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Recognizing in the Heart the "True Good"

The actions we do throughout the day are many: Tefillah, Torah, mitzvos, and other things we have to take care of. What is the point that connects them all?

Let us examine the words of the *Mesillas Yesharim*: "The main reason for a person's existence on this world is to do the mitzvos and to withstand difficulties...however, it is proper that a person should only be directed toward Hashem, and that he should have no goal in mind in any action he does, small or big, other than closeness to Hashem, and to break the barriers that separate him from the Creator. Whatever a person can think to enable this closeness, he should run after it and cling to it, and not slacken. If anything he thinks holds back this closeness, he should run from it as if it is fire."

Here the *Mesillas Yesharim* is telling us a great rule - a rule that has no exception - that we should have no other goal in whatever we do **other than to become close to Hashem.**

This is the first thing we need to prepare before we do any action: realize that the purpose of any action is to become close to Hashem.

Compare this to someone is riding on a bus from Jerusalem to Bnei Brak, and we ask him: "To where are you going?" and he replies, "I forgot". How can such a thing be?! If he forgot where he's going, he's probably on the wrong bus! Even if he isn't on the wrong bus, the fact that he forgets where he's going shows that he has a big issue going on inside.

We all know what the *Mesillas Yesharim* says (that the true good is Hashem), but the question is how much we succeed in actualizing this fact in our daily living. How much do we think about it, how much do we feel it?

This disconnect that people have can go very far. It's even possible that a person is in middle of davening, and he is so spaced out that he forgets that he's davening! (There is a question in *Halachah* if he has even fulfilled his prayer obligations).

A person has to be aware of whatever he's doing. If a person is driving a car, it's dangerous if he spaces out for even one second. Our Avodas Hashem as well needs our constant focus.

Why are people disconnected from the truth that we know from *Mesillas Yesharim*, that the true good

is closeness to Hashem?

A person has to arrive at the recognition that the only desire to have in life is to become close to Hashem. But in order to reach this, one has to first realize what the *true good* in life is. “*See that I have given before you the life and the goodness, death and evil; and you shall choose life.*” [1] In order to “choose life”, we first must be very clear what “good” means.

Anyone who learns the words of *Mesillas Yescharim* knows what the “true good” is, but one’s heart doesn’t feel that way; it feels the opposite. The heart is initially a *lev even*, a “heart of stone”, until we can get it to become a *lev basar*, a soft heart of flesh. Naturally, materialism has a stronger hold on a person, and one feels that the world’s materialism is the “good” in life.

Until a person realizes that materialistic desires of this world are nothing, as long as a person never feels the words of the *Mesillas Yescharim* that only closeness to Hashem is the true good and that everything else is worthless – then his heart will feel that this world is the “good.” A person can’t desire both this world and the next; the *Chovos HaLevovos* writes that this world and the next world are like fire and water, which cannot be mixed together.

When a person’s heart doesn’t feel that truth, the mind as well gets affected by this, and what happens is that a person does not live his life with a mindset of how he can act to become closer to Hashem; and life becomes routine.

The root of our Avodah, then, is to first clarify to ourselves – in our hearts – what is truly good.

Hashem created people in the world. If you ask most people what is good in the world, the answer is: “Money.” This is not just a verbal statement. This is the whole way people are living their life – their entire essence is screaming out, “I love money.” They think and talk about it all day. They don’t just *know* about money – they *live* for it. When a person lives money, he develops a sense of smell for money, and he can smell out what will make him get more money.

When a person knows what the true good is but he doesn’t live it, naturally, he won’t run after it, and he won’t either sense what will help him get to it. Only if a person is truly dedicated to searching for the truth will Hashem give him the inner senses that will show him what to avoid and what to aspire to in life.

The Beginning of Avodas Hashem: Establish Yourself on the Good Path

We know that *teshuvah* generally means to repent over our deeds, big or small. But there is another kind of *teshuvah*, and it is more basic: to return our *soul* to the proper path.

The *Shaarei Teshuvah* writes, “One who has always gone on an improper path and his sins have overtaken him every day, and he continues to sin...the first thing that this person must do to repent is to leave his ways and his evil thoughts, and to accept upon himself that he will never again sin.”

What is the improper path that one is originally on? What is the person doing wrong? His problem is that he doesn’t know what the true good is; he doesn’t feel it in his heart, and when he doesn’t feel it in his heart, his actions will reflect this and he will lead a life of sin.

So before a person begins to correct his deeds, he has to think into the root of the problem. Why does a person forget basic fundamentals about life? Why aren’t the facts burning intensely within him?

Even if a person decides that he will improve his deeds, if he hasn’t wondered about what has been causing all the problems, it is highly unlikely that he will succeed. Even if he’s davening better, it

won't be from his heart, and he won't either become closer to Hashem.

Only by first working on the inner point – by clarifying to oneself what the true good is – can a person have hope in proceeding. His wish to pursue this will then be no less intense than the people in the world who pursue money every second.

When a person is clear what the true good is, it won't be an "Avodah" for him; it will instead feel natural. "Whoever separates from You is like someone who has been separated from life." When a person feels that Torah and mitzvos are life itself, he naturally will not leave Torah and mitzvos. But when people have more feelings about this world than they do about Avodas Hashem, and Avodas Hashem is just some knowledge to them, then it will be very difficult to maintain their Avodas Hashem.

Therefore, every person, at the beginning of his way, must clarify to himself what he lives for, and what the true good in life is. After one clarifies this, he needs to clarify what will bring him to there, and what he needs to avoid. Only after this should one attempt to actually correct his deeds.

(We are not referring to actual sins, which one must stop doing, immediately. We are referring to actions that we do by rote; we mean that we cannot put heart into what we do unless we sense what the true good).

Revealing the Inner Point of the Heart

Reb Yisrael Salanter zt"l wrote that our heart consists of inner forces and outer forces. There are many interpretations of his statement, but the inner point of what he said always remains the same.

Reb Yisrael Salanter gave a parable to explain this. One time there was a certain great *Rosh Yeshiva* who unfortunately had a rebellious son, and his father had given up hope on him. He also had a student whom he loved with all his heart, equal to the love between David and Yehonasan. He would sit all day with his student and teach him, nourishing him both physically and spiritually, and he was totally bound up in love with him. His son, though, kept a distance from him, and he was never around much. As the days went on, the relationship with his student grew and grew, while the relationship with his son weakened and ebbed away more and more.

Then a fire suddenly broke out in middle of the night in the dormitory. They woke up the Rosh Yeshiva and told him that the dormitory is burning, and that he only has enough time to save either his beloved student – or his estranged son. Who will the Rosh Yeshiva save?

Here, says Reb Yisrael Salanter, is where the truth in one's soul is revealed. The father will instinctively save his son rather than his student. Why? Because deep inside his soul, the father has an attachment to his son, and it is an internal bond. The connection he had with his student only came from the outside and was superficial; when the moment of truth comes to choose between them, the internal bond he has with his son resurfaces.

The bond which we have with Hashem is a father-son relationship; "*You are children to Hashem, your G-d.*" It is a deep, internal connection. It is the innermost point of every Jew's heart. It is only the outer layer of a Jew that can get swayed by the *yetzer hora* to become attached to the materialism of this world. But every Jew (unless he is from the *Erev Rav*) still has an inner point in him that is always there, and there are times in which his true self emerges. There were Jews who gave themselves up to be killed *al kiddush Hashem* rather than sin, even though their lives lacked a connection with Hashem. That innermost point in every Jew is there, deep down.

Our Avodah thus is to reveal that inner point that is already in us. Instead of being forced to reveal

the innermost point in us, *chas v'shalom*, we can bring ourselves to it even now, before we are tested to do so.

“Always Repent A Day Before You Die”

How can we do it? We need to remove the layer of superficiality covering our heart, and instead reveal the inner layer of ourselves.

Earlier we mentioned that once a week, a person should be in solitude and reflect with Hashem for a few hours at a time. What does a person do during this time? Should one just repent over his deeds? No, this is not where to begin. One has to begin with the point we are speaking about now: remember why we are living.

First of all, a person has to make sure that he really wants to live the true kind of life. One should ask himself that perhaps he is merely fooling himself. If a person is truthful with himself, he will discover that he is actually very attached to this physical world.

Upon this discovery, what can a person indeed do to sever his attachment to this world? There are several ways, and we will only mention here the shorter way.

We do not know how much time we will have and what today or tomorrow will bring, so we have no choice but to adapt the statement of the Sages, “Always repent a day before you die” (and we never know when we will die...)

A person does not know what was decreed upon him on Rosh HaShanah. If so, one has to feel that maybe today is his last day alive!

Maybe you will counter, “I am not terminally ill, so it is ridiculous to assume that maybe I will die today.”

But this is a mistake. We all know that even healthy people die, because Hashem is the One who takes the soul away, and He can take anyone whom He chooses.

We all know people who unfortunately suddenly developed a life-threatening else one day. These stories happen every day, and anyone who has gone through such a thing knows of the feeling that there is never a guarantee to your life.

So if we want to realize how temporary this world is, we should think about those sick people in the world. If someone is a little more opened up to this, he can actually talk to such people and hear what they have to say. You can give them encouragement, but the point of this is to hear it from a live person: “Until now I thought I was for sure going to live out the rest of my life, but now my life is totally on the line.”

Before one goes to sleep at night, he should think simply: “Who says I will get up tomorrow?”

This awareness can change a person’s whole life. Things that were previously important to you will then lose their importance, and things that are truly important will begin to be felt by your heart.

None of us has written a will and testament yet. Why not? It is because we think that only dying people write a will. We have forgotten that Hashem is the one who gives life and takes away life, and there are no guarantees to our life.

The sefer *Reishis Chochmah* brings that the first aspect of *teshuvah* for one’s sins is to “give up” this

world. How can a person give up this world? Only by becoming aware that this might be his last day on earth. Then, everything is different. If you are ever by the bedside of a dying person who truly feared Hashem in his life, you can see that his feelings and thoughts are totally about spiritual matters, and he isn't thinking about his physical situation.

A person shouldn't wait for Hashem to bring him to such a situation that forces him to see the truth. A person can get to that feeling of the truth without that.

One should sit, once a week, and first think why he is living. He should think that life and death are up to Hashem. He should think that the revival of the dead will not only be an event of the future, but that He is doing it every second. He should clarify that the purpose of his life on this world is to search for his Creator.

After some time a person will feel, "I know the truth, but I don't feel it. How can I bring myself to feel the truth all the time, that I must search for Hashem always, and that only this is good?"

After this, a person should begin to give up this world. He can do this by remembering stories in which people discovered that their life is on the line, and he should imagine what he would do if he was told that he will soon die. If a person just thinks about this for five minutes, without a doubt, the whole way he leads his life will change!

Such thinking should be done slowly and patiently. It understandably takes time, and five minutes or ten minutes of this will not be enough. One should thus take a pen and paper and write down what he would do if he was told that he has thirty days left to live, how he will spend his schedule for the next month. Then, a person should also write down how he would spend his life if he knows that he has a full life ahead of him; the new schedule will look totally different.

Then What?

Let's say a person concludes that maybe indeed he won't be around in thirty days from now. What should he think now?

One should continuously think that Hashem is the One who gives life or death, and there is no guarantee to life. Every day we hear of people who suddenly die, when just the day before they were walking around totally carefree. This is not just a mere possibility. Every person has no guarantee that he will be around tomorrow, and each person has to think that maybe today is his last day on earth.

This should not make a person become sad or morbid about death. It instead should cause a person the opposite feeling - he should become happy that he has merited to clarify his purpose on this world, to know what he lives for.

When a person wants to buy something, he should consider that maybe he won't be around in a month for now, and so maybe it's not worth it to buy. No one should ignore his basic needs, but when it comes to buying some luxury that you could do without, think about if it's really worth it to buy, since there's a chance that you might not be around in a month.

When a person lives his life with a feeling that this world is fleeting, he disconnects from materialistic matters, and he will then be very close to arriving at the truth.

The point of this Avodah here is to reflect about how we need to disconnect from the evil pull that is on us, and when we remove that evil, it will become a lot easier to direct ourselves toward the truth in life.

Will We Choose This On Our Own - Or Will We Be Forced?

There are things as well one needs to reflect about, but in this chapter, we have only picked one point to work on: to clarify what the true good on this world is. As long as a person hasn't clarified it to himself, he forgets what true good is, and he won't be able to live the words of the *Mesillas Yesharim* that all of our actions are supposed to bring us closer to Hashem.

If a person never realizes what the true good in life is, he have an empty life, but he will have to endure something else as well. He will have to realize anyway at some point what the true good is, but the question is, will he be forced to realize it, or will he utilize his free will and choose to realize it on his own? Even if a person never makes the willing choice to disconnect from the physicality of this world, after he dies, he will realize it. But after death, this transition is very painful, and it is much less painful of a decision if a person makes it already as he lives on this world.

Our Reward In The Next World

There is another point one can think about to help him disconnect from the physicality of this world.

One should know that for every amount of enjoyment he has on this world, he will have to pay for it. Reb Yisrael Salanter zt"l said that this world is like an expensive hotel – after you enjoy yourself, you are given the bill. A person can lose all his reward for his Torah and mitzvos, because he enjoyed himself very much on this world....

One should thus be very afraid that maybe he will lose his reward in the next world by being so immersed in worldly interests, and that when he comes to the next world, he will be left with only a tiny reward, because it has all been swapped for this world's pleasures.

If a person knows that the true good is Hashem, then he can be sure that his Torah and mitzvos will earn him a true reward, and he will have the real closeness and attachment with Hashem. But if he is tied to this world's pleasures, *chas v'shalom*, and these are all his aspirations in life – his reward in the next world will get replaced with something very cheap (may Heaven have mercy on him).

Thus, everyone has to at some point give up this world, for three reasons:

1. How does he know that he will remain with his material gains from this world? Maybe tomorrow he won't have them anymore, because he might die?
2. If he doesn't decide in his life to disconnect from materialism, he will have to become disconnected from it after he dies, and it will be very painful.
3. Just for running after some food or for some honor, he is giving up his reward in the next world, by swapping spiritual pleasure for physical pleasure.

Let us summarize here what we have learned and then give a practical outcome from this.

A person has to clarify the truth. He should look around at the items in his house and ask himself what he needs and what he doesn't; maybe some needy people could use something in your house? Of course, ask your family if they mind if it's given away, and use your senses. The point is that if something in your house isn't needed to give you more *yishuv hadaas* (peace of mind), it's just a luxury, and you should learn to give it up. Don't do this in an external way; do it happily.

Rav Dessler zt"l would say that the jail is full of people who are deprived of worldly pleasures. If so, why don't the Jewish inmates there merit *ruach hakodesh*? He explained that although they are very

far removed from physical pleasures, they were forced to do so, and such abstinence does not give a person *ruach hakodesh*.

When a person decides to abstain from worldly pleasures, it has to be a happy decision, out of recognition that this world is a waste of time.

May Hashem help each person clarify to himself what the true good is, and to separate from the materialism of this world.

[\[1\]](#)(*Devorim 30: 15-19*).

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