



## Understanding Your Middos - 12 Becoming A Container

### ***Everything Has Its Place***

Hashem designed Creation in a way that everything has a place where it belongs in; there is nothing which exists for no reason.<sup>[1]</sup> The deeper implication behind this concept, that everything has its “place”, is because everything needs a place that it can go into, where it will be held and retained, allowing the receiver to benefit from it.

In terms of our soul: if we don't prepare a receptacle to be able to hold onto something, we won't be able to hold onto that thing. This is known as building “containers in the soul.”

In other words: a person needs to build a spiritual “container” within himself that will enable all spiritual light to enter him, so that it can be maintained. This enables a person to hold onto the *shefa* (spiritual sustenance) that Hashem sends him.

Another term for this concept is described as the “student-teacher” relationship of the soul in which we can get our soul to become a “student” to what it is being taught by the “teacher.” Another term for this concept is to become a “receiver” (*mekabel*). When we enable our soul to receive the spiritual light that Hashem beams down into the universe, this is called building a “container” (*kli*) in our soul.

Throughout Creation, there is a concept of giver and receiver [Each of these concepts can be used for good or evil]. Man represents the “giver” in Creation, providing sustenance for his wife. Woman is known as the “receiver” in Creation, for the wife receives the sustenance from her husband. The word for “woman” in Hebrew is *nekaivah*, which comes from the word *nekev*, “hole”, alluding to how something can be put into a hole, where it is received and stored.

In the soul, we all need to utilize this “feminine” aspect as well, for holiness, and become “receivers” for spiritual growth. This is by building a “container” in our soul, for anything spiritual that we want to go into it.

A very prominent aspect of our avodah is this concept, that we need to develop a “container” in our soul that receives spiritual growth and holds onto it.

We will reflect here a bit into how we can we can become a “container” for spiritual growth.

### ***Using Our Earth To Become A Container For Spiritual Growth***

If we do not hope for a certain spiritual gain, we aren't either interested in building a container for it. But if we have a hope for something, if we yearn for something, then this very willpower is what builds the container for the spiritual gains that we want.

A simple example that illustrates this idea is the concept of awaiting Moshiach. We say in *Ani Maamin*, “I believe in the coming of Moshiach, and even though he tarries, even so, I wait for him, every day, that he should come.” The simple meaning of this is that in spite of the fact that Moshiach hasn't

come yet, I still don't lose my faith in his arrival. But the depth behind is that my very yearning for Moshiach - which escalates day by day, since he hasn't come yet - is exactly what enables me to receive the spiritual light that is Moshiach.

Just as the vessels of the Beis HaMikdash needed to be stored in the place that was the Beis HaMikdash, so does the soul need a space in itself which can contain the light of Moshiach. How does this space become formed? It is through awaiting Moshiach. When the soul awaits Moshiach, this very longing itself is what can become the container that holds onto the light of Moshiach.

This concept continues what was discussed in the previous chapter, *te'avon* - a desperate hunger. This nature of the soul to have hunger is the root of how we build for ourselves a container in the soul that can hold onto the Heavenly sustenance which enters it. When a person had something and it is taken from him, he hungers for it. If he would have never had it in the first place, he wouldn't hunger for it. Only when someone already recognized something can he have a hunger for it.

The element of earth is also termed as the word "*maneh*", which means "vessel." The Maharitz<sup>[2]</sup> wrote that the element of wind, water and fire are the sustaining elements, while earth is the element that acts as the container to hold onto them and maintain them. We see from the physical world that earth takes up space and can be fashioned into containers that hold things. The earth in our soul is the power to build ourselves into a container that holds onto what we put into it.

Earth is the element which builds us into a container to receive spiritual gains, but as we have mentioned earlier, each of the elements contains aspects of all four elements, therefore, we can also use the elements of wind, water and fire as containers. Of course, earth is the main element that we need in order to build a container for the soul.

In the previous chapter, we explained the nature of the soul to have hunger, which is called *te'avon*, and this comes from the element of earth in the soul. It is a nature in the soul to yearn, to long for something, to await something. This is the root power of building a container in the soul [to hold onto and maintain spiritual gains].

We will see now how the active elements of fire, wind and water can be used as building containers for the soul. We will begin with fire.

### ***How Fire Can Help You Become A "Container"***

Fire can act as a container when it uses its nature of opposition. A fire, by nature, is a force that is opposing and destructive to what comes in its path. This nature of fire can actually be used to form a spiritual container in the soul [as we will explain].

Water, by nature, is calm. Of course, when water keeps dripping against a rock, the rock becomes eroded over time, but water is mainly seen as a vitality-giving source, not as a force of opposition. Earth does not either oppose things, and wind, when it is dormant, does not either present a challenge. Sometimes we can find how each of these elements act in an opposing manner, but for the most part, they do not oppose things. The main element which acts as the opposing element is fire. Fire is opposing, because it is naturally destructive.

Chazal state that when a husband and wife are worthy, they merit the Shechinah, and if they are not worthy, a fire destroys them.<sup>[3]</sup> Chazal elsewhere state that if a husband merits it, his wife helps him, and if he does not merit it, his wife will oppose him.<sup>[4]</sup> Fire is the element that opposes; when a wife opposes her husband, a "fire" destroys them.

With regards to our current discussion - building a container in the soul - opposition can actually

serve as a way to build a container. A wife is called *eizer k'negdo*, a helpmate for man, and the wife is also called the *kli* (container) of man, for the Sages say that a wife makes herself into a *kli* (container) to receive the husband. Thus, oppositions can form a container; the understanding of this is that the wife is *k'negdo*, an opposition, towards her husband, and this is exactly what forms a *kli* for the husband.

How does opposition form a container? When a person faces opposition, he needs to widen his own spiritual container, so that he can 'contain' the opposition. Thus, opposition acts a catalyst to strengthen and fortify oneself into a container that can deal with the opposition he faces.

What happens when the man does not wish to contain the opposition? He will be left without a container to contain the opposition, and the "fire" of the opposition will be destructive to him. This is the depth of the words of the Sages that a fire destroys husband and wife when they do not merit it - it is referring to the lack of building oneself into a container, which allows for the fire of the opposition between them to burn unstoppably.

When a person faces the fire of opposition, when husband faces opposition from his wife, he must know how to contain the opposition. What must he do? He must know how to widen his spiritual container, which will be able to bear the brunt of the opposition. In other words, he needs to know how to make peace.

The power of *shalom*, peace, is called a *kli*, a vessel or container, and in fact, the Sages state that the strongest container of blessing is *shalom*, peace.<sup>[5]</sup> It is necessary for one to make peace whenever there is opposition. Without opposition, there is no need to make peace; when one faces opposition, now is the time to make peace with the opposition. When one knows how to make peace with the opposition, he has the spiritual container that can deal with the opposition.

This is how one uses "fire" to build a spiritual container inside himself: when one faces the fire of opposition, he can use that very situation of opposition as a catalyst to make peace with the opposition.

### ***How Wind Can Help You Become A Container: Dealing With Different Situations***

How can wind form one into a container?

Wind is the root of movement, and moving and traveling causes one to become needy. Avraham Avinu was commanded by Hashem to leave his home and travel to Eretz Yisrael, where he would be blessed by Hashem and made into a great nation; the Sages learned from here that normally, traveling on the road makes a person lose three things: not being able to bear children, loss of income, and loss of reputation. Additionally, we find that the *halacha* is that when someone is traveling on the road, he may receive charity of the public, because he is considered like a pauper. We see from this that traveling on the road, which is movement\wind, is a situation that causes one to become a receiver. Thus, we find that the element of wind can cause one to become a 'container' that receives.

Now we will apply this concept in more practical terms. When a person goes to different places, he meets all kinds of people, with all kinds of quirks and different personalities. One has to learn how to accept all kinds of different people in the world. Our Sages said, "Greet everyone with a radiating countenance." When you move from place to place, it's a situation that can reveal an ability in yourself to accept (and thus "contain") all of the people you come across.

In addition, when you have to go to different places, you need to find a place that will contain you. To start with, you need suitable living grounds to dwell on, and you need to eat, drink, and have ways of

getting around town. All of this requires help from other people. When you are traveling and you need a place to stay, you enable your hosts to fulfill the *mitzvah* of having guests, which is a special kindness. So when you travel from place to place, you are enabling others to act as a “container” for you, since you are reliant on people for help.

Here is another practical example of the concept of becoming a “container”. A child needs to be trained to accept certain things about life. When the child gets a little older, he has hopefully matured and he knows how to accept even harder parts about life. If an older child’s level of tolerance towards difficulties hasn’t changed since his younger years, he remains with a small tolerance level; he will have a hard time accepting things, and his ambitions have increased, which will now make it very hard for him to accept that he can’t always get everything he wants. This is all because his power of acceptance hasn’t been properly developed, and the depth of this is that he hasn’t been properly trained into becoming a ‘container’.

We can compare this to a person trying to squeeze an elephant into a box. When the container isn’t wide enough, it cannot contain a big amount [and so too, when one hasn’t learned how deal with small issues, he will have a difficult time dealing with the bigger issues of life when he gets older.]

So whenever there is movement, one needs to develop his inner container that can handle the increased movements. When you go through various “movements” in your life, you need to use those opportunities to make a container in yourself to handle the movements, or else you will get tossed around by all the movement.

To further illustrate, the Mishnah states that first a child learns Chumash, then Mishnayos, then Gemara, then Halacha, then Agadta. For every advanced stage that there is in learning, one must first be properly developed from the previous stage, so that he can be a container to hold onto the next stage. In whatever you are involved with, you need a container that can hold it.

There is a very common mistake which people make: A person studies a certain area, and then he attempts to study a different, unrelated area, with the same level that he was used to from the previous area he learned about. This kind of learning is not a recipe for success.

We are describing here the ability to handle changes – when you get moved around between various situations. When you go through changes to your situation, you need to develop a new container to contain the changes.

Here is a very simple application of the concept: When a person gets married, he is moving from his parents’ home and beginning a new home of his own. This is one change of situation. Then he has a child, and then he has another child, and eventually, he needs to move into a new home. With the more changes that one goes through, one needs to create an additional space in himself which can contain the changes and help him deal with them.

One needs to be pay attention to this concept throughout his life. Every person goes through various changes in his life, and many times, a person simply doesn’t have the inner strength to handle the changes. This really stems from a lack of awareness to this concept that one needs to make a container in himself that can “contain” the changes. If a person would be able to develop new containers in himself throughout the changes he encounters, he would be able to properly handle the changes.

One of the reasons why people have such a hard time with changes is because each new situation requires a new kind of container to handle it, and a person attempts to handle his new changes with the same old tactics he is used to from previous situations - and this does not work. Each new change

that a person goes through requires a person to come up with a new, original kind of container in himself to deal with the changes.

### ***How Water Can Help You Become A Container: Dealing With Changes***

How can the element of water help a person form an inner 'container'?

Normally, water cannot hold things, but we find that when water freezes and solidifies, it can hold things. We can make the following observation from this. Water changes forms; and when it changes its form, this is what allows it to hold things. So the change of situation itself is what allows for water to become a container.

To illustrate, a child receives from his father, and a student receives from his teacher. When the father becomes a grandfather, the child has now become a father of a child, and now the child has become a giver to his own child; and when the student becomes a teacher and he has a student of his own, the student who once was a receiver now has become a giver. What we see from this is that the very same thing can be viewed through different lenses, whereupon it is perceived as a different form.

Water shows us that the very same water changes depending on the situation it is in. When it is melted, it cannot contain anything, and when it freezes, it can contain things; but it is the same exact water. Water is the only element in which we can see this concept. With fire and wind, we cannot see how the same fire or the same wind takes on a different shape. With earth, although we can form things from it and change around its shape, only when we add water to earth can there be a change of shape to earth. Earth by itself, without the aid of water, cannot remain as itself and take on a different shape.

What we see from this is that the element of water can help a person deal with changes within the very same situation that he is going through, in contrast with the element of wind, which can only help a person deal with changes in relation to other people.

There is a very big difference between water and wind with regards to this. Wind allows a person to deal with changes from place to place, while water can enable a person to deal with changes within the same situation. These are different kinds of "containers" that a person can develop within himself.

To give an illustration, the words of Torah always stay the same, yet one can find renewed pleasure in them every time he learns them. One does not need to always learn a new tractate of Gemara or a new discussion in the Gemara - he can find the same old words to be satisfying and new to him every time he learns the words. The Torah is called the "tools of craftsmanship of Hashem" - the Torah is a tool, otherwise known as a *kli* (container), which can reveal many new angles of understanding to the very same words.

### ***Fashioning The Inner Container: Only Through Longing For Something***

However, in the beginning of this chapter, it was explained that a *kli* container is mainly formed through utilizing the element of earth in the soul, as opposed to the other three elements of fire, wind and water. Although we have explained how the other three elements can form an inner power to be a container [to handle opposition, differences, and changes], the main element in the soul which we need to make use of in order to build an inner container is earth.

Why? In the previous chapter, we explained that the element of earth is described as *te'avon*, a desperate hunger in the soul, a longing. This fits in very well with the concept we are currently discussing: the power to form an inner container. In order to form a container, one has to have a

longing for this. When the soul longs for something, it forms a space in the soul that allows it to develop a container. If a person does not long for something, he will not be able to contain it.

(On a deeper note, when Hashem first created the universe, His existence first filled the entire universe, and then He created an empty space by retracting some of His space, so to speak. This was called the *chalal hapanuy*, the “empty space” that began the act of Creation. The soul has a yearning to return to the original situation, in which the entire universe was filled with Hashem’s Presence].

Although we explained how the elements of fire, wind and water can form an inner container, these can only be enabled by a longing in the first place to contain. If a person does not have this inner hunger to form a container in himself, then even if he tries to use the other elements, they will not be able to form a container. For example, even if a person tries to deal with oppositions, which is fire, the person will not be able to deal with the fire; the opposition will be too powerful for him to deal with. If he tries to deal with different situations, instead of being able to handle others, he will become overwhelmed by the changes. When trying to deal with changes in his situation, he will remain in the situation, unable to deal with the changes.

The only way to develop an inner container in the soul to deal with oppositions and changes lies in knowing how to use the element of earth. Earth contains aspects of the other three elements as well, but those are three ways of how to build the container; the power that fuels this entire ability in the first place is when one has a longing in his soul - a *te'avon*, an inner hunger.

When one does not uncover this ability in himself, his state resembles an inner imprisonment, exiled within himself.

### ***The Powers of Receiving and Giving***

Until now, we have explained the roots of this matter. Now we will see how this applies to our *middos*, as well as to practically apply the concept.

A *kli*, a container, can accomplish two things. It can receive what you put into it, and it can also give something to another, such as when you put something inside it in order to give it away.

We find such a concept by the *bikkurim*, the first fruits, which were required to be given in baskets. The wealthy would bring it in gold and silver baskets, and the poor would bring it in reed baskets.<sup>[6]</sup> In either case, in order to bring the *bikkurim*, it had to be contained in a basket, whether one was wealthy or poor.

So we see that a *kli*\container can either receive what is put into it, for the sake of receiving, or it can be used as a container to give something. These two natures are also in the element of earth. Sometimes the earth receives and it does not give back what is put into it; an example of this is death, when the body is placed in the earth, and a dead person cannot give back to anyone who does kindness with enabling his burial. For this reason, burying the dead is called *chessed shel emes*, true kindness, since the deceased cannot give back anything in return, and those who bury him do a kindness with him without expecting anything in return. Other times, however, the earth receives something in order to give. When a seed is planted in the ground, the earth takes it in, so that it can sprout a plant. This hints to us that there is a holy way to use the power of receiving: when one receives something in order to give. In fact, earth is the most giving of all the elements, because when something is planted in the ground, the earth sprouts multiple amounts of the material.

Thus, the element of earth contains both of these natures: we find that it can receive without giving back (symbolized by burial of the dead in the earth), and we also find that it receives in order to give back (symbolized by plants).

## **The Trait of Kamtzan\Stinginess**

This is relevant to us as follows.

The nature in a person to receive without giving back is really what lays behind the evil trait known as *kamtzan*, stinginess. A stingy person, a *kamtzan*, is also called "*kili*", which is a combination of the words "*kli li*", "The container is mine." In other words, when a person receives without giving back, this is the trait of *kamtzan\kili*.

*Kamtzan* stems from an improper use of the soul's power to become a container. When a person's inner container is used for evil, it manifests as a power to receive without being able to give back, and this is one of the ways how the element of earth is used for evil.

To illustrate, there is one vessel which receives but cannot give back what is put into it: an earthenware vessel, which absorbs its contents. An earthenware vessel, if it becomes ritually impure, cannot become purified, unless it is broken into shards.

### **Yearning For Fulfillment Vs. Yearning For Shleimus\Spiritual Perfection**

The two kinds of containers in the soul – a container that doesn't give back, and a container that gives back – are manifested in our soul as follows.

When the soul has a hunger for something, because it feels lacking, it will yearn; this fashions an inner container in the soul to receive. With this kind of container, a person becomes a container through the lacking that he felt. If not for what he lacked, he wouldn't have yearned to fill the emptiness. So it his lacking which enabled him to become a container.

But there is an even deeper kind of yearning in the soul which one can have, and it is also helps form an inner container: the yearning in the soul for *shleimus*, spiritual perfection. The *Mesillas Yescharim* refers to "*shleimei hadaas*", those who yearn for spiritual perfection.

The yearning for *shleimus* is not the same thing as yearning for fulfillment. When one has a desire for *shleimus*, this is not simply a desire to fill one's inner emptiness. It stems from the light of the *Ein Sof* (the Infinite Light of Hashem), which was in its full zenith before Hashem made the space in Creation to form the universe.

When one longs to fill his inner emptiness, this comes from the *chalal*, the empty space, in the soul. Hashem first made the *chalal* in Creation in order to make space for Creation, and in terms of our soul, whenever we yearn for something, it stems from this emptiness that we feel. However, there is a deeper kind of yearning in our soul: the yearning for *shleimus*, that Hashem's Presence become revealed in the soul. Hashem is present deep in the soul, and thus there is a yearning to fully reveal His Presence in the soul – that is the yearning for *shleimus*. The longing for this *shleimus* does not stem from a lack of anything, and it is not about a yearning to fill any emptiness. Rather, it is a yearning to return to the original situation of Creation before there was a *chalal*.

This is a very subtle point about the soul.

### **The Deepest Yearning**

When the *Shechinah* (Hashem's Presence) dwells, that is the most perfect situation that can be. The *Aron* (the Holy Ark) in the *Beis HaMikdash* is what contained the *Shechinah*, and inside the *Aron* were the *Luchos*, the Torah. The Torah is called *Toras Hashem Temimah*, "The Torah of Hashem is perfect"; the Torah is also called the *kli umniso shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the "tools of craftsmanship" of

Hashem.

This is what describes the yearning for *shleimus*. The yearning for *shleimus* does not stem from a wish to fill what one is lacking; it is the normal kind of yearning. It is a different kind of “container” in the person: the *kli umnuso shel HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the “tools of Hashem”.

### ***In Conclusion***

To summarize, there are three opportunities which can help a person form an inner container in the soul: fire (opposition), wind (different situations), and water (changes). The root of forming an inner container is through earth, which is when one is hungry to fulfill his spiritual emptiness, and thus he has a longing to form the inner container. The deep kind of inner container, however, if formed through the longing for *shleimus*.

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[1] Avos 4:3

[2] *The glosses of the comments of “Maharitz” are contained within the text of Sefer Nefesh HaChaim.*

[3] Sotah 17a

[4] Yevamos 63a

[5] Uktzin 3:3

[6] Bava Kamma 92a

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