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What Do We Forget, and What Do We Remember?

In the previous chapter, which dealt with the trait of modesty in the soul, we mentioned the words of the Sages that modesty is mainly exemplified when relieving oneself in the lavatory. The above statement of the Sages continues: “Who is a modest one? One who relieves himself at nighttime, instead of relieving himself by daytime.”^[1]

It is dark at night, so it would seem that there is no need for modesty at night, because one cannot be seen then anyway. Yet, the Sages revealed that nighttime is precisely the time in which we are meant to reveal modesty.

During the day, there is light, and at night, it is dark. This manifests in our soul as follows.

There is “darkness” in the soul, and this is what produces the trait of *shikc’hah*, forgetfulness. The Hebrew word for “darkness” is *c’hoshech*, which has the same letters as the Hebrew word *shoc’hac’h*, to forget. So there is a connection between darkness and forgetfulness. What is the connection? When something is revealed out in the open, we don’t forget it; we remember it. When a person is consciously aware of something, it is revealed to his mind, and he remembers it. But when something is hidden and concealed from us, it is apt to be forgotten.

This is our nature: when something is revealed to us and in front of our eyes, we remember it. This is the deeper meaning behind “*Shivisi Hashem L’Negdi Tamid*”, “I place Hashem before me always” – because Hashem is always in front of us, we are commanded to always remember Him. We can remember Him precisely because He is in front of us. But when something is not in front of us, we are able to forget it.

Thus, when something is concealed from us, it can be forgotten. If something is revealed to us, we don’t forget it.

So the trait of forgetfulness is created from “darkness” in the soul: when something is concealed from us, it is forgotten, just as the darkness conceals things from our sight.

How Forgetfulness Is Rooted In Earth

From all of the elements, earth is the darkest element, and it produces darkness inside the soul. For this reason, the trait of forgetfulness, which comes from darkness in the soul, is rooted in the element of earth.

Forgetfulness is termed by our Sages as reminiscent of death. The Sages said that had the first set of *Luchos* (Tablets) never been broken, the Torah would never have been forgotten from the Jewish people.^[2] Forgetfulness first appears in the world with this episode – the breaking of the first set of *Luchos*.

The sin of the Golden Calf was like the sin of Adam happening all over again. At Har Sinai, all of the Jewish people returned to the level of Adam before the sin, and with the sin of the Golden Calf, we were once again cursed with death, just as Adam was cursed with death after the sin. The breaking of the *Luchos*, which happened as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf, is what enabled us to ever forget our Torah learning; thus, forgetfulness and death are connected concepts.

The first set of *Luchos* rectified our ruined element of earth (a result of the sin of Adam), and had the *Luchos* not been broken, there would be no such thing as forgetting the Torah. Once the *Luchos* were broken, we returned to our fallen element of earth – the curse of death, along with the possibility to forget Torah.

We also find that the dead are forgotten after some time; Hashem decreed this is a law of our nature, that the dead are eventually forgotten from our hearts.^[3] The deeper meaning behind this is that when the body returns to the earth, it is able to be forgotten.

If a Torah scholar forgets his learning when he gets old, the Sages warn that one should still be careful to honor him, for he is like the broken *Luchos*, which still retain their sanctity^[4]. The simple reason for this is because even though right now he doesn't know the Torah, the Torah used to be in him, so he should still be honored, because he used to learn Torah. But the deeper meaning of this is that the broken *Luchos* are the source of forgetting one's Torah learning; had the *Luchos* not been broken, a Torah scholar would never forget his learning. He wouldn't get old and lose his memory, because there would be no such as death; and he would never be able to forget at all. The entire reason why there is forgetfulness in the world is due to the breaking of the first *Luchos*.

The curse of death, which came along with the possibility to forget, made man return to the earth he came from, for the curse of death is described as "*To earth you shall return.*" Therefore, when one returns to his element of earth, he is able to forget; if one leaves his element of earth, he leaves the possibility of forgetfulness.

The Maharal wrote that our ability to remember comes from our spiritual source, while our ability to forget comes from our materialistic aspects. This further brings out how forgetfulness is rooted in our element of earth.

Forgetfulness Caused By Fire, Water and Wind

As we explained in previous chapters, a problem stemming from the element of earth can also be stemming from any of the other three elements (fire, water and wind) that are also present in the earth. Therefore, we can find how fire, water and wind can be involved in causing forgetfulness. However, since forgetfulness is mainly rooted in the element of earth, it is mainly the element of earth that is responsible for forgetfulness.

Fire causes forgetfulness as follows. The Sages said that "Whoever gets angry, he forgets his Torah study."^[5] Additionally, they said that "One who is conceited, forgets his Torah study."^[6] We have already mentioned earlier that both the traits of anger and conceit are rooted in the element of fire. Conceit stems from the heat in fire, and anger stems from the dryness in fire.

Forgetfulness is really caused by the element of earth, so what does it mean that conceit and anger can cause one to forget his Torah learning? It means that conceit and anger can bring out the

element of earth in the person, and once the element of earth is activated, forgetfulness can ensue. The dryness of fire, which is the root of the trait of anger, returns a person to the dryness of his earth element. And when a person is conceited, he is also returned to his element of earth, because "Hashem lowers the conceited."

Where do we find that wind can cause forgetfulness? When the Tower of Babel was being built, Hashem confused their languages. It would seem simply that Hashem made them forget their languages so they were each speaking different languages to each other, but the Gemara states that the forgetfulness was because the air on the tower caused them to be forgetful.^[7] In other words, the air, which is the element of wind, is what made them forgetful.

But although the element of wind was a factor here, it was still the element of earth which mainly caused them to be forgetful. They stacked up many bricks in order to build the tower, and from this giant pile of "earth" they came to the elevated heights of the tower in which the air made them forgetful. So it was really the earth which brought them to this situation of forgetfulness. The air by itself, without the tower made by the earth, would not have been enough to make them forgetful.

Where do we find that water can cause forgetfulness? The Sages say that one of the things which causes forgetfulness is when a person drinks bathwater.^[8] Again, it is not only the water here which is causing the forgetfulness – it is the earth. The person is dirty with dust of the earth on his body, so he needs water to wash it off. Drinking such water causes one to be forgetful; but it is only because such water was involved in removing the earth upon his body.

We have seen how fire, wind and water can all be factors in breeding forgetfulness, yet it is always the element of earth which allows it to happen.

Fixing Forgetfulness

Forgetfulness can be removed using the elements of fire, wind or water. We will also see how even earth can be used as a subtle way to fix trait forgetfulness for which it is mainly responsible for.

How Fire Can Remove Forgetfulness

It is obvious how the element of fire can be used to remove forgetfulness.

Forgetfulness, as we explained, is rooted in darkness in the soul that stems from the element of earth. When something is in front of our eyes, it is not forgotten, and when something is concealed from us, it is apt to be forgotten. Thus, the element of fire is the antithesis to darkness in the soul, because fire illuminates darkness and thus it removes forgetfulness.

How Wind Can Remove Forgetfulness

Wind can fix forgetfulness as follows.

The Gemara says that one should verbalize the words of Torah he is learning, and then he will remember it better.^[9] When a person verbalizes his learning, he is using the power of speech, which is rooted in the element of wind, because speech is called *ruach memalelah* ("a talking spirit"), related to *ruach* (wind). When one speaks the words of Torah he is learning, he takes the words of Torah and brings them out of their dormant state into their active potential.

When earth remains dormant, its potential is left unutilized. It remains concealed, thus it breeds forgetfulness. When one verbalizes his learning, he has brought the words of Torah into their active state, and thus he remembers the words.

How Water Can Fix Forgetfulness

How can the element of water be used to fix forgetfulness?

The Gemara^[10] say that one should review his learning, even if he forgets them and even if he doesn't know what he is saying, for it is written, "*My soul will review, for it is hungry.*" The simple understanding of this Gemara is based on the words of the Zohar and the Arizal, that a person will be reminded all of his Torah learning in Heaven after he dies; for this reason, a person should learn Torah even if he will forget. But the deeper understanding of this Gemara is that when a person learns Torah out of a desire for the words, he will remember it better. Desire is rooted in the element of water, so we see that the element of water can help a person remember his learning.

We have mentioned thus far three ways in how to rectify the trait of forgetfulness that is rooted in the element of earth.

Examining The Root of Forgetfulness

Here is another statement of our Sages about forgetfulness. "A fetus in its mother's womb is taught the entire Torah, and once it enters the air of this world, an angel comes and strikes his mouth, and causes him to forget the entire Torah."^[11]

Let us reflect into what this means.

What is this "angel" that strikes a baby and causes him to forget all the Torah he was taught? It is brought in the writings of the Arizal, and in other sources as well, that the angel appointed over forgetfulness is called "the *Samech Mem*"^[12]. The Hebrew letters *samech* and *mem* are 60 and 40, which add up to be 100. There is another statement of our Sages, "One who reviews his learning 100 times is not as prominent as one who reviews his learning 101 times".^[13] The number 100 is the value of the word *Michael* - the angel appointed memory, for "*To my right, Michael.*"

Soon, we will delve more into this.

We can also ask: Once the baby enters the air of this world, he forgets all the learning he was taught. Why is the emphasis here on the "air" of the world, and not simply on the fact that he enters the world? The answer is based upon the concept brought earlier, that the air on the Tower of Babel is what caused them to become forgetful. We see from this that the air of this world - in and of itself - is a cause for forgetfulness.

What is the depth behind this?

The Gemara reveals that when the Luchos were given, the letters *mem* and *samech* in the Luchos were floating in the air, through a miracle^[14]. All of the letters carved onto the Luchos were not hollow, so the Luchos were able to hold them, whereas the letters *mem* and *samech* have holes in between them, so there was nothing to connect them in place. The fact that these letters did not fall out was a miracle. That is the simple meaning of this Gemara. The deeper meaning, though, is that the stone of the Luchos was made of the element of earth, and since Hashem Himself had hewn these Luchos, it was the perfected kind of earth.

The facts that the letters *mem* and *samech* remained standing in the Luchos, and the fact that *mem* and *samech* are the letters in the name of the angel which causes forgetfulness (The "*Samech Mem*"), are one related subject. When the Luchos were broken, the letters *mem* and *samech* which had stood through a miracle are now the very letters which cause forgetfulness [when combined]!

Before the Luchos were broken, when the letters *mem* and *samech* stood through a miracle, these letters were actually able to provide memory [of one's Torah learning], for they were the handiwork of Hashem, and not the work of a human. The letters *mem* and *samech* were on their own, detached from the Luchos, whereas the other letters on the Luchos were craved into the stones, attached to the element of earth. Thus, the original set of Luchos, before they were broken, contained a level of Torah that could not ever be forgotten, because they were a perfected kind of earth. The letters *samech* and *mem* were in the air, thus they were part of the element of wind, and not earth; whereas the other letters were part of the element of earth, a perfected kind of earth [for they were hewn by Hashem Himself].

When the Luchos were broken, the letters *mem* and *samech* remained afloat in the air, but instead of a miracle sustaining them, they were simply drifting in the air. Ever since they were broken, when the element of earth has become impaired, the angel appointed over forgetfulness fights not only the element of earth, but even the element of wind it wages war against.

Thus, there are two sources for evil forgetfulness. One source is the impaired element of earth, which came onto the scene after the Luchos were broken. An additional source of evil forgetfulness is the "air" of this world - "once a fetus enters the air of this world, an angel strikes him and causes him to forget all his Torah learning."

As long as a fetus is inside the mother, an angel teaches him the entire Torah. There, the Torah is not transmitted to him in writing, but orally. When a baby enters the world, he enters the place in which things have to be written down in order to be remembered. This is the forgetfulness that the "air" of this world causes.

Thus, just as earth is the root of forgetfulness, so is the "air" of this earth an additional cause of forgetfulness.

To illustrate how air is related to earth, we find a halacha in the laws of Shabbos that if one throws something over the ground, even if it never touched the ground, it is considered as if he has carried from domain to domain, even though the object did not stop in a public domain. The airspace of the ground has the status of the ground, to make him liable of the *melachah* (forbidden labor) of carrying on Shabbos. From here we see that air above the ground is like a part of the earth underneath it.

Applying this to the current discussion, after the sin with the Golden Calf and the Luchos were broken, forgetfulness not only stems from earth, but it can stem from the air in earth as well. We can see this from physical earth and wind, when they meet. Wind blows on the earth and causes the dust to swirl into the air, and then the wind becomes blackened.

This is the meaning behind how "The air on the tower of Babel caused forgetfulness." The lesson of it was that not only does earth cause forgetfulness, but that air as well causes forgetfulness; and we see this from the fact that when a baby enters the world, the "air" of this world causes him to forget all his learning.

So there are two sources of forgetfulness: when it comes from earth, and from the air of the earth. The second source, air of the earth, represents the total level of forgetfulness [because it was a concept that was introduced as a result of sin].

The more subtle understanding of this is that earth and wind are opposites, and there is a rule that "opposites always bear the same root"; thus, if forgetfulness is rooted in earth, it must be rooted in wind as well.

The Depth of Forgetting One's Torah Learning

The two kinds of forgetfulness that exist are parallel to the two kinds of forgetfulness which we deal with: the general trait of forgetfulness that exists in all of Creation, which is when we simply forget something; and forgetting our Torah learning.

The Torah warns us explicitly: *"Guard it very carefully, lest you forget these words."* The Gemara learns from here that it is a sin to forget one's Torah learning.[\[15\]](#) There is a difference between the regular kind of forgetting and the forgetting of one's Torah learning. The regular kind of forgetting is rooted in our element of earth, but forgetting one's Torah learning is rooted in the element of wind.

It seems simply that there is no difference between regular forgetting and forgetting one's learning, and that it's the same habit to forget. When a person forgets how much money in his bank account, isn't it the same kind of forgetfulness which makes him forget his Torah learning?

But the truth is, that forgetting one's learning has nothing to do with the regular bad habit of being forgetful that we are familiar with. It comes from a different source in the soul. Regular forgetting comes from earth, while forgetting one's Torah learning comes from the area of wind in the soul.

The Torah is called a "wind", for it is called the *"ruach"* (spirit) of Hashem, and *ruach* is wind. We are also commanded to speak words of Torah, and speech is rooted in wind. Thus, we are specially commanded not to forget the words of Torah.

Of Amalek, we are commanded to remember what they did to us, and in addition, we are commanded not to forget what they did.[\[16\]](#) The Sages learned from this apparent redundancy that we must never forget in our hearts what they did to us, and we are commanded as well to verbalize what they did to us, and that is how we remember.[\[17\]](#) We can see from here as well the two kinds of forgetting: when there is forgetting rooted in earth [when our heart forgets the episode of Amalek], and forgetting that is rooted in wind [when we don't verbalize the episode of Amalek].

Total Forgetting Vs. Confusion

There is an opinion in the Sages[\[18\]](#) that the Torah will one day be forgotten from the Jewish people; Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai disagreed: "G-d forbid to say that the Torah will be forgotten from the Jewish people! It is written, *"For it shall not be forgotten from His offspring."* Although there was a prophecy that there will be Torah forgotten from the Jewish people, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai explained that the prophecy meant that the study of clear Mishnah and clear Halacha will not be concentrated together in any one place.

We see that our Sages disagreed as to what it means that the Torah will be forgotten from us. The Sages were of the opinion that people will simply forget the Torah, while Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said that it will not happen, only that there will be a lack of clarity.

The rule is that *"Both of their words and their words are the words of the living G-d"*[\[19\]](#), so whenever our Sages disagree, both views are always correct. Let us try to understand both of the differing views and how they are both correct. What is the root of forgetting one's Torah learning, and what is the root of a lack of clarity toward one's Torah learning?

When a person simply forgets his Torah learning, this comes from any other kind of forgetting that we are familiar with. As the generations go on, the spiritual level of the generations decrease; this is the concept of *yeridas hadoros*, "descent of the generations." What are we further descending into? The

element of earth. The Sages state that we will be lowered until the depths of the earth, and then we will eventually be redeemed. It is for this reason that the Sages were of the opinion that the Torah will be forgotten from the Jewish people; since we are further and further descending into the element of earth as the generations go on, and earth is the root of forgetfulness, there will be forgetfulness towards the Torah. That is one kind of forgetting.

But the other kind of forgetting, as we explained, stems from the element of wind. This is the kind of forgetfulness that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was referring to, that the Torah will not be simply forgotten, and that it will merely become unclear to people. Even in the later generations, in which we have become very entrenched into the element of earth, we find that people are still remembering the Torah; the words of Torah are being spoken from our lips, and that is a guarantee that we will remember it. It is just that there is confusion about the words of Torah. "The clear Halacha and the clear Mishnah will not be concentrated in any one place." This is referring specifically to the second kind of forgetfulness, to "forget" one's Torah learning – in the sense that one is not clear in his learning. This is the kind of forgetfulness rooted in the element of wind.

The basic kind of forgetting that we are familiar with is rooted in the element of earth. For example, Hashem decreed that "the dead are eventually forgotten from our hearts". It's possible that a person forgets his learning in the same way. A person can surely forget his learning, as we know. But what does a person forget when he forgets his learning? He forgets the external layer of the Torah. The inner essence of the Torah, the "ruach Hashem" (spirit of Hashem) which the Torah is called, is never able to be totally forgotten. The only kind of forgetfulness one can have with regards to the inner essence of the Torah is the lack of clarity in his learning.

Thus, forgetfulness stemming from earth is when a person simply forgets something, and forgetfulness stemming from wind is when a person is confused and unclear.

To illustrate, we have a *mitzvah* to remember the episode of Amalek. Nowadays, there is no *mitzvah* to erase Amalek, because ever since Sanheriv mixed around the countries of the world, we are not sure who is from Amalek.^[20] The depth behind this is that the mixing up and confusing of the nations of the world is a subtle way of how we "forget" Amalek. There is nothing we can do about this, though, because it is all coming from a confusion, being that Amalek is not concentrated in any one place.

Wind, which causes movement, has the power to mix around things with its movements. This is a power that can be used either for evil or holiness. It is used for good when it mixes together things in order to harmonize them and connect them, and this is the concept of the Northern Wind, which we spoke about earlier^[21]. It is used for evil when it mixes things around and causes confusion; when wind lifts the dust into the air, it becomes blackened, and this manifests in terms of our soul when we lack clarity in our learning.

We have explained how forgetfulness stemming from earth is a kind of forgetfulness that is total, and forgetfulness stemming from wind is when there is confusion and lack of clarity.

Forgetfulness Rooted In Wind: When There Is A Removal of Daas

The second kind of forgetting – forgetting one's Torah learning, which stems from the area of wind in the soul – can be explained based upon the following Gemara: "The words of Torah are not forgotten unless there is *hesech hadaas* (a removal of one's *daas*(thoughts)).^[22] When a person takes his mind off something, he comes to forget it.

The simple understanding of this is that as soon as one has *hesech hadaas* [when he stops thinking about

something holy], he forgets about spiritual matters and falls back onto his physicality, and his physicality is awakened, which does not allow for his Torah learning to be remembered. If this is the definition, though, then it is forgetfulness that stems from earth.

But there is another way to understand forgetting one's learning, which comes from *hesech hadaas*. As long as a person retains his *daas* (his real, thinking spiritual mind), he has order in his thoughts. *Daas* creates order in one's mind; when one loses his *daas*, [when he takes his mind off holiness], confusion in his mind is created.

The Sages state that "Moshiach will come with *hesech hadaas*". It is written of the redemption, "*The voice of my beloved, behold, it is coming, skipping over the mountains, jumping over the hills.*"[\[23\]](#) When there is holy *hesech hadaas*, the holy "jumping" will come - the jumping of Moshiach. But when the power of "jumping" is used for evil, like when there is a lack order in one's mind and his mind is therefore jumpy, this is an evil kind of jumpiness, and it creates the evil trait that is forgetfulness.

How do we see that jumpiness\skipping is linked with forgetfulness? We see this from the *mitzvah* to give *shikc'hah* to the poor. Any forgotten sheaves of grain are entitled to the poor; when the owner skips over some of the grains and leaves them behind, the remaining leaves become *shikc'hah*, and they must be given as a gift to the poor.

This is the kind of forgetfulness that stems from wind in the soul: a lack of order in the thoughts, which causes confusion in the thoughts, resulting in *hesech hadaas*. It is a removal of one's *daas*.

Rectifying Forgetfulness: Connecting To The Reality of the Creator

How can forgetfulness stemming from wind become fixed?

There are two approaches. The simple antidote for this is for one to return his *daas*, which has become removed him. The more a person increases his *daas*, the more he chips away at his forgetfulness.

There is a deeper approach, though, based on a *Midrash*[\[24\]](#), which states that since we received the Torah from Moshe Rabbeinu, who was a human being, we therefore forget the Torah, because it was given to us by a human. In the future, we will receive the Torah directly from the mouth of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, and this will be a Torah that will never become forgotten.

Earlier, we explained based on the words of our Sages[\[25\]](#) that forgetfulness began with the breaking of the Luchos. But now we have seen from the words of our Sages the deeper root of forgetfulness: it is because our current Torah is the Torah we received from Moshe Rabbeinu, and since Moshe was human, it is possible to forget the current Torah.

The reason for this is because when we were first about to accept the Torah, there were members among us who did not wish to hear it from Hashem Himself, because they were afraid, so they asked that it be given by Moshe Rabbeinu instead. What was their mistake? What is wrong if they just wanted to hear it from Moshe? It was because they did not wish to hear the voice of Hashem, and that was why they turned away Hashem's voice in favor of Moshe's voice. This deviation on their part was already the root of forgetting the current Torah.

Thus, the root of forgetfulness did not begin with the breaking of the Luchos; it really began with the will of the people to hear the Torah from Moshe instead of wanting to hear it from Hashem.

What is the difference if we hear the Torah from Moshe or if we hear it from Hashem? The difference is, that only on Hashem can we apply the verse, "*Kiss me with the kisses of Your mouth*", which refers

to the verbal relationship that the Jewish people has with Hashem. Had they wished to hear Hashem's voice – as we will in the future – they would have achieved the ultimate rectification. It would perfected their element of wind (speech), because to hear the voice of Hashem is the ultimate level of speech that the soul can achieve.

Hearing the Torah from the mouth of Moshe, by contrast, did not perfect their element of wind, because although man received a breath of life from Hashem that enables him to speak (*"ruach memalelah"*), ultimately, our power of speech comes from Hashem, Who breathed into us the wind in our soul that enables us to speak. To hear the Torah from Hashem would have made us never forget the Torah, for it would have been the perfected element of wind\speech. Instead, we chose to hear it from Moshe; our element of wind therefore did not reach its completion, and that is why we are able to forget the current Torah we have.

Hearing a human speak, even to hear words from Moshe Rabbeinu, does not bring us to the perfected kind of speech. We can see this as well reflected in the fact that Moshe had difficulty with speech, for his mouth and tongue felt heavy upon him. When Moshe went up to Heaven to receive the Torah, every time he learned it, he forgot it, until it was given to him as a gift. The depth of this was because his power of speech was damaged, and that allowed him to forget.

The only way to avoid forgetting the Torah is when it is heard directly from Hashem. When one hears Hashem's voice, he never forgets it. *"Forever, the word of Hashem, stands in Heaven."* [26] When one fulfills the possuk of *"My words which I have placed on your mouth"*, he merits the end of the possuk – *"It will not be forgotten from your mouth, and from the mouth of your offspring, and from the mouth of the offspring of your offspring, forever."* The "word of Hashem" that is the Torah is the root of all speech, and the breath of life that Hashem breathed into man, which enables man to speak, is what can ultimately reveal to man that *"The One who has blown, blows from Himself."* In other words, when one reveals how his power of speech is really rooted in the Creator's speech, the words that emanate from such speech can never be forgotten from the person.

Thus, the deep way to nullify the trait of forgetfulness is through connecting oneself to the reality of the Creator. We will explain this.

Man, by essence, can only live the present moment. The past is gone, and the future is not here yet. The only one who exists both in the past, present and future is Hashem. Since man's past and future is not here in the present, man can forget. By contrast, Hashem, Who "was, is, and will always be", cannot ever be forgotten. This is a clear fundamental.

All of Creation is only temporary, and that is why they can be forgotten, for the very essence of all creations is a temporary existence, and that is the reason behind why forgetfulness can take effect on creations. A created being, a person, is limited and temporary, and that is why he forgets as well as become forgotten. A person's words are here one second and they are forgotten a second later.

However, if a person makes sure as he is speaking to become connected to Hashem, Who "was, is, and will always be", then he is connected with the eternal, and he is connected in his speech with the unforgettable. The unforgettable is nursed forth from an ever-constant source, and there can only be one source that is ever-constant (and thus unforgettable): The One Who was, is, and will always be.

A Kind of Torah Learning Which Is Never Forgotten: Learning Torah Modestly

The Sages said that "one who learns Torah in the synagogue with modesty, is one who will not forget it quickly." [27] What is the meaning of this? It can be explained according to the concepts developed until now: When one learns Torah modestly, meaning, when he connects himself to the *"One who sits*

in the upper concealed chambers" - when he reveals the trait of modesty in the soul (see **Understanding Your Middos #013 - Modesty**), he connects to the ultimate Modest One that there is: Hashem. Hashem is clearly revealed through His actions, but His essence is hidden from us. When one learns Torah modestly, he connects himself to the reality of the Creator, Who is the epitome of modesty.

This is also the depth behind the statement of the Rambam, that "One does not learn most of his wisdom except at nighttime."[\[28\]](#) For our purposes, the meaning of this is that when one learns Torah at nighttime, when it is dark, a time in which there is more modesty, he connects himself to the true Modest One, Who was, is, and will always be.

When a person learns Torah without modesty, darkness can descend upon him, and thus he can come to forget his learning, because he is bound to the present moment, which is temporary; he is not connected to the past, and he is not either connected with the future, for he is not eternal. But when one learns Torah modestly, he essentially has taken the concealment (*hester*) that gets created from forgetfulness and darkness, and instead, he reveals modesty through it. This is how he connects himself to the Creator - and of the Creator it is said, "There is no forgetfulness in front of Your Throne of Glory."

Concealment (*hester*) is a force in Creation, and it is up to man's power of free will to choose if he will steer it towards holiness or for evil. When one learns Torah without modesty, he doesn't access concealment for the purpose of modesty, and instead, the concealment will negatively come upon him, in the form of forgetfulness. But when one learns Torah modestly, he takes the force of concealment and reveals the modesty in it; and he will remember such Torah learning, forever.

This is how darkness of the soul is rectified: through using the power of modesty. In the beginning of this chapter, we brought from the words of our Sages that modesty is exemplified at nighttime. Now we can understand this with greater depth: it is because such a person takes the nighttime, the power of darkness, and transforms it into the holy power of modesty.

The simple understanding of this is that the person (in the times of the Gemara) would wait until nighttime to relieve himself, so that his private affairs should be done discreetly and not in broad daylight. It is because the nighttime is the tool a person could use as a tool to reveal the higher kind of modesty - to connect oneself to the reality of the Creator. A person who waited until the nighttime to relieve himself (in the times of the Gemara) was someone who knew the secret of modesty: to connect oneself to the Creator.

When a person is connected to the Creator, he remembers his Torah learning as well, and he doesn't forget it.

Holy Forgetfulness: How Forgetting One's Learning Can Be Constructive

There is an additional point to mention here, which is needed to complete the discussion.

Until now, it was explained, from many angles, about the negative side to forgetfulness, and that the power to remember is the side of holiness.

However, on a deep note, there is also a way how forgetfulness can be used for holiness. There is nothing in Creation that is always good or always evil; each force in Creation that exists can either be channeled towards holiness, or towards evil. It's all a question of how we use each thing. Therefore, even forgetfulness can be used positively, so there is a holy way to utilize the trait of forgetfulness.

There is both a simple and deep approach in how to use it for holiness.

The simple way of how forgetfulness can be holy is contained in the words of the *Midrash*: “It is for the good of man that he learns Torah and forgets it, for if he would learn Torah and never forget it, he would learn Torah for only two or three years and then return to his labor, and he would never pay attention to it for all his life. But since man learns Torah and can forget his learning, he will make sure not to remove himself from the words of Torah.”[\[29\]](#)

In other words, since we are apt to forget our Torah learning, that makes us feel responsible to review our learning, and through reviewing our learning, we become more deeply connected to our Torah learning. Thus, in a sense, forgetfulness is an indirect cause for us to become more connected to the Torah. It reflects how “From the wound itself comes the recovery.” Forgetfulness is a destructive power, but it also acts as a catalyst to cause us to review our learning.

The element of earth can take things and return them to their root. Forgetfulness, which stems from earth, causes us to connect to our root.

But the deeper understanding is as follows. Our memory is an ability of our mind, which contains our *daas*. When a person merits to reach the depth of the soul, which is above even his *daas* – and this is referring to the statement of our *sefarim hakedoshim* that “the purpose of knowledge is to know that we do not know” – he reaches the power of holy forgetfulness. He “forgets” his *daas*, because he is above it.

It is there that a person merits a complete forgiveness of his sins.

There is something very hard to understand: If Hashem doesn’t forget anything, how can He forgive our sins? The deep answer is, though, that when a person goes above his regular intellect, he has access to the holy kind of forgetfulness.

Herein lies the secret of how the entire Creation will receive its rectification. As long as a person’s sins are “remembered”, there would be no concept of *teshuvah*. But when a person does *teshuvah*, he is above memory, and that is why his sins aren’t remembered by Hashem.

Of course, Hashem does not ever forget to reward our good deeds. Rather, what is meant here is that *teshuvah* is the novel concept that there is an area in our soul above memory: holy forgetfulness. It places a person above the regular rules, which are within *daas*, and there, there is no “memory.”

Forgetfulness is produced from *hesech hadaas* (a removal of *daas*), and there is a holy kind of *hesech hadaas*: “Moshiach will not come except with *hesech hadaas*.” This represents the holy kind of forgetfulness [to “forget” our *daas*, because we will be above *daas*].

How To Use Forgetfulness For Holiness

Now we will give a practical example of this concept.

When a person learns a part of the Gemara and he doesn’t understand it, what should he do? He should empty out his thoughts and approach it as if he has never learned it before, and then start again from the beginning of the Gemara, anew. This is the holy way how to use the power of forgetfulness.

Every time there is forgetfulness, it is an opportunity for a person to realize that he must begin again anew. This is also the depth behind *teshuvah*. When a person does *teshuvah*, it does not mean that Hashem has remembered the sin; He erases it completely! Hashem “forgets” the sin. This is not the

regular kind of forgetting we are familiar with; it is the deepest kind of holy forgetfulness.

In the depths of the soul, there exists an ability to use “forgetfulness” for holiness: the power for a person to begin again anew.

Similarly, when Rebbi Zeira left Bavel for Eretz Yisrael, he fasted 100 times so that he could forget all that he had learned in Bavel, in order for his mind to be clear to learn *Talmud Yerushalmi*.^[30] Here we see the concept of holy forgetfulness, that when a person needs to have a new beginning, he needs to utilize his power to forget, even when it comes to the words of Torah. This is the depth that lays behind holy forgetfulness.

In Conclusion: Repairing Forgetfulness

All new beginnings require a person to forget what was until now, in order to begin again anew. Thus, the depth of fixing forgetfulness is not just through remembrance, but through accessing the higher and holier kind of forgetting: the power to start from a new beginning.

Thus, the way to fix forgetfulness involves both accessing our power of remembrance [which is acquired through connecting with Hashem, and then we never forget what we learn, and this is also exemplified through the trait of modesty], as well as the higher way, which is to access the holy kind of forgetfulness [starting again anew after one forgets his learning].

^[1] *Berachos 62a*

^[2] *Eruvin 54a*

^[3] *Pesachim 54b*

^[4] *Berachos 8b*

^[5] *Nedarim 22b*

^[6] *Yevamos 105b*

^[7] *Sanhedrin 109a*

^[8] *Horayos 13b*

[9] Eruvin 54a

[10] Avodah Zarah 19a

[11] Niddah 30b

[12] Also known as "Samael", usually connected with the "Sitra Achara", "The Other Side" [the forces of evil and impurity].

[13] Chagigah 9b

[14] Megillah 3a

[15] Menachos 99b

[16] Devarim 25: 17-19

[17] Megillah 18a

[18] Shabbos 138b

[19] Gittin 6b

[20] Yoma 54a

[21] For more on the "Northern Wind" and how it manifests in the soul, see **Understanding Your Middos #07 (Internal Hardening)** as well as **דע את מידותיך-מהות המדות-רוח 079 - רוח** (English translation not yet available).

[22] Taanis 7b

[23] Shir HaShirim 2:8

[24] Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:4

[25] Eruvin 54a

[26] Tehillim 119:89

[\[27\]](#) *Yerushalmi Berachos 5:1*

[\[28\]](#) *Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:13*

[\[29\]](#) *Koheles Rabbah 1:13*

[\[30\]](#) *Bava Metzia 85a*

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