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The Message of Death

To continue the discussion begun by the previous chapters, we will give a short introduction to the root of these matters.

When Adam was first fashioned, Hashem placed him in Gan Eden, and he had a clear recognition, felt in his heart, that Hashem was in front of him. There was an open revelation of Hashem, and nothing was hidden from man. The first sin came and allowed for the recognition of Hashem to become concealed and hidden, and since all souls were once contained in Adam's soul, every soul became affected from this and thus faces a test in recognizing the reality of Hashem. After the sin, confusion about the truth entered the fabric of Creation, and now each person according to his level is somewhat affected - in his mind and heart - and the truth is now somewhat hidden from people.

Hashem warned Adam that if he eats from the *eitz hadaas*, "*For from the day you eat from it, you will surely die.*" Here we see that death is in essence a concealment of recognizing the truth of Hashem's existence. "*You will surely die.*"

However, even where He is concealed from us, it is precisely there where He can become even more revealed to us. The possuk says, "*For no man can see Me and live,*" and the Zohar comments on this, "*In life no one can see Him, but in death, they can.*"

On one hand, sin resulted in the curse of death, which is essentially the concealment of Hashem from us. On the other hand, death is the time in which Hashem is the most revealed to a person, because a person can't see Him when he's alive, but when he dies, he can then see Him.

The first sin is the root of all concealment about the truth of Hashem's existence. This can get fixed through "death". There is a power in our soul called "death" - the ability to die *al kiddush Hashem*, to sanctify His Name. Rabbi Akiva awaited his whole life to reveal this ability and be able to die *al kiddush Hashem* (see Berachos 61a).

There are two ways to die *al kiddush Hashem*. One way, as we know, is to literally be killed in order to sanctify Hashem's Name, as Rabbi Akiva and the other sages who were martyred by the Romans. But there is another way to "die" *al kiddush Hashem* - this can happen in our very own soul, when we accept upon ourselves something that is very hard to accept.

Before the first sin, Hashem was totally revealed to a person. After the sin, the truth became concealed; the amount of concealment differs with each person, and thus some people have more doubts about Hashem than others. The common denominator between all people after the sin is that all people became somewhat doubtful about the reality of Hashem in their hearts.

If a person has a will to want to feel Hashem, it is thus essentially a will to leave the situation caused by sin and to want to enter the level that existed before the sin of Adam.

When we enter the "pre-sin" state, we are essentially removing the "death" caused by sin. In order to fix up our state of "death", we instead need to "die" *al kiddush Hashem* - in our soul. We will explain what we mean.

Being Ready To Sacrifice For High Levels

When we speak about dying *al kiddush Hashem*, it seems like something very far from us. In previous generations, this topic was very relevant, but to us, it seems way too far-fetched to talk about.

In this chapter, we will try to explain how it is still very much applicable to us, in our very own life as we know it. We will give a brief introduction.

There are many details in our Avodas Hashem. But there is one matter which is all-inclusive; if we have it, then we can acquire all perfection.

If you think about it, a human being by definition cannot ever acquire anything perfectly. A human can never be perfect; only Hashem is perfect. All people have deficiencies.

If one's "I" is still involved in his Avodas Hashem, then he will never be able to acquire any gain perfectly, because since one's "I" is never perfect, the "I" will always get in the way of reaching perfection.

How, then, can one ever hope to become perfected in any area?

Here is where the secret of "*mesirus nefesh*" comes in: the ability in a person to be self-sacrificing towards Hashem. This matter is written about in the *sefarim hakedoshim* and it has many ramifications. The *Reshash* wrote that all qualities are gained only through *mesirus nefesh*. It is also brought that if a person wants to make sure he never accidentally eats *treif* (non-kosher), besides for being careful in the regular *Halachic* sense, he should have *mesirus nefesh* when it comes to keeping kosher. In other words, he should decide that if *chas v'shalom* he ever comes across food that is *treif*, he'd rather die than eat it.

This is just one example, but the concept can be applied to everything in Avodas Hashem. Chazal say that "the words of Torah only exist by one who dies over them" (Berachos 63b). The way you "die" over Torah is by having *mesirus nefesh* for it – by being prepared, in your soul, to die over it if you must.

We don't mean to *actually* give up your life; there is almost no one who has to do this. We mean to *potentially* give it up – to be prepared for such a thing and develop in yourself the potential ability to do it. For example, if Hashem would come and give you either the choice to live without a certain spiritual attainment, or to reach a certain attainment but to die for it – what would you choose?

An Internal Examination:

What Is Our Life Worth If We Are Missing Some Ruchniyus?

The truth is that this matter needs an inner clarification. If someone claims that he's already ready for this immediately upon seeing these words, it's highly doubtful if he will practice what he preaches if he is tested, and he's just imagining that he's already at the level of *mesirus nefesh*.

A person has to come to an inner decision to be prepared to even give up his current level in Avodas Hashem in order to receive a higher level – if he knows that has more to improve on, then he should want to give up his current life rather than remain on his current level. This should not be done out of feeling morbid about one's life or as an escape from the stress of life. It should come from recognition that this is really what life is all about, and that a life without this acceptance is really *death*. In other words, don't think you're giving up anything for this! You're instead gaining the real kind of life. That is the real attitude to look at it.

If a person wants to acquire a certain area in Avodas Hashem, he has to work very hard to get it. But the truth is that it's not really within his reach to get it; after all, he is only human, and without the help of Hashem, nothing is possible. Chazal say (Sukkah 52a) "If not for Hashem helping a person, it would be impossible to overcome." This doesn't mean simply that Hashem gives a person help from some outer force; it means that when Hashem is revealed inside a person's soul, He assists the person from within, and through that a person is able to achieve something.

We already brought the words of Chazal that Hashem says of a *baal gaavah*, "I and him cannot dwell under one roof." As long as a person's "I" is still in the picture, he doesn't receive help from Hashem. If a person is willing to give up his ego, like to give up his current life that lacks a higher level – rather than live without that level – he has the key to acquire all spiritual attainments.

If a person wants to reach a higher level in Avodas Hashem, but he feels that he can still live without it – it's as if he wants both the physical world and the world to come at once, which cannot co-exist, as the *Chovos HaLevovos* writes.

When Eliyahu Hanavi faced the false prophets at Mt. Carmel, there were two sides – truth and falsehood. Those who knew the truth sided with Eliyahu, and those who were swayed by falsity stood with the false prophets. Every soul as well has to go through a test to choose between the truth and falsehood. A person has to clarify to himself if his life is worth living without the higher levels he hasn't yet reached. If he feels that he is able to go on his life even though he hasn't attained higher levels yet in his life, then his "I" is getting in the way of his growth in Avodas Hashem. But if a person is prepared to give up his life in order to receive a higher level in Avodas Hashem, he has the key to it all.

Many people are trying to serve Hashem, but there are two kinds of people that serve Hashem. There are people who serve Hashem in an inner way, while there are many others who are just suffering and enduring the experiences of life, yet that doesn't make them "servants of Hashem". How can we tell the difference between them?

Those who are really serving Hashem are living a life of *mesirus nefesh*, every second. As long as a person isn't ready yet to give up his life for Hashem, he never passed his true test in his life (and every person has to at some point pass the "test of the *Akeidah*" in his life...). *Yiras Hashem* (fear of G-d) is only reached if we pass the true test in life, just as Avraham Avinu's greatness was only proved by his tenth and final test.

Without that sense of fear of Hashem in life – without realizing that it is better to be dead rather to be alive and not grow spiritually – a person will never be able to really acquire any matter in his Avodas Hashem.

The Inner Redemption

At first, these words seem very far from us, too difficult to work on, and perhaps way too lofty of a concept. But we cannot run away from the truth. When a person wants both this physical world and he also wants to grow spiritually, he must know that he is sorely mistaken.

Moshiach ben David is called "*bar nafli*" (Sanhedrin 96b). He will have no ego, and he will be entirely self-sacrificing for Hashem. This is the secret of the redemption. There will be a general redemption, in which we all await for Moshiach ben David to come; there is also a personal redemption, however, that each person can reveal in his very own soul - "*My soul will be drawn close to her redemption.*" There is a private redemption that can take place in every individual Jew's soul.

Just like the Moshiach who will come in the general redemption will be someone who has no life to himself and he will be all about *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem, so can each individual Jew strive for his own personal redemption and have *mesirus nefesh* to give up what he wants for closeness to Hashem.

These words apply to all areas of Avodas Hashem - they can be applied to any area a person wants to attain.

Vitality of the Soul - Revealing G-dliness

Hashem breathed a soul into man, from His very own spirit. The *nishmas chaim*, "breathe of life" which Hashem breathed into us, is a G-dly source of vitality that is found in every soul. To what does this apply?

A person generally feels that he is in charge of his life, and it is upon him to give himself up for Hashem if he wants to acquire spiritual attainment, as we said.

But it is even more than this. Hashem breathed into us a spirit that comes from His own breath, so to speak - and this means that the vitality in our own soul is not our own; it is from Hashem! If so, *mesirus nefesh* really means that one is revealing that his vitality, the air he breathes, is really coming directly from Hashem. "*And I will dwell in his innards.*" Hashem is found in each person, and we only have to bring Him out from concealment and reveal Him.

That should be the true way to realize it: all our life-force is a revelation of the G-dliness which Hashem has placed in us, and in order to **feel** this, we need *mesirus nefesh*. After a person has decided with conviction that he will give up his lifestyle for Hashem, he will realize that really he isn't

giving up anything! He has only given to Hashem what was already His in the first place. After all, his very life-force is a piece of Hashem. All our life and vitality streams to us directly from Hashem, and when a person truly recognizes this, he realizes that the energy in him is not his own, but a G-dly vitality sustaining him.

The *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) is called a “strange god” who inhabits the body of a person (Shabbos 105b). On a very subtle note, perhaps it can be said that a person tends to view the G-dliness in himself as something strange and foreign to him, and this is really because a person feels his ego very strongly, thus he doesn't feel the G-dly vitality sustaining him every second.

A person's Avodah is to clarify and recognize how each thing contains a G-dly vitality that sustains it. We do not mean for this to become mere intellectual information; any person who has read a little knows this. We mean that a person has to realize how the life-giving energy in each creation by essence comes from Hashem.

In order to clarify this concept, one has to clear away his own existence and give room for Hashem space to enter and be revealed in him.

There is also a more subtle kind of Avodah here.

From a superficial perspective, *mesirus nefesh* is that a person has to, let's say, give up some of his money to help someone out. If so, the attitude is that really the money is mine, but I'm giving it up for another, a good *middah* of being charitable. *Mesirus nefesh* in our Avodas Hashem, though, is much more than this. It is to feel that we're really not giving away anything for Hashem! We have to realize that our situation, without being prepared to give up anything for Hashem, is not really a life, but a deathlike kind of existence. So you're not really “giving up” your life for Hashem; you are instead gaining for yourself the true life, by being prepared to “give up” for Hashem.

If a person feels that he's giving up for Hashem, it will be very difficult for him to serve Hashem, because he will always feel like he is stepping on his ego and losing control over his life. He will always feel like he's depriving himself with all his *mesirus nefesh*. It is, of course, possible for a person to serve Hashem even with this attitude; but it will be very difficult. The simple way to do it is to realize that you don't really have anything of your own to give away to Hashem.

So altogether there are three levels:

1. That one feels like he is giving up “his life” for Hashem – and he feels deprived in doing so.
2. That he realizes that all of his life comes from Hashem.

3. That he realizes that he doesn't really have what to give away in the first place, because without *mesirus nefesh*, life is not a life, but death.

Above Free Will

Chazal (Shabbos 151a) state that when Moshiach comes, one of the changes that will happen is that there will be no more *bechirah* (free will).

Why are Chazal telling us what will be when Moshiach comes? Of what relevance does it have to us? What is the point in revealing to us that in the future our power to choose will disappear?

Chazal are revealing to us here that if a person reaches the inner point in himself – the ability of personal redemption, which can be reached even in today's times – he realizes the truth, that he is really not “giving” anything towards Hashem. We really have nothing to “give”; all we can do is reveal Hashem's existence.

That is how our power of free will disappears in the future. Free will means that I have what to give to Hashem, and I am choosing to give it for Him; “I'm in charge.” But in the future, we will “choose” not to “choose” – we will realize that all of life belongs to Hashem, not ourselves.

The true aspiration for perfection a person must have is to realize that there is G-dliness sustaining everything, and that means that Hashem *is* everything, as the Baal Shem Tov wrote. A person's simple mission is to realize that everything belongs to Hashem, and that we have nothing to give to Him.

It's possible that a person can know all this in his mind and even say these words over with his mouth, but that doesn't mean he is there yet. If a person wants to live these words, he has to be prepared to die at any second for Hashem; otherwise, he still thinks he's in charge of his life, and all these words will just be a superficial discussion.

This is the secret of the “light of Moshiach” which began to become revealed during the time of the Baal Shem Tov. It is for a person to really check himself and see if he's ready to have true *mesirus nefesh* for Hashem – to be above the regular kind of *mesirus nefesh*.

“*May He swallow up death forever.*” In the future, there will be no more death, and this is because we will all realize that life isn't possible without Hashem. When we realize that, there cannot be death,

because then the “true life” will be revealed – the revelation of Hashem’s existence and how He sustains the world.

On one hand, these words are about a very lofty concept, but on the other hand, they should be so simple to every person, as simple as can be. If a person has matured in his *ruchniyus* (spirituality), he should know that one cannot want both. It’s either or. A person is either prepared to give his life for Hashem, or he isn’t, which means that he will just go through constant ups and downs in his *ruchniyus* and he will never really get anywhere.

These words are clear, simple, and well-known to anyone who serves Hashem in an inner way. This is how the earlier generations were able to readily give up their lives *al kiddush Hashem*; they were thus deserving of miracles, because they were in control of the tendency in people towards superficiality.

Every single person has the power to be able to give himself up for Hashem, to accept that he is prepared even to die (if he must) in order to attain more closeness to Hashem.

May Hashem merit the entire Jewish people that we be inclined to serve Him, and that we should quickly merit the truest revelation of all – “*And Hashem will remain, alone*” – as a personal revelation in each of our souls.

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