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The Beginning Of Our Avodah: Using Our Power of Holy Thought

In the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, we say **אלוקי אברהם ואלוקי יצחק ואלוקי יעקב** – that Hashem is the G-d of our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov.

As we mentioned previously, each of the Avos personified a particular trait. Avraham represents *ahavah* (love), Yitzchok represents *yirah* (restraint), and Yaakov represents *rachamim* (compassion). The simple understanding of this is that these were each three separate *middos* which they personified, and that these three *middos* have no relation to each other.

Each of the Avos were the “father” of the particular *middah* which they embodied. A father is obligated to teach his son Torah (Kiddushin 29a), and thus each of our Avos taught us how to have the particular *middah* which they embodied.

Chazal enacted 18 blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei*, parallel to the 18 vertebrae in the spine. These 18 vertebrae extend from the brain and end by the *Bris Kodesh* (the reproductive organ). However, we can ask: *Tefillah* is called “service of the heart”, so why didn’t Chazal instead use the heart as a metaphor for *Shemoneh Esrei*, as opposed to the spine? Heart in Hebrew is *lev*, which has the numerical value of 32. Why didn’t Chazal enact 32 blessings in *Shemoneh Esrei* instead, parallel to the numerical value of *lev*\heart?

From this we see that the heart is not the beginning point of our avodah, in spite of the fact that *Tefillah* is called “service of the heart.” Our avodah begins in our brain – in our power of holy thought (*machshavah*) which is reflected by the 18 vertebrae that run along the spine; which begins in the brain and ends by the *Bris Kodesh*.

The beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei* begins with the blessing of our Avos, who represent the power of holy thought. *Shemoneh Esrei* ends with *Sim Shalom*, which represents the spiritual power of *Bris Kodesh*.

Fixing Our Middos: Putting Mind Over Heart

We have in us the good *middos* which we inherited from Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov – the *middos* of *ahavah*, *yirah* and *rachamim*. How do we fix our various bad *middos*, though?

Avraham Avinu personified the trait of *ahavah*\chessed. In using the power of love for holiness, he rectified the power of love, because sometimes love can be evil; he succeeded in taking this trait and

using it for holiness. We possess the good *middos* from our Avos – the three traits of the Jewish people, which are kindness, bashfulness and compassion – but how do we fix our bad *middos*?

“The mind controls the heart.”^[1] It is our mind which can fix our *middos* – our power of holy thought, which is reached through learning Torah. The depth to fixing our *middos* lays in developing a holy mind, through Torah.

However, not everyone who learns Torah merits fixing their *middos*. This we can all see clearly. If someone just learns Torah to “remember” its facts or to “know” it just intellectually, the Torah does not purify his mind, and his Torah learning will in turn not be able to fix his bad *middos*.

A Heart Based Upon The Mind

This is the meaning of “Prayer is the service of the heart.” The fact that *Tefillah* is “service of the heart” does not mean that *Tefillah* is an ‘emotional’ thing. Emotions are temporary and fleeting; they are impermanent. We can’t build our life upon our emotions. When we are younger, emotions play a role, and they help keep ourselves enthusiastic to serve Hashem, but we cannot remain our whole life dependent on our feelings. It is an unstable approach.

How, then, must we go about our *Avodas Hashem*? Prayer is called the “service of the heart” - this means that we need to build a **heart based upon our mind**, that our heart’s feelings are mature and developed through learning Torah, which builds the mind.

Tefillah is about “standing in front of the King.” Is this an emotional matter? It cannot be based on emotions. Sometimes a person feels inspired when he davens, and on other days he does not. So it is not an emotional thing. [It is rather a service of the “**heart**”, a heart developed by our mind, which can function even when we don’t feel emotional].

The Balance Between Mind and Heart

There are people who live solely in their Torah learning, and they do not develop their world of *Tefillah*. Others are immersed in *Tefillah*, but they do not learn enough Torah. Each of these ways are extreme approaches in *Avodas Hashem* that are incorrect.

If a person is strong in the area of *Tefillah* but he doesn’t learn enough Torah, he is acting too emotional, and he has not acting sensibly. He won’t be able to really daven properly either, because since *Tefillah* is “service of the heart”, and the heart is developed through the mind, without learning Torah properly a person doesn’t develop his heart.

Chazal say that one’s heart and mouth must be equal with each other. The meaning of this is that the heart’s emotions must be in line with what one says with his mouth – the heart must be developed.

Similarly, in order to build the *Beis HaMikdash*, one had to be a *chacham lev*, “wise of heart” – one had to have a heart that was developed through the mind’s wisdom. The heart’s wisdom is not about being intellectually bright; it is about having a palpable sense for the wisdom. [This was the quality that Betzalel possessed].

The Inner Contradiction

When a person learns a sugya of Gemara, he encounters contradictions. When it comes to learning Torah, we all know what contradictions are. But when it comes to *Avodas Hashem* as well, there are also contradictions.

There are contradictions between our mind and heart. Our brain has one kind of knowledge, while our heart has a different kind of knowledge. That was the difficulty in building the *Beis HaMikdash* – it required two kinds of knowledge to build it, mind knowledge and heart knowledge, and thus there was a contradiction in how to make it. Only one who possessed the quality of “*chacham lev*” knew how to combine the two kinds of knowledge.

When Rivkah was pregnant with Yaakov and Esav, they clashed within her, and she felt a contradiction growing inside of her. She knew that there were two opposite forces going on inside her. In the same way, a person can feel an inner contradiction going on in himself as well – he can feel how there is a contradiction between his mind and heart.

Two Kinds of Knowledge Within Us

What exactly is the nature of this inner contradiction between our mind and heart?

To understand it simply, it is because our mind can know something, but our heart feels differently, and then we encounter an inner turmoil between what we **know** with what we **feel**.

But the contradiction between our mind and heart goes further than that: our mind ‘**knows**’ one kind of knowledge, while heart ‘**knows**’ a different kind of knowledge. We really have two kinds of knowledge going on at once inside us: ‘mind knowledge’, and ‘heart knowledge’. Our mind and heart have different ways of going about things.[\[2\]](#)

Our True Heart

Thus, our heart’s knowledge doesn’t mean the “emotions”. Our heart – our true heart – is really a combination of both intellect and heart; in other words, our heart can feel the knowledge of our mind in a very real sense.

Most people are far from grasping how *Tefillah* is “service of the heart” because they think that “service of the heart” means to be “emotional” in *Tefillah*. People generally equate the heart with emotions. But the truth is that the true “heart” is not the emotions. The heart can feel knowledge in a very real way, no less than when you touch fire and you feel its heat.

If we achieve an integration between our mind and heart, our heart’s emotions become elevated, and the heart is then able to feel the knowledge of our mind in a real sense. So the heart – “service of the heart”, which is *tefillah* – is when our intellect and heart are combined, when our heart can feel the knowledge of our mind as a reality that can be sensed.

A true *tefillah* emanates from a developed heart, from the place in our heart that is called “*daas* of the heart” [which is when the intellect and heart are integrated], and when we reach *daas* of the heart, our *daas* can offer us clarity on matters.

This is the meaning of how *Tefillah* is the “service of the heart” – that when *tefillah* comes from our real heart, we gain clarity, and our *Avodas Hashem* is then vastly improved and clearer.

Chazal say that “An ignoramus cannot be devout.” We need both our intellect and heart; when we combine our intellect with our emotions – when our *daas* balances out our emotions – this is what it means that *Tefillah* is called “the service of the heart.”[\[3\]](#)

[1] Tanya in the name of the Zohar

[2] For more on this concept, see ***Bilvavi Part 9 - Understanding Suffering and Tragedy.***

[3] For more on this concept, see ***Getting To Know Your Feelings: Part 2: Chapter 2.***

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/tefillah-012-integrating-mind-heart>