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Should We Focus On Our Weaknesses Or On Our Greatness?

It is brought in *Shulchan Aruch* that when one *davens*, he should think about the greatness of Hashem, and how small he is.

Is a person big or small? In *Shulchan Aruch*, it says that one should think how lowly he is, in comparison to Hashem. What does this mean? Are we supposed to look at ourselves as lowly beings?

The true approach we need to have is that one has to realize that man is very great, but at the same time, man is also a lowly being. One can have simultaneous views towards himself at once.

How can this be, though? Either we are great, or we are lowly. How can we be both at the same time?

We all have certain bad *middos* (character traits). That can help us understand how lowly we are. But we are also beloved to Hashem, for we were created in His image. In our actual essence, we are all great.

We are lowly in the sense that we are materialistic, and we also have bad *middos*; these two factors together contribute to our lowliness. We have certain human weaknesses and shortcomings. But our soul is called a *cheilek eloka mimaal*, "a portion of Hashem". What is the main part of who we are? Is it the fact that we are a soul? Or is it the fact that we have bad *middos* which we must fix?

This is a very fundamental question: How does one view himself?

We Are All A 'Tzelem Elokim' (In The Image of G-d) - A 'Neshamah' (Divine soul)

To explain more what we mean: the fact that one is a *tzelem elokim* ("in the image of G-d") is not just because one must view himself as "I, Reuven, was created as a *tzelem elokim*", in the same way that Shimon and Levi are a *tzelem elokim*. The fact that we are a *tzelem elokim* is not part of your aspect of individuality, because if it was, it would be *gaavah* (conceit), and then you wouldn't honor others for being a *tzelem elokim*. This is because the same way you honor yourself for being a *tzelem elokim* is the same reason that you should honor another for being a *tzelem elokim*. Otherwise, you are just using your '*tzelem elokim*' for the purposes of your own ego.

When you make a self-accounting and you want to improve, what are you thinking about? Are you just thinking about your faults and that you want to change? Or are you also realizing that you have greatness in yourself - that you are a *tzelem elokim*?

If you look at yourself as just a lowly being, you won't be able to ever reach self-perfection. Just focusing on your lowliness won't perfect you. If you want to have a true kind of life, you need to first focus on how you are good. You are a *neshamah* - your soul is pure, for it was placed in you by Hashem.

How Should We View Our Faults?

Of course, you must know your faults, and you must also repent for your sins, but you need to view yourself as mainly being a good person. If you view yourself as a good person, you will have an inner source in yourself to draw forth great spiritual strength from to improve in Torah, *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven) and holiness.

If you don't connect to that inner source and you instead focus on your lowly aspects, you have nothing to draw forth inner strength from, because then it doesn't do anything for you.

In order for you to survive, you need to feel that you are precious to Hashem, for you are a *tzelem elokim*, and that your essence - your soul - is pure.

It can be compared to a stone covering over a well with pure water underneath. We have rough layers covering us, but beneath the surface, lies our pure *neshamah*. Our faults and our bad *middos* definitely exist, but they are not the source of our inner 'wellspring'. The source of our inner 'wellspring' is completely pure and good and holy.

When you reflect about yourself personally, where do you think your thoughts and feelings come from? Do they come from your lower aspects of your existence, or from your pure soul? We definitely have actions, feelings, and thoughts that come from the bad parts, but the real issue is, for a person to *know* where they actually come from.

The Difference Between Conceit and Proper Jewish Self-Esteem

What is the difference between a superficial person and an inner [spiritual] kind of person? A superficial person views his thoughts and feelings as coming from an external part of himself. He does not view himself as being a good person in essence. Therefore, he suspects that his thoughts and feelings are not good. When a person views himself as only good, though, it is because he has *gaavah*; he doesn't realize where his thoughts and feelings stem from in himself.

By contrast, a person who lives an inner kind of life gets his feelings and thoughts from a pure place in himself. It can still happen that he receives bad thoughts and feelings, but they are mainly pure. So when a person lives an inner kind of life and not a superficial kind of life, he lives with inner strength.

If one lives superficially and he gets the strength from his inner self - this is all stemming from a strong amount of *gaavah* (conceit), which is a negative trait. But one who lives inwardly gets his thoughts and feelings from a pure place in himself.

Believing In Our Inner Point of Purity

The *avodah* of each of us is to reveal that completely good and holy part of ourselves. Many times people live superficially, and thus they don't realize that there is a pure place in themselves. They see others who are not truthful, so they view themselves in the same way, and they lose belief in the pure part of themselves. If you don't believe that there is a pure place in yourself, you won't be able to get to it.

We must all know that even though we have faults, our soul contains a place which is totally pure.

This inner place is really what we have to reveal. A person who hasn't revealed it views himself with a low self-image, and this is a false way of viewing himself. But if one has revealed it, he views himself as being pure, as a person who contains greatness.

Dealing With Evil

How will we be able to deal with the coming year, and all the situations that it will bring? If we try to deal with it superficially, we won't be able to handle it. But if we merit to reveal the inner place in our soul which is pure, then whatever trying situation we will face this year to our spirituality, we will be able to return to that pure place and connect to its holiness.

Why is it that people usually succumb to evil when they are tempted? It is because they view themselves as mainly evil, so their evil is awakened, when they see evil. But if one is tempted in a situation yet he identifies with the pure place in his soul, even when he is tempted, he will remain attached to the pure place in his soul. True, he still has free will, and he can still fall. But he will be able to place in himself in a place that is pure, even as he is being tempted.

Every day, the *yetzer hora* gets stronger, Chazal say; and if not for Hashem's help, we cannot overcome.^[1] Why can't we overcome evil, and why is it impossible without Hashem? When a person identifies himself superficially, the *yetzer hora* can sway him to do evil. Hashem helps a person in that a person can awaken his pure point when he is tempted with evil.

Chazal say that when the *yetzer hora* is present, there is no *yetzer tov*^[2]. You don't remember any *tov* (good) when *ra* (evil) is present. But if you are already used to dwelling on the pure point in yourself, then when you meet temptation, you will be very close to returning yourself to the good place in yourself, and then the evil won't be able to sway you.

If you're not used to dwelling on your inner purity, it will be very hard to overcome evil temptations when you are faced with them. This is why most people are struggling with their *yetzer hora*.

Rosh HaShanah: Returning To The State of Adam Before The Sin

Every year, when Rosh HaShanah comes, the original spiritual light returns to the world. When we were first created, we were pure. When Adam sinned, he fell into a mixture of good and evil. On Rosh HaShanah, we have the opportunity to identify our original pure state and connect to it.

Rosh HaShanah is a great light –it is a power to identify our pure point in the soul, which existed before Adam's sin, in which the world was still a pure place. If we want a true kind of life, we need to reveal that inner point in ourselves.

If we check ourselves and we want to see how we view ourselves, we should see what our first thoughts are when we think about ourselves: Do we initially feel negative towards ourselves, or positive towards ourselves?

If we have a positive view towards ourselves, we are connecting to the light that comes on Rosh HaShanah. But if we just look at Rosh HaShanah as a scary day in which we are judged for our actions, this is a superficial outlook, which only dwells on the mixture of good and evil that is This World.

Our Rabbis pointed out that on Rosh HaShanah, we don't mention any sins. Not only don't we verbalize them, but even to think about our sins on Rosh HaShanah is not allowed, according to the writings of our Rabbis. What is the depth of this? It is because when you think about your faults and sins, you are connecting yourself to the external parts to yourself, which are not pure.

On Rosh HaShanah, our main *avodah* is to connect ourselves to the way we are the beginning of creation, before the sin, when we were entirely pure. We need to awaken in ourselves the part in the soul which resembles Adam's state before the sin.

To clarify what this means, this is not simply to 'take our mind off' our sins; it is to enter deep into our soul, where there is a place in which there is no sin.

Shofar on Rosh HaShanah: Awakening Your Inner Point

Shofar on Rosh HaShanah is meant to penetrate into our soul, that we should enter our souls. One aspect of *Shofar* is to remind us to do *teshuvah*, but that is only the external part of *Shofar*. The inner message behind *Shofar*, as Rav Saadyah Gaon says, is to remind us of *Shofar* at Har Sinai, when we were pure again.

If one hears *Shofar* and only thinks about improving his ways, his Rosh HaShanah is superficial. But if one hears the *Shofar* and is reminded of his purity, he enters the place in his soul where there is no sin.

There is *Shofar* in Elul and in *Rosh HaShanah*. The sound of the *Shofar* in Elul is to get us to cry and improve our ways. *Shofar* on Rosh HaShanah is to help us enter the place in our souls where there is no sin. This is Rosh HaShanah, the 'head of the year' – to begin the year from a pure, clean place. We each need to reveal in our own personal soul that our beginning point is a place of no sin. We don't begin with sin; we begin with a place where there is no sin.

There Is Never Reason To Despair

When one who absorbs this concept - first intellectually, and then in his heart - these words can transform his entire life, from beginning until end!

There is a [Chassidic] saying that goes, "Think good, and then it will be good." Where does this saying come from? It is really based on the concept of thinking about the pure place in your soul, where there is no evil. Rosh HaShanah is when this perspective shines particularly.

Even a person who kept falling into sins this year, time and time again, should not despair. One of the reasons why we should never despair is because we can change our very orientations. As we have explained here, we can train ourselves to dwell on our pure essence, and this will help us succeed, with Heavenly assistance.

You can do this by reflecting every day into the concept that you are renewed each day by Hashem.

Begin Anew Each Day

We will now try to explain how we can access this practically.

The inner part of our soul is entirely pure, and the outer part of our soul is a mix of good and evil. How do we connect to the pure part in our soul? The pure part in the soul is deep in the soul, so it is very hidden from us. How, then, can we connect to it?

One major way to get there is through purifying the soul, and that is how one can penetrate to there. But there is a piece of advice that can be used even for someone who hasn't purified his soul. The advice is to begin every day anew! Not only in the morning should you feel renewed, but throughout the day, keep viewing yourself as "new".

What does it mean to keep renewing yourself? You should not look at yourself as merely continuing the previous moment. This is because the previous moment was a mixture of good and evil. Instead, look at yourself as being born anew each second.

Rosh HaShanah is the day to remember the first day of Creation. What does it mean to remember the beginning of Creation? To look at this year as if it's the only year!

We must extend Rosh HaShanah to the rest of the year: that we should look at each day as the beginning. If you begin anew each day, not just as yourself but because the entire Creation is being renewed – this is not imagination; why not? Because the renewal is really there, it is just covered over and hidden, and you just need to connect yourself to it.

If a person tries this, not superficially and not through fooling himself, but because he believes in the renewal of Creation and that he can connect to it, each day he can connect to the pure place of renewal.

Of course, there will always be tests, even after you reach that place in the soul. Adam *HaRishon* also had a test, even when he was in his pure state. But the tests will look totally different, when we acquire this perspective.

Thus, each day, whenever you feel *timtum halev* (when you feel like your heart is stuffed and blocked from spiritual inspiration), or when your head is cloudy, or when you're upset at yourself for having bad *middos*, or anything that's not good in yourself - tell yourself that **you can begin again anew**, and you can tell yourself hundreds and thousands of times, that **your essence is good**. For you are, in you very essence, a *neshamah* - a "*cheilek eloka mimaal*" (portion of G-d above).

One who does this every day will feel purity in his soul each day, and he will acquire great power to deal with all events of life.^[3]

[1] Sukkah 52a

[2] Nedarim 32a

[3] See also ***Rosh Chodesh Avodah_06_Elul - Renewal***