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## Understanding Your Middos - 01 Elements and Traits

### ***What we first need to know***

This sefer discusses how we can work on our *middos*.

The Torah is entirely Hashem's wisdom. Just like the rest of the Torah, the subject of our *middos* – its beginning and its end – needs to be understood, even before we work on them. We can't work on our *Middos* unless we understand them. Just like "a wise person's question is half the answer", so is the understanding of our *middos* already half way toward working on them.

After understanding what our *middos* are, we can work on them. "Learning Torah is great, for it brings one to do actions"[1]. If our wisdom doesn't affect us practically, it is a lack in our actual wisdom; like the Sages say: "Anyone who says, 'All I do is learn Torah' doesn't even have the Torah." [2]

The first part of working on our *middos* is understanding their roots, and then we can reach their practical applications. Understanding the roots of the *middos* isn't quick. It is a great, deep wisdom and it needs a lot of introductions to explain it. First we need to know about the roots, and then we can learn about its branches.

We will attempt, with the help of Hashem, to start from the roots and slowly continue onward with this, as much as Hashem gives us the strength to.

### ***Three groups of Middos***

We are commanded in the Torah "to go in Hashem's ways." From here our Sages learn that must cling to His *middos*. We are supposed to resemble Hashem, who is merciful and compassionate. [3] The Sages have thus essentially revealed to us in this that just like all of Creation is rooted in Hashem, so are our *middos* rooted in the *middos* of Hashem.

There are three groups of *Middos*: the root *Middos*, the soul's *middos* and the body's *middos*.

The root *Middos* are Hashem's *middos* -- the 13 Attributes of Mercy. We are commanded to resemble these *middos* of Hashem. These are the root *middos*.

The second group of *Middos* are the soul's own *Middos* – Kindness, Justice and Compassion. Just like Hashem has *middos*, He created the soul with its own *middos*. Each of our Avos personified each of these *middos*: Avraham personified kindness, Yitzchok personified justice, and Yaakov personified compassion. These *middos* are not *middos* of the body – they are *middos* of our very soul.

The third group of *Middos* are what we are generally referring to in this *sefer*. They are the *middos* which come from our **nefesh habehamis** – our animalistic part of our soul, which is the lowest part of our soul. They are also called our **body's middos**. They are our negative emotions we know of: anger, jealousy, desire, honor, and so forth.

### ***It is only these middos which we need to fix***

So there are three groups of *middos*: *Middos* of Hashem, *middos* of our soul, and *middos* of our body (or lower part of our soul). The first two groups of *middos* do not need to be fixed. Hashem is perfect; all his *middos* are good, and so is our soul only good *middos*; our soul is pure, and its *middos* are pure.

It is only our body's *middos* which need to be fixed. Since Adam ate from the tree – which was mixed with good and evil – our *middos* have become a mixture of good and evil.

From a superficial understanding, there are seven primary emotions: *ahavah*\love, *yirah*\fear, *hispaarus*\pride, *nitzachon*\victory, *hodayah*\gratitude, *hiskashrus*\connection and *shiflus*\lowliness.<sup>[4]</sup> This is the general picture of the *middos*. Just like Creation was created in seven days, so do we have seven *middos*. But these are just the external layers of our *middos* - the inner layers of our *middos* are called “*Daas*” (lit. “knowledge”).

The Rambam, who codifies the proper conduct of a Jew, describes our *middos*\character traits as “*hilchos de'os*” – laws of “*Daas*.” This is because the outer layer of our *middos* have endless scenarios, but the inner layer of our *middos* is always one and the same – it is always *Daas*.

This means for us as follows. *Daas* is mixed with good and evil in it. As soon as Adam sinned and ate from the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”, all *middos* have become mixed with good and evil; *Daas* still remains at the core of the *middos*, but the outer layers of our *Middos* are a mixture of good and evil.

For example, the *middah* of *gaavah*\arrogance can be holy, such as when a person uses *gaavah* for holy reasons; it is written, “*And his heart was high in the ways of Hashem.*” This is called *gaavah d'kedushah*. A person can use *gaavah* for evil, and this is the kind of *gaavah* of which Hashem says, “I and him cannot dwell under one roof.”

The *middah* of *kaas*\anger as well might either be for good or for bad. If a person is only showing anger outwardly to reprove someone, but he doesn't feel an anger in his heart, then such anger is commendable; we also find that Hashem has a moment of anger every day, and this is obviously holy. Anger is evil, though, when a person gets angry and loses belief in Hashem – the Sages say that such an angry person is like an idol worshipper.

The same goes for the rest of all the *Middos*. We can always find instances in which they are either used for good or bad.

Had Adam not eaten from the *Eitz HaDaas* and instead have eaten from the *Eitz Hachaim*, then all our *middos* would always be good. Once Adam ate from the *Eitz HaDaas*, all our *middos* became mixed with evil.

To summarize so far, there are three kinds of *middos*.

1. There are *middos* of Hashem, which are always completely good.
2. These are the *middos* that also exist in the depths of our soul, and they are totally pure.
3. There are also *middos* which stem from our body – in other words, our *nefesh habehamis* (the

animal layer of our soul) – and these *middos* are a mixture of good and bad. It is this third category of *middos* which we seek to improve – this is where the area of *tikkun hamiddos* lies.

### ***There Is No Such Thing As ‘Bad’ Middos***

Having clarified that all our *middos* are a mixture of good and evil – for they are all rooted in the *Eitz HaDaas* – we can understand another fundamental which our Rabbis taught: there is no such thing as a “bad” *middah* or a “good” *middah*. The whole issue with our *middos* is how we are using it.

*Daas*, by essence, is always good and positive. When it is used wisely, it is called what we call “good” – but when misused, it is what we call “bad.”

Our Rabbis identified *Daas* as the power to lead (*hanhagah*). Moshe Rabbbeinu personified *Daas*, and he is the leader of the Jewish people – the “faithful shepherd” of Hashem.

That is true for the general, collective soul of the Jewish people. But when it comes to each person as an individual, *daas* is our power to “go in His ways” (*V’holachta b’drachav*). It is an ability in a person to lead himself and guide himself. If a person goes in the right way, his *daas* is called *daas tov*, “good” *daas*. If he is going in the incorrect path, his *daas* is *daas ra*, “evil” *daas* – like the students of Bilaam, who misuse their *daas*.

These are the words of our holy rabbis. They are clear matters. Now we will continue to the next step of this.

### ***The Roots of the Middos: The Four Elements***

The words of Rav Chaim Vital, in his *sefer Shaarei Kedushah*, are well-known: Man is made up of the four *yesodos*\elements – fire, wind, water and earth.[\[5\]](#)

He writes as well that these four elements are the roots of our *middos*. Arrogance and anger come from our fire. Forbidden speech comes from our wind. Desires come from our water. Sadness and laziness come from our earth.

In these words, Rav Chaim Vital has defined our *middos*: they are all essentially an outcome of its root element. For example, anger is not just a *middah* of anger – it is a result from an imbalance in the element of fire in the soul. Evil desires are a result from an imbalanced element of water, and sadness comes from an imbalanced element of earth, and so forth.

Our *middos* that we identify – arrogance, anger, forbidden speech, desires, sadness, laziness, etc. – are just the outer layer of the *middos*. The inner layer of our *middos* is the four elements – fire, wind, water, and earth. The four elements are the roots of our *middos* – which are the branches. Thus, fire is not a branch of arrogance; rather, arrogance is a branch of fire. Water is not the branch of desires – it is the other way around: desires are a branch of water.

From the words of Rav Chaim Vital, we see the deep approach to improve our *middos*: instead of working on our *middos*, we must work with their roots – which are the four elements. *Tikkun Hamiddos* is thus essentially all about fixing our fire, our wind, our water, and our earth.

For example, a person wants to get rid of his *gaavah*. From the superficial perspective, he needs to do just that – get rid of his *gaavah*. But the inner perspective is that he needs to fix up his element of fire. If a person wants to stop having lustful desires, the inner approach is to fix his element of water, as opposed to attempting to get rid of his desires.

When a person works to improve his *middos*, the question is: Is he working with the branches of the problem, or with the roots of the problem?

A person has to get to the root of the problem.

A person can do this either by directly tackling the root of the problem and then working with the branches, or he can at least start by working with the branches of the problem until he gets to the root of the problem. Either way, he must deal with the root of the problem at some point. Just working on the branches of the problem will prove unsuccessful.

We can see many people try to work on their *middos* and don't succeed. The Kotzker Rebbe zt"l said that this is because such people are trying to "break" their bad *middos*, and then they end up with "two" bad *middos*...

Why aren't people successful in improving their *middos*? It is because the person is only trying to fix the branches of the problem, not the root of the problem. A person has a lustful desire, and he wants to get rid of these desires by trying to break his desires – but this is only working on the branches of the problem. The root of the problem here lies in the element of water, which is the root of desire.

Therefore, if we want to define what it means to work on our *middos*, working on our "*middos*" is an incorrect definition! Working on our *middos* really means to work on our four elements of the soul: fire, wind, water, and earth. To be more precise, it is fire, wind, and water which are the active elements, while earth acts as a container for them.

The *middos* are really hidden – they aren't revealed to us. We see our *middos*, but we don't see their essence, which are our four elements. We can all see and identify anger or arrogance or forbidden speech or sadness. But we do not see their roots – the elements behind them.

Our Rabbis found a hint to this. Fire in Hebrew is *aish*. Water is *mayim*, and wind is *avir* (air). If we take the first letter of each of these three words, we get "*emesh*", which means "yesterday" in Hebrew. In other words, the three active elements of fire, wind and earth are always like yesterday – gone before we can even identify it. The four elements are hidden from us. People may have heard about the four elements, but do not actually identify with them.

As a result, people have misconceptions when they try to work on their *middos*. They attempt to break their *middos* – the *middah* itself, without uncovering its root element. A person might look through many sefarim for advice on how to work on any of his *middos*: how to work on anger, how to work on arrogance, etc. But to try to work on oneself in this way lacks a basic understanding of our *middos* and how we work on them.

We need to start by learning about our *yesodos*\elements, not about our *middos*. From learning about our elements, we can come to learn about our *middos* – with the help of Hashem. We need to first learn what fire, wind, water, and earth are about. Then we need to see how each of the elements are actually comprised of the other three, and how each of the elements can be used in a healthy and unhealthy way. We need to learn how to steer our unhealthy usages of the elements in a positive and healthy direction.

That is *tikkun hamiddos*.

### ***This Does Not Apply To The Middos of Hashem***

We will emphasize here that when we discuss the four elements, as we mentioned before, we are not speaking about how Hashem uses these elements. Although we find sometimes that Hashem is called

“a consuming fire” or a “wind of Hashem”, and other such places, we are not speaking about the Creator here or even about His *middos*.

We are also not speaking here about the four elements of our *neshamah* – the higher part of our soul, which is completely spiritual.

We are discussing here only the *middos* which stem from our body, which our physical emotions. It is our physical emotions which are made up of the elements of fire, wind, water and earth.

There are elements which are lower than the kind we are discussing, and these are the purely physical elements we see. This is the dirt we walk on, the water we drink, the air we feel and the fire we cook with. We are definitely not discussing these four elements, which are entirely physical.

Anything in the material world is made up of the four elements. Everything contains in it some warmth (fire), some movement (wind), some moisture or coldness (water), and some structure (earth). The table and chair in front of us contains each of the four elements – but we are not coming to explain what this is. We are discussing the four elements of our soul – the fire in our soul, the wind in our soul, the water in our soul, and the earth in our soul. It is an entirely different class of its own.

### **How The Elements Complement Each Other**

As we have brought from our teachers, each of the four elements has its own nature. The nature of fire is warmth and dryness. The nature of wind is warmth and moisture. Water is cold and moist, while earth is cold and dry.[\[6\]](#)

Each of the four elements this divides into two classes: it is either hot or cold, and it is either moist or dry. These natures define the four elements.

Everything is made up of opposites – there is a good and evil side to everything. Hashem created an opposite for everything. If there is warmth, there is coldness. If there is dryness, there is moisture.[\[7\]](#)

The two root elements are fire and water. Fire is hot and dry, while water is moist and cold. By contrast, wind and earth each take one of the natures of each fire and water. Earth resembles water in that it is naturally cold, and it also resembles fire in that it is dry. The earth gets its coldness from water, and it gets its dryness from fire. Wind gets its natural heat from fire, and it gets its moisture from water. To be more specific: heat is rooted in fire, coldness is rooted in water, moisture is rooted in wind, and dryness is rooted in earth.

Fire and water are natural opposites – we do not ever find a combination of them. Water puts out fire, and fire heats up water and evaporates it. Fire and water are always the classic example of opposites, according to the Sages; that is the phenomenon of the heavens, which are called *shomayim* – a combination of the words *aish* (fire) and *mayim* (water).

However, the other elements of wind and earth can serve as a bridge between them and maintain equilibrium in between the fire and water. How can we see this? The element of earth in the soul gets warmth from fire and moisture from water, or it gets dryness from fire and coldness from water. In this way, the qualities of fire and water can be put together without putting each other out.

If the world (and our soul) would only have fire and water in it, we couldn't exist. For this, we have wind and earth. Wind can sustain fire, as we find that the wind can blow fire in a certain direction. Wind can also direct water by making clouds from the moisture of water. “Difficult waters can be taken care of, by the clouds.”[\[8\]](#) From this we see that wind can combine with both fire and water. Earth can also combine with fire and water and take qualities from each.

Thus, the elements of wind and earth serve to combine the various *middos*.<sup>[9]</sup>

### **The Real Meaning of “Good” Middos**

Let us make this matter clearer.

What exactly is a good *middah*, and what is a bad *middah*?

In the beginning of this chapter, we have said that a good *middah* is when we use the *middah* positively, and a bad *middah* is when we use the *middah* negatively. That is a proper, general definition. But to give a more detailed definition, a good *middah* is when we combine a *middah* with its opposite. A bad *middah*, by contrast, is when we fail to combine a *middah* with its opposite.

We can give an example for this from Chazal, concerning the *middos* of Hashem. It is written, “Serve Hashem with awe, and rejoice with trembling.” Chazal<sup>[10]</sup> explain this to mean, “Where there is rejoicing, let there be trembling there.” What is the meaning of this statement? Many explanations are given, but there is one that applies to our current discussion: good *middos* are *middos* that can work together with an opposing *middah*.

For example, fire and water, the classic opposites, are combined to form heaven. For this reason, Hashem is called “He who makes peace on high.” In Heaven, the angels only have good *middos*, because in Heaven, opposites can come together in harmony. But on this world, fire and water do not combine, and thus we find bad *middos* on this world amongst people. Bad *middos* are essentially a product of failing to synthesize opposing *middos*.

In this lays a deep and basic understanding about “good *middos*” and “bad *middos*.” Simply speaking, we think that anger or jealousy are bad *middos*, and that nothing good can be said of them; and that good *middos* means to benefit other people by acting refined. This is true, but there is a deeper definition to our *middos*.

If we have a superficial perspective and merely look at our *middos* as “*middos*”, then we a good *middah* means to use a *middah* for a good cause – such as to use *gaavah* for a holy purpose – and a bad *middah* is to use a *middah* for evil purposes. But if we have the inner perspective on our *middos* – which is to see the elements behind them – then we can see either a *middah* that results from a combination of two opposing elements (which will result in a good *middah*), or we see a *middah* that results from a separation of these elements (which will result in a bad *middah*).

For this reason, someone who achieves perfection of character is called “*adam shalem*” – “perfect man”. Someone who has attained that balance between all his various *middos* has succeed in combining opposite *middos*, and thus he gains the tile of *adam shalem*.

In order to achieve this equilibrium, we need to understand the natures of each of the elements. We also need to know be aware of all the opposite natures in different elements we encounter, and then we can see how to combine them.

If we are to succeed in combining all the various *middos* together and to attain this equilibrium, we first need to see how the various natures of the elements contradict and oppose each other.

### **Unifying the Middos**

We will broaden this discussion more.

A person has either a superficial perspective on life, or has the inner perspective.

From the superficial perspective, life appears to us as a bunch of details. Our spiritual mission seems daunting from all the details it entails, and our physical life is also full of countless details. Our spiritual job on this earth involves Torah study, the *mitzvos*, doing kindness, having good *middos*, *davening*, etc. Every person can add his own list of what he is supposed to attain spiritually.

Is there anything that connects all these details together? A superficial response would be, "Yes, because they are all about *ruchniyus*", or "They are all about serving the Creator." That is true, but this is a shallow mentality.

The inner answer to this involves using our power of wisdom. The Menorah was made up of many details, but it is called "*miksheh achas*" - "one piece." In other words, there is a way for a person to see how many details connect into one piece. The Sages say that if one wants to become wise, he should go southward, because the Menorah was in the south of the Temple<sup>[11]</sup>; in other words, if one wants to be wise, he should see the lesson from the Menorah, which was all "one piece."

What we need is to acquire a "unified outlook", in which we can see a bunch of details as all one being one piece.

When it comes to our *middos*, the same is true. How many good *middos* are there, and how many bad *middos* are there? Open up a sefer *Orchos Tzaddikim*, and you will find a list of thirty various *middos*. If you look through more *sefarim*, you will find even more *middos*...

If a person is trying to improve his "*middos*" - he wants to work on his anger, on his jealousy, on his desire, on abstaining from honor, on becoming happier, on becoming more energetic with doing *mitzvos*, etc. - this is a proper thing to do, but it will take too much work. We know that "The task is not upon you to complete", but we also know that "You are not either exempt from it." Working on each *middah* separately takes too much work. It is a superficial approach.

The inner approach is to have a unified perspective. Instead of seeing how there are so many *middos* to work on, see how you can unify them all together.

With this approach, it's not that you have to "work on your *gaavah*" or "work on your anger." That is not the *avodah*! The *avodah* is to learn how to combine our *gaavah* or our anger with the other *middos*. Combining our anger with another *middah* will refine our anger, and combining our *gaavah* with another *middah* will refine our *gaavah*.

This is not just another way of defining *tikkun hamiddos*. It is a perspective which can totally transform a person's life.

### ***The Order of the Elements - and The Lesson We Learn From It***

Now we can understand another thing.

We have said that there are four elements in Creation - fire, wind, water and earth. Chazal reveal to us that first Hashem created wind, and from wind He made water; from water He made fire, from water He made snow, and from snow He made earth.

Why did Hashem make it this way? Why didn't He just create each of them all at once separately - why did He have to make it that one element created another? It is to show that the four elements are not meant to be worked on separately; they are meant to be combined, and that is how we fix them. Had they been created each separately, it wouldn't be possible to unify them all together. Instead, one element lead to the next element, and this shows us that they can be combined and unified.

We see this correlation as well from the creation of man and woman. Hashem first created them as one body, and then He took Adam's rib and created Chavah from it. Why didn't He instead create them as two bodies to start out with and then unify them? It is because only something that was one unit to start out with can return to its unified state. But if it is separated to begin with, then it never becomes unified again.

We also find this concept by an infant, who is taught the entire Torah in his mother's womb, only to get tapped by an angel on his mouth and forget it all. We can ask: If he's going to forget the Torah anyway, what is the point of being taught by the angel? There is a well-known answer to this question, that in order for a person to return to once again knowing the Torah, he first has to have known it at some point beforehand. If a person would never have been taught the Torah beforehand, he wouldn't be able to return to it.

The same is true for our *middos*. If our *middos* were just meant to be separate creations - we would never be able to connect them together. After all, if they each stand on their own, why should I connect them? The job would be just to fix each *middah* separately.

But when we understand the inner depth to *tikkun hamiddos*, we see that the *middos* all come from each other because they are meant to become connected. It is our mission to unify them all together, as they were at their initial created state.

### ***Middah* - "Measured"**

The word "*middos*" has two meanings. It can either mean character traits, such as love, fear, anger, happiness, etc. Or, it can mean "measure" - in other words, *middos* have limits. It seems that these two definitions of the concept of "*middos*" are totally different and not related - one kind of *middos* is our emotions, while the other kind of *middos* are measurements of the Torah, such as three cubits (*amos*), three handbreadths (*tefachim*), the size of an olive (*k'zayis*), the size of an egg (*k'beitzah*), etc.

But the root of both meanings is one and the same, and thus they are indeed related. If we know what the root of both meanings is, it sharpens our understanding of the *middos*.

Every *middah* is essentially limited - when it reaches up until its proper limit, it is defined "*middah*." *Middos* which break the limit of that *middah* lose their title of *middah*. When the rules of a *middah* have been broken, it is no longer a *middah*, because by very essence, a *middah* is limited; if its limits have been crossed, it is by definition not a *middah*.

It appears simply to us that there are "good" *middos* and "bad" *middos*. But this is actually incorrect. A bad *middah* is not a *middah*, because since the limits of the *middah* have been broken, it is no longer a *middah* - thus there is no such thing as a "bad" *middah*. If we want to give a title to "bad *middos*", we can call them just "bad" - something which either went over the limits, or didn't reach its limits.

When a *middah* is in its proper place, it can be said that "A man who stands in his place comes in peace." When a person crosses the line of where he's supposed to be, peace is ruined, and strife starts.

If so, now we know what "good *middos*" are what "bad *middos*" are. Good *middos* are when our elements are in proper measurement, not crossing their limits. In this situation, opposites can combine and work together, because they won't spread out into places they aren't supposed to be. But if a person's *middos* aren't in measure - if their limits are being broken - then we call this "bad *middos*" (because we have no other way of describing this).

## ***Each Element Divides Into Four Parts***

Our Rabbis also taught that each of the elements have in them all four elements. In fire, there is fire, as well as wind, water and earth. The same goes for the rest of the elements as well. Altogether, there are sixteen possibilities, because each of the four elements divides into four. [\[12\]](#)

Therefore, when we speak of how to balance the elements, there are two different ways to balance. One way is to balance each of the elements with the other elements, and another way is to balance the elements within each of the elements. (Later, with the help of Hashem, we will explain that just as there is an avodah to balance the elements, so is there an avodah to differentiate between each of the elements and work with each one separately).

In addition to this, we must also know that if a certain nature is manifest in one of the elements, it also exists in the other elements. For example, when we learn about the various natures of earth, those same traits also exist in water; it is not manifest in the element of water itself, but in the *earth* contained in the water. You will also find it in the earth of wind, as well as in the earth of fire.

For example, if earth has a certain nature, then we can find that very same nature also in wind, water and fire. The only question is if that nature is coming from a certain element as a whole (either earth, wind, water or fire), or if it is coming from a more specific nature (either from the earth contained in fire, earth contained in wind, or earth contained in water).

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In the coming chapters, with the help of Hashem, we will learn about each of the elements. First we will study the general concept of each element, and its natures. Then we will learn how to balance each element with the other elements, until we get to the practical outcomes from this.

The words here are based on the words of our Rabbis. We will try to explain these matters at their root, at their source, as much as possible. This is not my own logic that I have devised; it is rather an arrangement and clarification of their words.

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[\[1\]](#) *Kiddushin 40b*

[\[2\]](#) *Yevamos 109b*

[\[3\]](#) *Shabbos 133b*

[\[4\]](#) *These seven emotions can be used either positively or negatively, and they are the subject of*

another sefer of the author, *Da Es Hargoshosecha (Getting To Know Your Feelings)*.

**[5]** For more on this, see also sefer *Imrei Pinchas*, Vol. I, p.401.

**[6]** See *Remak*, siman 82, page 308; also see *Pardes Rimonim*, shaar 9, and *Shaar HaMachriim* perek 3; also see *Midrash HaNeelam: Zohar Chadash: 17b*, and *Gra to Yeshayahu 11:1*.

**[7]** See *Gra*, *Tikkunim*, *Tikkun 69*.

**[8]** *Bava Basra 10a*

**[9]** See *Meor Einayim*, *parshas Mattos*

**[10]** *Yalkut Shimeoni*, *Tehillim*, 623.

**[11]** *Bava Basra 25b*

**[12]** See *Shaar HaGilgulim*, *Hakdamah*, 18. See also *Eitz Chaim*, *Shaar 50*.

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