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The Three Garments of the Soul - Action, Speech and Thought

As we have already clarified, the power of *ratzon* is like the other of our soul forces: it has an outer layer and inner layer. The outer layer of our *ratzon* is to desire superficial things, while the inner layer of our *ratzon* is to desire to serve the Creator. Our *avodah* is to come out of superficial *retzonos* and enter into our inner *ratzon*.

In the previous chapter, we explained one of the ways to do this, and it is by realizing that what we want doesn't get us anywhere. This is when a person firmly believes that nothing is up to him, and that only Hashem is in charge; such thinking helps a person weaken his *ratzon* for physical things.

There is a very important rule in serving Hashem which we must know. A person is made up of thought, speech and action – these are three garments of the soul. If so, there are three aspects in whatever a person wants (when it is for something physical). The percentage amount of how much thought there is to action and speech differ according to the situation, but these three factors are always present.

For example, we have said that one must understand that the fact that he wants something does nothing to make it happen. This is a thought. How do we bring this thought into our speech and actions as well?

We need to expand upon the thought. In order to impress this fact upon our ability of speech, we need to speak about this verbally. We already mentioned this in the beginning chapters, that we first need to reflect into something deeply with our mind, then verbalize it, and finally, to act upon it.

This is the rule in *Avodas Hashem*: our thoughts alone will not suffice, and we need to verbalize our thoughts and actualize them. The Ramban wrote that a person has to make sure that he is acting upon his inspiration.

Thoughts are a spiritual light – *ohr*. The *ohr* needs a receptacle (*kli*) to hold it and maintain it. That receptacle is our speech and our actions. If we just remain with lofty thoughts alone, they will remain afloat in the air – and the spiritual light of our thoughts will never become absorbed in us.

People want many, many things. There are two factors in our motivations: the *ratzon*, and the *middah* (behavior) which it is manifested in. A person likes something – which is a *middah* of *ahavah* (love). Then, he wants it (*ratzon*). The *ratzon* is covered over by the *middah*, which is its garment.

There is a well-known statement of the Kotzker Rebbe zt"l that one should not attempt to break his bad *middos*, because if he breaks them, he will be left with two of them!

Let us reflect into the depth of this statement, and then we can understand, with the help of Hashem, how exactly we can go about negating our superficial *retzonos* – and how we can enter and **actualize** our inner *ratzon*, which is “*Retzoneinu laasos retzoncha*” – “It is our will to do Your will.”

Knowing Doesn't Always Lead To Acting

As we explained, we must understand that just because we want something, that doesn't make it happen.

First, we must understand that we are made up of two kinds of desires. We have in us our inner *ratzon*, which is the desire to only do Hashem's will. “*Retzoneinu laasos retzoncha.*” We have also outer desires, which are all the various *retzonos* we recognize in ourselves.

The second thing we must be aware of is that we have no way of actualizing our outer desires. It's not up to us to get what we want physically; we already explained this before.

After we get used to these two facts – by thinking about it, and by verbalizing it – now we need to bring this knowledge into the realm of our actions. We need to actualize all of this information in our daily life.

Now comes the hard part! Even when a person has already reached a deep understanding of all that we have said so far, to **act** upon this is a whole different story. We all know that even if a person knows very well what the truth is, our heart can hold us back, and then we don't do it.

For example, when a person is in the middle of losing his temper, even if he is reminded of every statement in Chazal of how bad it is to get angry, and he is explained very well that it's pointless to get angry – he will lash out (angrily): “I **know** that, but I'm so angry!!” (In other words, his **soul** is not at peace, in spite of the fact that he “**knows**” how bad it is to get angry).

Just because a person knows about something doesn't mean that it affects how he behaves. A person can know very well that getting angry doesn't get you anywhere, it's damaging to his health, and that it's demeaning to his stature to lose his temper, etc. – yet even with all this knowledge, his soul doesn't feel that knowledge, and thus his behavior is unaffected.

We can compare this to someone who's trapped in the middle of the ocean, and he's drowning. He sees a board floating nearby and immediately grabs it, trying to climb onto it in the hope that it will somehow save him. He knows good and well that it's only going to tip him over and that it might make things even worse, yet he grabs it anyway, desperately. Just because a person “knows” that something is detrimental doesn't mean that he will be affected by this knowledge.

The same goes for our *retzonos*. Even after knowing that our physical *retzonos* don't get us anywhere, this isn't enough to affect us. To counter this problem, we need to extend our mental knowledge into the realm of our speech and actions.

We need to thus speak out our mind's knowledge about this with our mouths. We have explained how to do this before.

Now, we will explain how we can bring our knowledge into the realm of action – how we can actualize what we know.

Actually Giving Up Your Desires

The general idea of this is as follows.

Every person has some desires that are stronger than other desires, and it depends on each person. We all have things that we want very much, as well as other things that we want, but not as much as those things that we want very much.

For example, one kind of person feels a strong need for honor, and he will stop at nothing to gain more honor. Another kind of person also seeks honor, but not as much as he seeks other things in his life; he'll give up some honor if that's what it takes to get what he wants. He'd rather be lazy than get some honor, so if he is told that he will have to work very hard at something in order to get honored, he won't do it. His interest to take it easy is more appealing to him than some more honor.

There are countless scenarios of this idea, but the point is always the same: Every person has things that he wants, but he's give up those things so he can get something he wants more. Our soul is made up of four elements, and different people have in them an element that dominates over the other elements, causing each person to value certain things over others.

With regards to our discussion: if we want to make sure that we really believe that our *retzonos* don't get us anywhere, the sensible approach for this is to do this in steps.

First, begin by giving up things you want that aren't that important to you. This is a relatively easy challenge, and it helps you fight your *retzonos* slowly and in small steps.

For example, let's say a person likes to talk a lot. If we ask him not to talk about things he likes to talk about, this will be very hard for him, and it will be too hard for him to try to hold back from talking about those things. But we can ask him to stop talking about certain topics that he's anyways not so pulled after, and this will be effective, because he won't find it so hard to refrain from talking about those things.

So if a person is trying to get rid of his *retzonos* to always talk about everything, he should begin by getting used to the fact that not everything he wants to say can he say. He should say this verbally: "I can't say everything I want to say."

Such a person, who is trying to work on this, shouldn't just take upon himself that he will only say things that he thinks about beforehand. He will almost definitely fail such a resolution. Instead, he should do the exact opposite - he should tell himself "Not everything I want to say can I say." (We are only speaking about the kinds of conversations that are not forbidden, such as talking too much.) It is just for a person to get used to holding back his natural impulse to talk, and to put a lid on his mouth sometimes.

For example, he can accept upon himself that for twice a day, he won't say what he wants to say. It is up to each person to decide for himself what things he will refrain from talking about - it should be something that he doesn't feel such a strong urge to talk about anyway.

Acting, Together With Thought

However, we must stress here a very important point. In order to act practically upon this, we must make sure that we are aware of what we are trying to accomplish here.

Many people, who are trying to work on their *middos*, have a problem: they know that they must act differently, but they haven't thought enough beforehand about why they want to change.

Before, we mentioned that we need a *kli* (receptacle) in order to contain our *ohr* (spiritual light). The *ohr* is our lofty thoughts, and our *kli* is our speech and actions. We explained how to develop a *kli* to receive that *ohr*. But many people have the *kli*, and they don't have the *ohr* - in other words, they are trying to act this out, but they haven't clarified this yet to themselves. This problem results in years of fruitless efforts from working on oneself!

We can compare this to a non-observant Jew who has gone through much suffering in his life. Although we know that suffering purifies the soul and can bring a person closer to Hashem, it doesn't always affect people, and that is why we can find people who suffered in their life yet they are still non-observant. If a person already recognizes Hashem, then suffering can purify him and draw him closer to Hashem. Otherwise, he doesn't see suffering as a vehicle to get closer to Hashem (Unless he is a rare individual). Although suffering can help a person begin to search for meaning in his life, it doesn't bring him directly to being close to Hashem (unless he has the "*ohr*" - a recognition of Hashem).

This is a very fundamental fact: in whatever we work on, we need to be clear what the goal of it is.

Therefore, **before** we begin to try to practice self-improvement, we need to first clearly recognize where we are heading towards with all of this. Then, we need to actualize that recognition - we need a *kli* to contain the *ohr* (and we must have *ohr* to go into our *kli*!)

With regards to our discussion: When a person is beginning to work on getting rid of his superficial *retzonos*, he should **not** first begin by trying to change how he acts. It takes **months** to even recognize in our minds that superficial *retzonos* are an unworthy goal - simply put!

The first step one needs is to reflect in his mind, throughout the day, again and again, about the worthlessness of these *retzonos*. After a person feels that he has internalized this fact in his soul - and he feels it simply - he can then begin to bring this knowledge into the realm of practical action.

If a person still thinks that this is a very novel concept (that all *retzonos* for physical matters are pointless), it is not either recommended for him to try to bring this knowledge into practical life. He has to first clarify this intellectually by thinking about it over and over.

No one should say: "Okay, so I thought about this for two days, and now it's clear to me." This is sign of impatience. It takes a long time until a person is able to clarify the concept we have been discussing.

In the case of the person who has decided that he won't say everything he'd like to talk about it, he has to be clear to himself, as he's holding back from talking - about the reason for this. Otherwise, he's jumping to the action part of this without having thought about this enough, and his actions will prove unsuccessful.

In other words, resolving to change is not about "What am I going to **do** to change." It is rather about, "What am I **thinking** as I carry out those changes of action?"

It is not enough to have thought about it before I change - I have to actually be thinking as I'm carrying out the action of change about the purpose of why I'm doing it. Otherwise, it's pointless, and it will not bear any results.

Our Avodas Hashem needs an *ohr*, and then a *kli* - it first needs clarification in our minds, and then it needs to be carried out in the practical sense, each time we attempt to change.

Awareness As We Act

Reflect about this, until you see how simple these words are.

We mentioned before how our soul has three garments: thoughts, speech and action. Our lofty thoughts is our *ohr*, and our speech and actions are the *kli* that can contain the lofty thoughts and maintain them.

Let's think about our speech. What kind of speech will be effective to maintain our thoughts? Not every kind of speech works. What a person says in middle of his sleep doesn't do anything for him. Speech needs thought out in it in order to have any value. They have to "words that come from the heart, enter the heart." If our speech isn't emanating from our heart, it at least has to come from a mental recognition.

Thus, when we verbalize these matters, we need to say it with some feeling, and not just say the words. The more we recognize the truth of these matters, the more our speech will affect us when we verbalize these matters.

It's understandable to us that our speech must connect with our thoughts in order for it to be effective. The same must go for our actions. Actions only help us change when we think as we are doing them, and it's not enough to have thought about it before acting.

Thus, in whatever want to work on - in our case, building our power of *ratzon* - we need to mentally reflect on how we have two layers to our *ratzon* (external and internal), and then we need to think about this as we avoid the external *retzonos*.

One example we already gave - that if a person wants to hold back from saying everything that comes to his mind, he needs to think about this **as** he's holding back from talking. It should not be some superficial lip service ("I have accepted upon myself, for twice a day, not to say everything that comes to my mind, and therefore I will hold back from saying those things..."), but rather a clearer recognition:

"I have a *ratzon* to talk, and it is an external *ratzon* of mine, for it is not my innermost *ratzon*. My true *ratzon* is only to do Hashem's *ratzon* - I do not really want to talk, because it is not Hashem's *ratzon*. I want to remove my external *retzonos*, and therefore I am letting my inner *ratzon* take over my external *ratzon*. By slowing gaining control of my external *retzonos*, I will eventually reveal my inner *ratzon* in this way."

This kind of mentality (which we only described briefly) has to become alive as we refrain from our physical *retzonos*. In this way, our avodah will be much more solid, and we will be clear in what we are doing.

Remembering Hashem Throughout

Before we continue, let us remind ourselves of something very important which must accompany us in whatever we do.

It's very possible that a person is doing all of this, which is wonderful - but Hashem is out of the picture, and all he's doing is talking to himself! Without Hashem in the picture, a person is missing the inner point of this all.

The innermost point of all that we have been describing is to **work together with Hashem!** We must keep repeating this point, because it is the most truthful point from anything we have said here.

In other words, we need to talk to Hashem about everything we have learned here. Talk to Hashem

about any minute detail here – one can say the following:

“Ribono shel olam, You gave me an inner ratzon to do Your ratzon. You also gave me external desires which seek to do the opposite of Your ratzon. I know that my external desires are getting in the way of my inner ratzon. I am trying to hold back from those desires and instead reveal my inner ratzon to serve You. Please, help me succeed!”

Without doing this, a person ignores the most basic point. It’s possible that a person, all his life, is only involved in a life of Avodas Hashem, and he does wonderful things – yet he’s just “serving” Hashem, and Hashem isn’t even on his agenda at all, *rachmana litzlon* (May G-d have mercy upon him!)

This might sound very strange, but it’s true, and it’s one of the biggest mistakes people make when they seek to improve in their service toward the Creator: it is possible that a person is **servicing** the Creator his whole life, yet he has no **connection** with the Creator...he might be a “servant” of Hashem, but he lacks an actual bond with Him.

First Develop Your Individual Strengths, Then Unify Them All Together

To summarize our avodah: First, we need to think about these matters, and then we need to talk about it with Hashem (and still think into it as we *daven* to Him).

After some time, we can begin to actually change our actions; but we still have to think as we do those actions of change. Our whole psyche must be involved in what we do – action, speech, and thought. As we said, this is a step-by-step process, and we cannot improve our actions, speech and thoughts at once. We first need to change our thoughts, then our speech, and then our actions. We must go in these steps, or else we will not succeed.

This is actually the general introduction to our entire inner world.

What do we mean?

The abilities in our soul^[1] each stand on their own, but they are all part of one conglomerate. Our avodah is to build our soul – first by building each faculty in our soul separately, and then, to combine them together. Without combining our soul abilities together, we remain with a bunch of scattered parts of our soul.

There is also an opposite problem, in which a person only seeks to combine the parts of his soul together, but he never developed his individual strengths to begin with. He will lack a properly developed soul if he works like this.

We want our soul abilities to come together as a proper mixture, not as a mess thrown together. We can compare this to mixing different foods together – one way is a random mix which will lead to a horribly tasting food, while another kind of mix is planned out with an order, resulting in a delicacy.

So first, we have to recognize what each ability in our soul is, one by one. As you learn about each ability, focus just on that ability, and don’t try to see how it connects to another ability in the soul; then you’re mixing it up too much, because it will just confuse things.

We can give a simple example that explains this. Two of our *middos* are *atzlus* (laziness) and *kavod* (honor-seeking). Laziness comes from our element of earth, and honor comes from our element of fire. First, a person needs to know what laziness is and what honor is. Then, he should see how they can oppose each other, and then he needs to see how they can work together. But they must be seen

as two separate abilities.

As an example, many people want to begin improving themselves immediately by trying to avoid honor. (Anyone with an able thinking mind realizes that seeking honor is a bad thing, and if someone doesn't feel that way, his feelings are deadened.) But it's a mistake to begin by trying to avoid honor. First, one has to know what the concept of honor is! After knowing what something is, only then can we either build upon it or break it down.

A person should think: Do I want honor or not? If I do want honor – what kind of honor am I seeking? What does it give me, and what do I feel from getting honor? What are the things that give me honor?

A person is apt to think that he doesn't need to think about this, because he already understands that honor-seeking is a negative trait. But if that is his attitude, then he doesn't even understand what the concept of honor is.

There are actually three reasons why a person should know what honor is:

1. In order to honor others, we need to know what honor is.
2. In order to break the desire for honor, we need to know how to fight it, so if we don't know what honor is, we won't know how to fight it.
3. The *neshamah* (soul) is called *kavod* \honor.

We have only given one example of the idea, but the inner point is one and the same: we have to recognize what every *middah* is. It is simple that we have to know what the good *middos* are, but even bad *middos* we need to recognize.

This is always the rule, and it doesn't change – whether we are trying to develop a positive ability in our soul, or whether we are trying to break a negative ability in our soul. The *avodah* is always one and the same: we must know the structure of each ability.

The same goes for the *middah* of *ratzon*: we need to build our *ratzon* as a proper structure. First, we must develop our inner *ratzon*, mentally, by thinking and reflecting about it. Then, we need to verbalize it, and then we need to actualize it in our life. But we have to go in that order, and we cannot work on all three areas at once.

May Hashem help us stabilize our service to Him and give ourselves structure in how we serve Him, and then we can receive Heavenly assistance to change how we act; and may we merit to always be close to Him throughout our life as a result.

[1] *There are thirteen basic faculties of the soul, and this is explained in Getting To Know Your Soul of the author. Ratzon is the fourth highest faculty of the soul.*

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