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The Earth Is Dry and Hard

Another nature contained in the element of earth [and soon, we will learn about the *middos* which branch out from this particular aspect of earth[1]] is that earth is of a hard substance. Of all the four elements, earth is the hardest, while wind is the softest.

Just as there are four elements in the soul – fire, wind, water, and earth – so are there four unique natures that can be present in each of them: warmth, coldness, moisture and dryness. Warmth is mainly manifest in fire; moisture is mainly found with wind; coldness is the main trait in water, and dryness is the main nature of earth.

Of these four natures – warmth, coldness, moisture, and dryness – it is clear that dryness is the hardest substance. Dryness is the source of the earth's hard material. Although dryness is also present in fire, the defining nature of fire is its warmth. Earth's defining nature is its dryness. (These are the words of the Vilna Gaon)[2].

The Traits of Stubbornness, Brazenness, Cruelty and Anger

Let's first think into the *middos* that this nature of earth produces.

The word "hard" in Hebrew means *koshi*, which comes from the word "***kashyus oref***", "stiff-necked." Hashem rebuked the Jewish people by the sin of the Golden Calf that were a "stiff-necked" nation.[3] There is a certain negative trait in which a person becomes hardened and stiff-necked.

Another evil trait which stems from the hardening aspect in earth is called ***azus***, brazenness. "A brazen-faced person goes to *Gehinnom*." [4] The Maharal [5] explains that a brazen person is someone who is unfazed, in a situation where he is supposed to show some subservience. A person is supposed to have a certain degree of shame from another person and be concerned of another's reaction towards him. If instead he acts indifferent toward others, he is called brazen.

To give an example, the Gemara says that normally a person is not brazen-faced enough to lie to his borrower and deny that he borrowed the money.[6] If he does deny it, though, he is called "brazen-faced".

When a person acts brazen (for evil), he uses the hard nature of earth to harden himself inside and act indifferent to others' feelings.

Understandably, the trait of *azus*\brazenness can be used either for good or evil, just like all the other traits. The Jewish people are praised for being stubborn when it comes to remaining steadfast to keeping the mitzvos; this is the meaning of the statement, “*Yisrael* is the most brazen of all the nations.”^[7] But when someone acts brazen for an evil agenda, of him it is applied the statement of our Sages, “A brazen-faced person goes to *Gehinnom*.”

Right now, we will not discuss when brazenness is evil and when it can be good; we are merely analyzing the nature of this trait, which is that it comes from inner hardening, in which a person becomes indifferent. When a person is soft inside, he reacts from other people; when he is hardened inside, he is indifferent to others and he doesn't react to those whom he is dealing with.

Another trait which stems from earth's hardness is the trait of cruelty. Cruelty is really a branch of brazenness. A cruel person is also indifferent to others, but he goes even further than a brazen person. A brazen person is simply insensitive to another, but he doesn't take action against the other person. A cruel person, though, will act upon his brazenness and mistreat the other.

Another trait which stems from the hard nature of earth, although it is not as obvious, is the trait of anger. Anger is fueled by the dryness of fire, as well as the heat of fire, which branches out from the dryness in the fire. Since dryness is rooted in fire, and there is dryness as well in earth, there is always a degree of hardening found in the element of fire, which is the root of the trait of anger.

To summarize, the four traits which stem from earth's hardness are: evil stubbornness, brazenness, cruelty, and anger.

First we will study what the nature of hardness in earth is, with the help of Hashem, and after that we will discuss the *middos* which come from this.

The Source of Hardness

Where does hardness come from? As we mentioned earlier, earth came from water. Water is cold and moist; when it becomes snow, its moisture is hidden, because it solidifies, and it simply remains with the coldness of the water. Snow is solid and cold, which was formed into earth. Thus, all hardening comes from water that becomes solidified. When water gets too cold, it solidifies, and it can now produce something hard. Hashem told the snow to make the earth (see *Iyov* 37:6).

So hardness comes from the removal of moisture, due to a heavy amount of cold. When moisture is removed, there is dryness which creates a hardness.

To analyze this deeper, in Egypt, there was *avodah koshoh*, difficult labor. Why was it so difficult? The Gemara explains that men were forced to do women's work, and women were forced to do men's work. This made it in particular an *avodah koshoh*; the difficulty was not mainly because it was so grueling, but because it was challenging – men and women had to exchange roles. They were being challenged. The word *koshoh* has the same root letter as the word *koshi*; thus, *koshi*\hardness comes when there is *koshoh*\challenge.

We can learn from this that when something is a challenge to me, it is “hard”. It is a *koshi* upon me. To take this even further, when something feels too heavy upon a person to bear, he encounters a difficulty. So when something feels like a heavy weight upon me, it feels hard and difficult for me to endure.

Chazal say that from all of the hard substances which Hashem created, death is called the “hardest” substance of them all.^[8] A mountain, which is hard and solid, can be cut with metal. Metal can be reduced by fire. Fire is put out by water, and water is absorbed by the clouds. Clouds are dispersed by

the wind, while the physical body of man can withstand winds. The body is broken by fears that can paralyze it, and fears can be eliminated through wine. Wine's effect is taken away by sleep. From all of these things, death is the hardest substance, because it can take away sleep.

The depth behind this matter is because at death, a person's body returns to the earth, and since earth is the hardest substance and the root of all hardness, death is called the hardest material, because death is associated with earth.

Yet, there is something even harder than death. Chazal say that a bad wife is more challenging to a person than even the Angel of Death.^[9] The Angel of Death makes even the worst illnesses seem like child's play, for it can come and actually bring upon death to the person. But a bad wife, Chazal say, is even worse to a person than the Angel of Death.

A wife is called *eizer k'negdo*, the "helpmate who opposes man." Because a wife opposes and challenges her husband, she is more difficult to the husband than any of the other difficulties he faces.

If the husband merits it, he merits a wife who helps him through the oppositions. He then discovers that she does not really oppose him, but that she is instead helping him. But even if when she is helping him, he will still feel somewhat opposed by her, because in order to help him reach perfection, she has to oppose him along the way.

Another reason given for this (by our Sages) is because a woman was created from the rib of man, which is called *tzela* in Hebrew, and *tzela* is synonymous with the word *ketzeh*, "end." Thus, since the rib is a hard place of the body, and the rib alludes to an end, we can learn from this that a person feels that something is hard when he feels toward it as if it is his "end".

We see this clearly when we compare the four elements. Earth is also the "last" element, while the other elements of fire, wind and water are the beginning elements. Earth symbolizes the ending of the Creation, for it was the last element in the process of Creation. The fact that it is an "end" is the root of its hardness.

To illustrate the concept (of how hardness and ends are related), a wall of the city is placed at the ends of the city for protection. It is a hard wall, and it is at the ends of the city.

We can give more examples of the concept, but the point is that when there is an end to something, this is what defines its hardness. "Ends" therefore create hardness and difficulties for a person [soon we will explain what we are referring to].

Our body and our soul were taken from two opposite ends of Creation. Our soul comes from Heaven, while our body is created from the earth. Thus, our body opposes our soul, because it was taken from the endpoint - from the perspective of our soul, which comes from Heaven, the opposite and furthest point from the earth. For this reason, we express in the "*Asher Yotzar*" blessing that it is a wonder that Hashem allows our body and soul to co-exist, when they are such opposites, as they were each taken from the opposite ends of Creation.

What we learn from all this is that our difficulties come from our challenges, and the depth of a challenge is that it involves two points which come from opposite ends.

Up until this point, we have explained, with the help of Hashem, the nature of hardness which is present in the element of earth.

Good and Evil Uses of Hardening

Understandably, since everything can be used for either good or evil, the hardness of earth is a power that can be used for good or evil.

On its good side, it is used as an ability to remain steadfast to your beliefs. The Gemara says that a Torah scholar must be “as hard as iron”,^[10] meaning, he should be firm in his beliefs. If a Torah scholar will allow himself to be too soft-hearted, he will be swayed by the opinions of ignoramuses. The true nature of a Torah scholar is that he is unfazed by other people’s opinions, and in fact, others are in awe of him for being able to remain so firm, and thus people come to respect a Torah scholar.

This is when the power of hardness is being used for good. However, in our current discussion, we will focus on how one can fix the evil use of the power to become hardened – how we can fix evil stubbornness, as alluded to in the epithet, “*A stiff-necked nation.*”

To fix evil stubbornness, we will continue to use our original approach, which is that whenever there is an imbalance in one of the four elements, we need to make use of the other three elements. Right now we are discussing the problem of evil stubbornness, which is rooted in hardness of earth, so we will need to make use of the other three elements – water, wind and fire.

Using Water To Stop Hardness

Earth is hard, but water can be poured onto it to soften it. The earth then becomes moist.

When the hardness of earth is left imbalanced, it will create all kinds of different formations. For example, in the earth, there are mountains, hills and valleys of all shapes and sizes. This is the nature of earth when it is left as it is – it changes in its sizes, and it creates all kinds of different forms (Chazal say that at first, the landscape of the earth was completely straight, but after Adam sinned, the earth began to become lopsided, with some places in the earth that had higher elevation and some places with lower elevation. This was how all mountains and hills came about!).

By contrast, water stays in its original form. It does not take on another shape. Therefore, water has the power to take something hard and lopsided and give it equilibrium, straightening it out.

The *Chovos HaLevovos* describes this as “*midas hishtavus*” – the trait of “equalizing”. A person normally has a hard time accepting things that are hard for him to accept, but that is only if he feels opposed by things. If a person feels that he is equal with everything, that there are no “oppositions” to him, then he becomes more flexible, and he can accept things that used to oppose him. He won’t feel opposed.

An example of this concept is the principle of “*hekesh*”. One of the 13 ways in which the Torah is expounded is through the principle of “*hekesh*”. Although the word *hekesh* is rooted in the word *kosh* (hard), it is not coming to create an opposition. It is coming to show how things are equal; it is coming to show how two *halachos* in the Torah can be learned from each other, that they share a certain equality.

Therefore, the way to use water and to stop the hardness of earth is through using the ability of *hishtavus*, “equality” – to be able to deal with oppositions, to be open towards challenges and not see them as “oppositions” at all.

Using Wind To Stop Hardness

Now we will see how wind can also stop the hardness of earth. Earth is dry, and that is why it is hard. Wind is moist, which can stop the dryness, which in turn takes away the hardness in earth.

How can we actually see this? The Gemara says that the four winds are constantly blowing in all directions. The southern wind is the strongest kind of wind and tends to oppose the other winds, but the northern wind comes and blows together with all of them, harmonizing them.[\[11\]](#)

From all of the elements, wind serves to connect the elements together and unify them. Water represents the right side of the world, because water represents *chesed* \kindness, the “right hand”. Fire represents the left side of the world, because fire represents *gevurah* \strength, known as the “left hand.” Wind is at the middle point, so it can harmonize the fire and water together.

This is the idea behind how the “Northern Wind” comes to make peace between all the other winds. It represents the very idea of wind, which serves to bring about connection.

What we learn from this is that when there is opposition, instead of feeling opposed by it, one can instead connect with it, and then there will be no opposition.

Using Fire To Stop Hardness

How can fire stop the hardness of earth? Fire can destroy. The Gemara says that if a husband and wife do not merit the *Shechinah* between them, a fire will destroy them.[\[12\]](#) The idea behind this is that if the husband and wife are opposing each other too much, the only way they will become connected with each other is through some “fire”. When the fire comes, it will destroy; it won’t fix the opposition, but it instead takes it away by destroying it. We can also learn from here, though, that if something opposes me, I can connect it to myself if it gets destroyed.

Fixing A ‘Heart of Stone’

Now we will take these concepts and apply it to our own soul. Here, we will go above the simple understanding of our elements of water, wind and fire.

How does the hardness of earth manifest itself in our own life? The hardest part of the body is the heel. Chazal say that there are mitzvos which people neglect and trample under their heels. When a person neglects certain mitzvos and doesn’t care to fulfill them, he has become too hardened inside. He has lost a feeling for these mitzvos; he is indifferent to them.

Earlier, we mentioned the words of the Maharal, that the trait of brazenness (*azus*) is the opposite of the trait of shame. Brazenness is one kind of evil indifference to things, but there are evil traits which are an even deeper kind of feeling indifferent to things. When a person becomes hardened inside, his heart becomes a “*lev even*”, a heart of stone. This is a worse kind of internal hardening than the trait of brazenness.

If the hardening gets worse, it affects even the *daas* in his mind. This is called *tokef hadaas*, “a hardened mind.” This is when a person becomes very set in his evil ways, and he doesn’t want to budge at all from the evil way in which he thinks.

We described this earlier as *kashyus oref*, when a person is “stiff-necked.” The word *oref*, “neck”, has the same Hebrew letters as the word *afar*, “earth.” This alludes to how being stiff-necked [or evil stubbornness] is rooted in the element of earth.

(On a deeper note, both *kashyus oref* and *tokef hadaas* share the same root, because *daas* is located in the neck. There are three parts to the brain \mind – *Chochmah*, *Binah* and *Daas*; the *Chochmah* is called the right compartment of the brain, while *Binah* is the left compartment of the brain, and *Daas* of the brain is located in the neck.)

Often, we find that a “hardened heart” is associated with being “stiff-necked.” This is alluded to in the possuk, “*And remove the blockage from your hearts, and do not harden your necks anymore.*”[\[13\]](#)

In our physical body, it’s clear to us what the hardest part of the body is. Chazal say that it is the heels, which trample on the mitzvos, when a person is indifferent to the *mitzvos*. But a “heart of stone” is a deeper kind of feeling indifferent to spirituality. This is when a person doesn’t want to accept truths, because he has become so set in his ways. Not only doesn’t his body feel the importance of certain *mitzvos*, but his heart doesn’t want to accept things; this is worse.

A “heart of stone” gets developed as a result of sin. When a person sins, it hardens him inside. Chazal say that when a person sins once, he’s less scared to commit the sin a second time, and if he repeats the sin a second time, he already thinks that the sin has become permissible.[\[14\]](#) The first time a person deliberately commits a sin, he can still be inspired to repent. If he repeats the sin, he becomes indifferent towards the act. This is the “heart of stone” – when a person is indifferent even towards sins. He develops brazenness and he gets hardened inside towards spirituality.

How does a “heart of stone” become fixed? It is fixed when we “break” it apart, which is when we do *teshuvah*. We then reveal a soft heart of flesh in its place, and this is the secret behind how we fix the heart.

Hardening of the Mind - For Good Or Evil

There is an even deeper kind of internal hardening as well, even more than a heart of stone. This is when the mind becomes hardened; when a person’s *daas*, present in the mind, has become set in its ways. This is called *kashyus oref* in our mind [otherwise known as *tokef hadaas*].

This power is used for good, as we brought earlier, in the example of a Torah scholar who remains steadfast to the truths of the Torah, and he isn’t swayed by other opinions. Moshe Rabbeinu possessed this power in its ultimate level. When Pharaoh sent someone after him to kill him, his neck turned into stone. Simply, this was a miracle, but the deeper meaning behind this is that because he possessed the ultimate level of *daas*, his “neck” was strong – he was so firm that nothing could oppose him.

But it used for evil when a person stubbornly refuses to accept the truth, continuing to strengthen his erroneous beliefs he has formed for himself. This is the hardness coming from the element of earth. It is when a person doesn’t want to accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven.

When the Jewish people sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem rebuked us that we were a “stiff-necked nation.” This was because they used their hardness of the element of earth to remain set in their belief to erect the Calf; they were using the power of being hardened, for evil. Similarly, the Sages say that “Yisrael is the most brazen of the nations”, and this is referring to when the power of internal hardness is being used for evil.

But on the other hand, a Torah scholar is supposed to be firm in his mind and be “as tough as iron” when it comes to remaining steadfast to the values of the Torah. This hardness is not coming from his element of earth, but from a higher place in the soul - his *daas*.[\[15\]](#)

Developing Our Daas

How indeed can we attain a firm kind of *daas*, which will enable us to remain steadfast to the truth, and not be swayed by evil?

First, we must understand the following. *Daas* is the highest point in our soul. In *Daas*, everything is

found; as the Sages state, if we have it, we have everything, and if we don't have it, we have nothing.[16] By contrast, the element of earth is the lowest point in our soul.

Thus, *daas* and the element of earth (in other words, our physical body) are at two opposite ends of the spectrum. As we brought before, "ends" create difficulty. Because we are made up of two opposite ends, we encounter a challenge.

However, in spite of this fact, *daas* also contains another power which can counter this great challenge we are faced with. [We will explain].

There are three abilities contained in our *daas* - the power to separate information (*daas hamavdeles*), the power to decide upon information (*daas hamachraas*), and the power to unify information and connect to it (*daas hamechaberes*).

When a person unifies with differences, he utilizes the highest part of his *daas* - the ability to connect, which is called *daas hamechaberes*. When Adam married Chavah, the possuk says that now he "knew" her; because when one connects with another, that is how he really gets to know the other person. This utilizes the power of *daas*, and when *daas* connection is utilized between husband and wife, it reveals oneness between them. "*And they shall become one flesh.*"

Chazal say that one should be "soft like a reed", and the example of this is brought from Dovid HaMelech, who would feel like a small worm as he learned Torah, and he was in a gentle mode. But when the very same Dovid HaMelech had to go to war, he made himself as tough as a cedar wood tree.[17]

Therefore, our ability of *daas* is able to take our abilities of inner softness and inner hardness and combine them together, harmonizing them into one.

So we can use our *daas* to realize that when we feel opposed, there is no other choice we have other than to follow Hashem's will, because there is really only "one" - Hashem. If we realize that there is only One reality in front of us - Hashem - then it will be very clear to us, even when we are faced with challenges to our values, Whom we should choose. We will realize that there are really no oppositions at all to us, because there is only One choice to make.

In this way, a person is able to be both soft and hard at once. He can be "soft like a reed", as the Sages say,[18] but he can also be firm and tough when he has to. We contain in ourselves a paradox, and we can live with the paradox when we use our power of *daas*, the power to harmonize different abilities in ourselves.

In Summary

To summarize, we mentioned four ways to fix internal hardening: through using water, wind, fire, or *daas*. The solution of *daas* is the deepest solution to internal hardening, because it harmonizes the different aspects going on in us; it can help us be soft when we have to - and tough when we have to.

[1] These are referring to the middos of stubbornness, brazenness, and cruelty, which will be discussed in the next 2 chapters, b'ezras Hashem.

[2] Gra: Tikkunim: 69

[3] Shemos 32:9

[4] Avos 5:20

[5] Maharal Nesivos Olam: Nesiv HaBushah

[6] Kesubos 18a

[7] Beitzah 25b

[8] Bava Basra 10a

[9] Koheles Rabbah 7:2

[10] Taanis 4a

[11] Gittin 31b

[12] Sotah 17a. (Editor's Note: There are many explanations of this statement of our Sages. The basic understanding of this is that when there is no spirituality in a marriage, Hashem's Presence is missing from the home, and the marriage will be doomed to fail).

[13] Devorim 10:16

[14] Yoma 86b

[15] Editor's Note: Throughout the author's sefarim, the Rav mentions that there are two kinds of daas - the daas of the heart, and the daas of the mind. (For more about this, see the book "Getting To Know Your Feelings", Chapter 16). The daas of the mind is to use our intellectual abilities to contemplate and reflect about matters of holiness, and the daas of the heart is the second stage, in which we become aware, in an emotional way, of that knowledge - after we internalize the mind's knowledge. Here, in this chapter, the "daas" is referring to daas of the **mind**.

[16] Nedarim 41a

[17] Taanis 20a

[18] Taanis 20a

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