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Humans Can Choose Between Their Emotions and Thoughts

We are currently learning about the 70 forces of the soul listed by the Vilna Gaon. Ten of these are our feelings (“*margish*” in Hebrew), and included in these are our five thinking abilities: imagination (*medameh*), combining images in the mind (*markiv*), protecting the image (*shoimer*), memory (*zoicher*), and actual thought (*choishev*).

Animals as well have these abilities, but people are different in animals in the following way.

In a human being, we have two distinct abilities – our feelings\emotions, and our thoughts. In every thought, there is a feeling contained in it, and in every feeling, there is also a thought. The question is if a person can **feel** the *thought* contained in a *feeling*, and if he can **feel** the *feeling* contained in a *thought*.

An animal can think and feel, but it does not have *bechirah* (free will) to choose if it will follow its feeling or its thought. It has a degree of *bechirah* to the extent that it is in control of its movements and it decides where it will go, but it does not actually have self-control over itself, so its *bechirah* is underdeveloped and thus incomplete. An animal does not have the ability to take apart its feelings from its thoughts, nor can it extract its thoughts from its feelings.

By contrast, human beings can choose to either follow the emotion in a thought, or the thought in an emotion. It is a person’s nature to follow his emotions, but we also have free will (*bechirah*) to choose to follow our thoughts instead. We can choose to let our thoughts overpower our natural emotions.

When Imagination Is Preceding How We Think

The Vilna Gaon lists the power of imagination, before he lists the power of thought. Why doesn’t he first list thought, before he lists imagination? It must be because our thoughts are contained in our imagination, not that our imagination is contained in our thoughts. In other words, we (initially) think *through* our imagination.

Most people have not yet developed their souls yet, and they are still at the level of *nefesh habehaimis*, the lower, animalistic layer of the soul. Therefore, most people live life through their *nefesh habehaimis*, and their thinking process is left undeveloped – with the imagination as the basis of their thinking (as opposed to actual thinking being the basis to imagination). This will result in a kind of life in which the person’s very thinking is based upon imagination. Thus, most people are experiencing all of their thoughts through their **imagination**, not through their actual **thoughts**.

What is the depth behind the concept of imagination? A person uses his imagination to compare things in his mind.

Man is called "*adam*", and this can have two meanings to it. "*Adam*" comes from the word "*adameh*", which means "I will resemble", alluding to man's deep ability to become spiritually refined and to come to "resemble", on some level, the Creator. This is the good side to our power of *medameh*\imagination\comparing: when we get ourselves to "resemble" the Creator. But "*adam*" can also come from the word "*adamah*", "earth" – a reference to the earthiness in a human, which is the pull towards imagination.

The entire power of the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) is to convince a person to do evil, using the power of *medameh*\imagination. Sometimes our imagination can be used for holiness. However, holy imagination and evil imagination are entirely different kinds of imagination; they work in different ways.

When imagination is used for evil (which is the kind of imagination that the *yetzer hora* employs), the imaginative thought in a person is preceding the rational thought of the person, resulting in a thinking that is based upon imagination. This is always the root of sin: when a person's thoughts are based upon imagination.

By contrast, good imagination, the power of our *yetzer tov*, is when our thoughts are coming before our imagination, resulting in a reliable kind of imagination that we can trust, for it is based on our real power of thought.

Mental Picture Vs. Conceptualization Without A Picture

Medameh\Imagination, itself, consists of two abilities (which we brought before from the Vilna Gaon's list of the 70 forces): *zoicher*\memory, and *shoimer*\protecting the images of the mind.

Ever since Adam ate from the evil *Eitz HaDaas* (The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), our thinking process has become damaged in that our imagination initially precedes our thoughts.

Imagination and thought are totally different two different kinds of perception. How can we know if we are imagining something, or if we are really thinking of what it is?

The way is as follows. Imagination is a mental picture; a person pictures a certain image of something in his mind, and he thinks about it – that's imagination. Thought, however, is to think about something on a purely intellectual level, without giving yourself a mental picture in order to be able to think about it. A person's real thoughts can think about a concept even if there is no picture or image in the mind about it.

Imagination is thus all about picturing. The *yetzer hora*, who always employs imagination to get a person to sin, is essentially putting a picture in your head, in the hope that this will entice you. Children think always through their imagination and love to go after pictures.

When a person never develops his power of true thought, he has to picture everything in order to understand anything. If he goes his whole life like this, he remains at the level of *nefesh habehaimis* – which leaves him at the level of the *yetzer hora*. His mind never develops, and he remains his whole life at the level of imagination – a childish kind of thinking.

When a person wants to see a picture of something, it's really coming from his imagination. A more mature kind of thinking is for a person to want to understand the intellectual understanding behind a matter; that's all he's interested in seeing. The person who has developed his thoughts has his

thoughts preceding imagination, and therefore, he wants to get the intellectual understanding of a matter first, without trying to get some “picture” of it.

The desire in a person for an intellectual understanding of something – as opposed to being able to picture it – is essentially the power of the *yetzer tov*, the true power of thought in a person.

In the works of *mussar*, it is brought that a person should use his imagination to imagine spiritual realities (such as imagining what it’s like to suffer in Gehinnom).^[1] But this is a kind of imagination which isn’t regular imagination; it is a kind of imagination which is preceded by real thought. It’s not just to simply fantasize about these things; real thought has to precede the imagination in order for such imagination to be holy.

Fighting the Yetzer Hora\Evil Fantasies - Through The Power of “Shoimer”

Our entire struggle with the *yetzer hora* is a war that takes place in our imagination. The *yetzer hora* comes to us with its evil image, and we then feel a pull towards the image in our head. How do we fight it?

We can only fight it using our own imagination; when we imagine what the good and right thing to do is, that imagination can overpower the evil image in our head.

However, the problem is that people usually fall to the evil image which the *yetzer hora* presents, and it is very hard to choose between good and evil when the *yetzer hora* presents a luring image in our head. In order to succeed over the *yetzer hora*’s evil fantasies, we need to make use of the other abilities we mentioned, as we will now explain.

We need to imagine something good that will overpower the evil imagination, when the *yetzer hora* is overtaking us. People usually choose the evil imagination, since their thinking abilities are undeveloped. How can we get our good imagination, then, to overpower the evil imagination?

The ability in the soul which is called “*shoimer*”, “protecting images in the mind”, is what stores our imagination. Therefore, we need to make use of the power of “*shoimer*” to guard and protect our holy images, and then we will be able to summon up those holy images when we are presented with evil images in our head. If we succeed, our power of “*shoimer*” protects the holy images in our head, and then we overpower the evil fantasies in our mind.

When the *yetzer hora* is challenging us, our thoughts leave us. We are left without our power of *choishev*\thinking, and we can’t think straight. How are we able to fight the *yetzer hora*, then? The only way is if we have developed our more subconscious kind of thinking, which is our power of *shoimer*. Our power of *shoimer* can come and protect our mind so that it doesn’t fall to the evil fantasy, and thus be able to choose not to sin.^[2]

Doing Teshuvah - Through Repairing Your Mind

By maintaining our ability of “*shoimer*”, we are able to “protect” our own imagination from falling to the evil kind of imagination, and we then able to use our imagination for good and overpower the evil imagination when it allures us.

This is really the concept of *teshuvah*. When a person does *teshuvah*, he is connecting the past with the present, inspiring himself to change now because of what happened in his past. In the same way, using our power of “*shoimer*” helps us choose good in the present, by summoning forth the holy images we have developed in our minds, from past experiences.

On an even deeper note, using our ability of “*shoimer*” is like doing *teshuvah*, because just like *teshuvah* “returns” a person, so does developing our mind’s abilities help us “return” our power of imagination\medameh to its original source, which is the power of *choishev*\thought.

Chazal (Sukkah 52a) say that in the future, Hashem will slaughter the *yetzer hora*. The depth behind this matter is that since we will do *teshuvah*, our mind will be returned to its original state, and thus all evil fantasies will cease.

This is the secret to all success in life: fighting our evil fantasies:through being able to protect our holy imagination.

“Zoicher” Must Precede “Shoimer”

In order to be able to develop our power of “*shoimer*”, though, we must first develop its preceding force in the soul: the power of “*zoicher*” (memory), which enables us to remember an image of holiness in the first place. Then the ability of *shoimer* can protect that holy memory and hold onto it, so that when the *medameh**yetzer hora* (evil imagination) enters our mind with some alluring image that is evil, the power of *shoimer* will guard our mind and the imagination will cease on its own.

When our ability of “*zoicher*” is preceding our ability of “*shoimer*”, then the *yetzer hora* will fall away. Thus, our power of *zoicher* needs to have been developed before *shoimer*, and this will enable *shoimer* to work properly. But if our ability of “*shoimer*” is dominating before we have developed the power of *zoicher* - in other words, if our imagination is the basis of how we think - our minds will not be fortified enough to avoid fantasizing evil and forbidden thoughts.

This is the secret, inner layer of life: the power of how overcoming evil, alluring temptations that enter our mind. We can do it by making sure that our ability of “*zoicher*” is the basis in how we think, so that our ability of *zoicher* is preceding our ability of *shoimer*.[\[3\]](#)

This is a guaranteed way to exit all evil fantasies. It is the way to reach the holy kind of *medameh*, which is “*adameh l’elyon*”, “I will resemble the One above.”

[\[1\]](#) This is mentioned in *Ohr Yisrael* of Reb Yisrael Salanter

[\[2\]](#) See also *Getting To Know Your Thoughts, Chapter 17: How To Use Imagination For Holiness*.

[\[3\]](#) For a more detailed guidance on how to develop our power of “*zoicher*” to precede our power of “*shoimer*”, see ***Getting To Know Your Thoughts, Chapter 5: Two Stages of Understanding - Intellect and Picture***. See also ***70 Forces of the Soul #039: Memory*** (English translation of this will hopefully be available in the near future, b’ezras Hashem).