song (that stems from a pure source), not a sad song or a loud song, but a *niggun* (tune) that expresses yearnings for something, that can awaken your soul. There is much gain from this, and anyone who tries this can attest to how helpful it is.

What is the gain from this? Firstly, the *niggun* can make you calm, and this is already a tool that can help you free yourself of previous thoughts that have piled up in your head from the whole day and week. In addition to this gain, your reflection will be done out of joy. Although it's superficial joy and not yet inner joy, still, it's a lot better than nothing. It can help you reflect properly and then cause you to feel inner joy throughout the rest of the day.

That is the superficial part of the job, but what is the inner part that brings you to joy?

The Chovos HaLevovos writes that a righteous person awaits his day of death. How can a person look forward to his death?! Do people suffer so much on this world that they'd rather die?! The answer to this, though, is very simple. A desire for the day of death comes from one's desire for life! What are we aspiring to on this world? If a person just wants money or to have great kids (which can also be a purely physical desire), he's very connected to this world, and he has no desire whatsoever to want to take leave of this world. When his time comes to leave the world, he's very sad about this.

But if a person has already in his lifetime developed a deep desire to connect to the Creator and to only seek the truth – both in the internal world of the soul, as well on the physical earth he lives on – such a person naturally has yearnings for a more angelic world, a world of the soul. He naturally longs to leave this “world of falsity” and to connect to a better world of truth. A person knows that even if he has overcome the lies of this world, he is still affected by the foul smells of this world's falsehood, and he wants to run away from even this, and thus he longs for a world of truth.

This change of mindset can only come to a person on condition that he searches for truth on this world in his lifetime. It can't come suddenly to a person when it is time to leave the world; the attitude has to be developed before, already in one's lifetime.

The Real Reason Why People Fear Death

Let us be more specific about what we mean here.

A person is sitting and reflecting that one day, he might suddenly die *chas v'shalom* and leave this world. He feels sad from this. What does he do to relieve this feeling? He might go to drink some wine to calm himself down; Chazal indeed say the wine can take away the fear of death. Although this is true, it is just acting superficially; a person has to develop his internal world. What is the inner approach?

What a person should really do is sit calmly and ask himself: Why am I afraid to die? He can ask himself as follows: “If Eliyahu HaNavi will and offer me a choice to either go to the World of Truth or stay here, what would I choose? What would I **really** answer, and **why** am I answering that?”

There were great *tzaddikim* who didn't want to die, though. An example is the Vilna Gaon, he said that he doesn't want to die – but not for any of the reasons that we have. His reason was because he wanted to continue serving Hashem on this world, as opposed to being dead, when a person can't do any mitzvos. He has no personal desires – he didn't want to die because that would mean being free of mitzvos, which was his true fear.

Hashem made people born with a natural fear of death. The root of this fear comes a holy feeling from our soul, which fears the true death – a life that is disconnected from the Creator. Now *that* is death. It is written, “*And you shall cleave to Hashem your G-d, and you shall all be alive today*”. *D'veykus* with Hashem means that we are truly alive, and without *d'veykus*, we are basically living a deathlike kind of existence. Our soul is truly scared of this total kind of death, because to be disconnected from Hashem is like being cut off from its source, and there is no greater death than this.

The soul comes down onto this world and gets clothed by the body, and the soul's feelings of a person as well are clothed by the body, so a person just feels them as bodily feelings. For this reason, a person fears death. But the usual fear of death that people identify with is the body's fear of death, which is just a reflection of the true kind of fear of death. Really, the death of the body would begin the soul's life, but the more emphasis a person places on his body's life and not his soul's life, the more death his soul experiences.

Thus, the fear of death is really a message from the soul, which fears spiritual death. So when a person fears death, he should ask himself where the fear is coming from. There are many reasons why a person fears death, but most of the time, they stem from being so tied to this world, and people are scared to leave this world's vanities. Some people are very connected to their families, and they fear what it would be like to be separated forever from their family. Others are very tied to their money and fear death because that would mean no more money. Everyone has their own natural reason to fear death.

Therefore, every person should ask himself: "To what am I really connected to on this world?" This is the true test. Even if we aren't aware consciously of what the reason is, we have to figure out what's going on in our sub-conscious, the very depths of our soul. This will help that when our time eventually comes to leave this world, we will be able to pull away easily from our connection to this physical world.

This World Has Nothing To Offer

A person should imagine to himself what it would really be like to leave this world, and why he is so afraid of leaving it.

When a person is clear about all the reasons he fears death, he should then review the words of the Mesillas Yesharim: "Besides for this (connection to Hashem), what people think is "good" is nothing but futility." He should repeat this tens of times, even a hundred or even a thousand times - until he acquires the attitude.

It is written, "*It is not good for man to be alone, I shall make for him a helpmate opposite him.*" It would seem simply that a "helpmate opposite him" is something that is "good", and that a person is tied to this on this world. But this is not the truth. When a person is too connected to his "helpmate" - a reference to the body, which his soul inhabits - as well as worldly matters - it is too hard for him to leave this world, or his family, or anything else that he has on this world.

But when a person realizes that his stay on this world is so that he can become connected to spirituality, to the soul - he will naturally will want to leave this world when the time comes, because he'd rather be a soul that isn't tied down to a body than to be a soul that is bound to a body.

When a person is sad when he thinks about death - sometimes this is consciously, but usually it is deep in one's subconscious - it is really because he is too connected to this world, and he doesn't want to give it up.

A person's Avodah, then, is to truly reflect about this, in a calm manner; he should understand that true joy can never come from being connected to this world. The words of the Vilna Gaon are famous: This world is like salty water. We all know this, but how much do we succeed in remembering this? How much do we live with this idea?

If we really believe in the words of our Chazal, we wouldn't be interested at all in this world's "salty water." Worldly pleasures just make you thirstier for even more. So if a person decides that he is ready to give up this world one day, it shouldn't be done with a feeling of sadness and regret. It's the

best thing!

When you think about the “true” good in comparison to whatever “good” this world has to offer, you will realize that you’re not giving up anything at all by deciding to disconnect from this world’s pleasures.

When one reflects into this, he should do so slowly and calmly, and happily. To accomplish this, one can use parables that help him come to this understanding. We can give a few examples that can be of aid, and each person can add on his own.

Recently, a wedding hall collapsed. Imagine if the owner of the wedding hall would come to us two weeks before it collapsed, and he would offer it to see it to us for 20 shekel. We would yell at him, “You’re crazy! 20 shekel for a wedding hall?!” He would answer, “Let me explain you something. I know that in two weeks from now, this hall will fall to the ground.”

Would anyone even agree to give him 20 shekel in such a situation? No one in their right mind would give him even 20 shekel for the building, because we have been informed that it’s going to collapse and be worth nothing. But if none of us think it’s going to collapse, we would all run to give him 20 shekel for the building.

Yet, if you think about it, that would also be a huge mistake. Even if the owner himself gives you \$20,000 to take the building, you still shouldn’t take it! Why not? The answer is because the amount of stress and worry that this building will cost you is much more than \$20,000, and it is far from worth it.

Naturally, though, a person looks at what he will gain monetarily from accepting \$20,000 to take the building – and he doesn’t think about the consequences. He will have to spend so much time worrying about maintaining this building, and he will have to put all his energy into it, but he doesn’t think about this, and all he thinks about is the \$20,000 that he’s being offered to take the building.

When a person considers that he has only one goal in life – to only search for Hashem with all his heart – then everything in his life is always about how he can become close to Hashem through it, and he views every situation now differently. What seems simple to other people isn’t so simple to him, because since he seeks Hashem, he realizes how certain undertakings can interfere with his Avodas Hashem and cause him to have pain.

A person has to become more clearly focused in everything and think: “Will this thing bring me closer to Hashem, or further away from Him?” One has to get used to purifying his mind more in this way, slowly but surely. For example, money is something that a person can use to become closer to Hashem, or the opposite, *chas v’shalom*. Money doesn’t exist for itself – it can be used as a tool to serve Hashem.

The True Test: What Does Hashem Want?

We can give another example.

A person is invited to a wedding, but he doesn’t feel like going. He says to himself, “I really don’t want to go, but I don’t want to insult my friend, so I’ll go.” This is really not a way proper way to go about such a situation. Let us explain what the true approach should be.

First, a person should ask himself why he thinks that way. He should think of two options – why he should go to the wedding, and why he shouldn’t. “Why should I want to go the wedding? Because that will gladden my friend and his family. Why shouldn’t I go to the wedding? Because I should rather stay

in the beis midrash and learn Torah. What will bring me closer to Hashem – going to the wedding, which is an act of *chessed*, or sitting and learning instead?”

Learning Torah is more important than *chessed*, but that alone isn't enough to conclude that Hashem wants one to sit and learn rather than go to a wedding. This is because there is a rule that if a mitzvah cannot be accomplished by anyone other than you, you have to do it. Rather, the true barometer over here should be: “What will draw me closer to Hashem – staying to learn, or going to the wedding?”

Closeness to Hashem isn't necessarily measured by how you feel. It's easier to have elated feelings when you learn Torah than to drag yourself to a wedding and become emotional to gladden a bride and groom. How a person “feels” doesn't decide if this act will bring him closer to Hashem or not. Closeness to Hashem is determined by: What does Hashem want from me in this situation? Sometimes you have to do something because it will bring you closer to Hashem, even though it doesn't create in you intense feelings of closeness to Hashem. Being close to Hashem is not about how you feel – it is about doing what He wills from us in a situation.

When Avraham Avinu became aware that he had guests, he left the Shechinah so that he could receive them, because “greeting guests is more important than receiving the Shechinah.” He gave up the Shechinah so that he could have guests! Being close to Hashem is not determined by how much you feel the closeness. If Avraham Avinu would have gone by his feelings, he surely would have stayed with the Shechinah; you feel much closer to Hashem in the presence of the Shechinah. But Avraham decided to do what was right, not what he felt. Being close to Hashem is to do what Hashem wants – not to do what makes you feel closer to Hashem.

We can give many examples of this concept, but the way of thinking is always the same: all day, the way we approach anything should always be weighed and measured if this thing will bring you closer to Hashem or not.

When a person realizes that this physical world distances himself from Hashem, he will realize that he must separate from it, and he shouldn't feel sad or deprived in doing so. He should do it happily, because he has come to this truthful realization.

The *Chovos HaLevovos* writes that a *chassid* (pious individual) longs for the day of death, when his soul will leave his body. This desire, to return to Hashem, is actually not a level for only lofty people. Every Jew who strives to be close to Hashem should long to return to Hashem.

When a person realizes that the body holds back the soul from becoming close to Hashem, he will find that he actually awaits death, instead of remaining bound to the physical body.

A Life of Giving

Until now we explained the simple point that if one searches for the Creator, he should abandon worldly interests. Now we will explain a deeper point: Why do people naturally want to cling to worldly interests, and how can we disconnect from it?

When we left Egypt, Hashem declared: “*For you are My servants.*” A Jew's purpose is truly feel that he is a servant to Hashem. We need to strive to be on a level in which we aren't in it for what we will get, but from a feeling of indebted kindness to Hashem for taking us out of Egypt. We need to redeem ourselves from our personal “Egypt” – from all the things that hold us back from serving Hashem. In order to do this, we have to feel indebted to Hashem for all His kindness, and not expect any reward

for what we do.

If that would be the attitude, then everything will be different. Naturally, a person is only interested in what's in it for him, in what's good and enjoyable to do. But a person has to sit and reflect that this was not what he was created for. Hashem has created us and given us a purpose. We cannot get around the Creator.

The Egyptians tried to be smarter than Hashem by making sure to drown all the boys so that the redeemer would not be born. In our own soul, there exists such an evil agenda as well - to try and outsmart Hashem and get away with just living for himself.

Hashem is in charge. He makes the rules. He is telling each Jew that we do not live for ourselves. We live to serve the Creator. When a person realizes this, his whole life will change.

If a person is prepared to live a life of giving for Hashem, not a life of a taker, then it doesn't matter to him where he is placed. No matter the situation, a Jew is supposed to live a life of what he can do to become more giving towards Hashem, and this will help a person not depend on the physical world.

When a person only lives for the taking, he is very attached to this world. He might get himself to develop a love for Gan Eden, but this isn't true love for the Creator. He loves himself. Instead, a person has to live the truth, that there is a Creator and that we are His creations. Hashem is telling us one thing: "You are My servants." We cannot run away from Hashem, nor can we outsmart Him.

This is a deep matter, and it needs to be explained more, but we have opened it up. To summarize, there are two ways how we can disconnect from this physical world and not be dependent on it:

1. By realizing that this world is like "salty water." Being bound to this physical world doesn't allow us to be close to Hashem. If so, our decision to disconnect from this world is a happy one, and it should not cause us to feel deprived. After all, we want *Olam HaBa*, not this physical world.
2. We are servants of Hashem, and we live for Hashem. It doesn't make a difference where we are, because we must always serve Hashem. So why should it bother us if we separate from this world and enter the world of spirituality? (This method is a deeper method than the first one).

When these words are internalized in the heart, our soul will be calmed, and we will thus be able to have times of quiet to make a self-accounting.

May Hashem help all of us to search for Hashem with our heart, and from this we should merit to find Him in our heart.