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## Fixing Your Wind - 007 Flattery Part 3: Craving Social Acceptance

### ***Words of Flattery: Lack of Awareness To One's Speech***

We are in the midst of discussing **water-of-wind**, which is the source of speaking words of flattery. So far we have explained flattery stemming from the earth-of-water-of-wind and water-of-water-of-wind. Now we will discuss flattery that is rooted in **wind-of-water-of-wind**.

Flattery rooted in **wind-of-water-of-wind** is when a person utters words of flattery without being aware of it, because he is somewhat unaware of the words that leave his mouth. He speaks words of flattery to others simply because he is so used to it; this is called *melumadah*, to act "by rote". He is so used to it that he's not even aware of it.

A common example of this (words we utter out of "*melumadah*") is when a person is *davening Shemoneh Esrei* and he forgets where he's up to in *Shemoneh Esrei*, or like when he forgot if he said "*Yaaleh V'yavoh*" or not; because he doesn't pay attention to what he says, and he can't recall the words that he said.

Of course, no one is perfectly aware of all the words coming out of his mouth, but each person can identify at least three or four times a day when he utters words which he forgets that he even said.

It is a problem that does not begin with words of flattery; it begins way before that – it began with lack of awareness to one's speech. It is due to the habit of *melumadah*, when a person acts by rote. The habit of *melumadah*, besides for being the source of words that we're not aware of that we say, is also what leads one to speak words of flattery, because since the person is so used to being unaware of what he says, he is also not aware that he is using his speech all the time to flatter others.

### ***Examining Flattery***

Taking this further: what indeed is the reason that a person flatters others?

Chazal say that "it is permitted to flatter the wicked on This World"; we learn from this that it is permitted to engage in flattery when it necessary, like if one needs something from a wicked person, and the only way to get it out of him is to flatter him. It seems that a person flatters others in order to get something he needs out of them; that is the simple understand of why people flatter – so they can get on the other person's good side and get what they need.

But we also know that sometimes, a person flatters others even when in a situation where he doesn't need something from the other. It is simply more comfortable for him to engage in flattery.

So flattery isn't always about getting something out of others. It can simply be a nature to flatter others.

We also find that there are people who flatter others in order to be good to others; this kind of flattery is being used for a holy cause, such as giving another a smile or a compliment to another in order to make the other feel good and strengthen his spirits. This is a kind of flattery which is not evil, in essence.

### ***A Deeper Look At Flattery***

However, let's take a deeper look into the root of flattery.

When a person flatters another, there are two factors involved: the **words** of flattery he utters, as well as various **actions** of flattery that he does in order to win the other's approval. This is a true description of flattery, but the deeper understanding behind flattery is that the person is saying what he knows (or thinks) that others want him to say. Or, he will say certain words to others so that others will praise him for if he says those words.

The point is: a flatterer is he not being himself! He is acting in a way that he thinks others want him to act like, and he is saying words which he thinks that others would like him to say.

Thus, flattery is essentially when a person says or does things that aren't from his true self. He'll act a certain way and say certain words just so that he'll "fit in" to society. The root of [evil] flattery, therefore, is not the act of flattery he does, nor the words of flattery that he utters, nor is it in the smile of flattery that he projects; the root of evil flattery is that a person trains himself to act or talk in the way that he thinks how others wants him to act. [He is not acting like himself; he is performing for others, albeit subconsciously].

This is what Chazal refer to as the "group of flatters." It is a kind of person who has transformed his entire behavior into someone whom he really isn't, which deceives others, so that he can fit in with society.

### ***The Holy and Evil Ways To Use "Bittul" (Nullifying Oneself)***

When this power is used for holiness, it is used as the holy power in the soul called *bittul*, to nullify oneself to others (and to feel nullified to Hashem). *Bittul*, in a subtle sense, really thrives on using the power of flattery for holiness, because it involves giving up one's real self for the betterment of others.

Evil flattery, however, is when this feeling of *bittul* to others is coming from one's *nefesh habehaimis* (animalistic level of the soul), and it is an evil kind of *bittul*. And when we are dealing with the *nefesh habehaimis*, there are many different kinds of "animals" that one can imitate....

When one doesn't have his own sense of healthy individuality, he will try very much to fit in with others. Thus, evil flattery is really a lack of proper identity of oneself. When one does not have a healthy sense of individuality for himself, he is more drawn towards this form of evil flattery of always having to "fit in" with others.

### ***Two Kinds of Flatterers***

When we reflect, we can see that there are two kinds of people who regularly engage in flattery.

One kind of person will flatter others because he has an agenda to get what he needs out of others. He'll be nice to the banker because he needs to form a trust with the banker. This is not the kind of flattery we are dealing with; it is also flattery, but it is not as deeply ingrained in the person, because here the person is just using flattery as a tool to get what he needs out of others.

Here, we are dealing with a person who flatters others because he has trained himself to become a flatterer, since he wants to fit in with others, for he has no sense of individuality of his own. He has trained himself to become a professional flatterer, as a means for survival. He has become something he is not. That is the prime example of evil flattery - the "group of flatterers."

### ***The Solution To Flattery Stemming From Lack of Individuality***

The root of the problem always contains the key to the solution. Since we have explained here that flattery is not rooted in flattery, but in a lack of individuality, the solution to flattery/lack of individuality is thus rooted in developing a healthy sense of one's individuality.

Chazal say that "Each person was created individual". When one develops his individuality in a holy way (and this does not refer to *gaavah*\conceit, *chas v'shalom*, which it very well could be confused with) and he knows his inner world well, he is stronger about his true identity, and this in turn will weaken his need to flatter others. The whole reason that he needs to flatter others is because he does not have a strong sense of identity of himself, therefore he feels a need to always be nullified to others, so that he will have an identity. But if we can get him to develop his individuality (in a holy way - which is by knowing his strengths), then his whole need to flatter others will fall away.

### ***Those Who Should Not Use This Solution***

However, we will mention here that a person who is drawn after flattery is probably a person who lacks "fire" in his soul. If he would have a lot of fire in his soul, he does not nullify himself to others easily. If a person with a lot of fire in his soul attempts to increase his sense of individuality for himself, he will probably go overboard with this and become too conceited.

Therefore, the words here are only addressing one who does not have that much fire in his soul. If one knows himself well that he is very drawn towards *gaavah*, he should not use the following solution, because it will only increase his *gaavah*.

### ***Fixing Flattery: Developing Your Own Identity***

If one is too meek and that is why he flatters others, he has to develop a healthy sense of individuality for oneself. He has to get to know how he is unique. The more a person is clear about his inner world, the less he will feel a need to flatter others, because he will feel stronger about himself and thus not lower himself that easily.

Of course, he should also avoid flattering others in the practical sense, such as resolving not to do certain acts of flattery and not to say words of flattery to others. We've already mentioned this in the past. However, what we are introducing here is that resolving to stop one's habits of flattery only happens when one knows how to eradicate his own tendency towards flattery. This is achieved through building in oneself a healthy sense of identity and individuality.

### ***Complimenting Others***

Until now, we have explained the evils of flattery and how to fix it. Now we will explain an additional

point, which answers a question that many are asking on this topic.

When a person flatters another because he needs something from him, where does this behavior come from? When a person gives a false compliment to another, or a compliment that's a little exaggerated, what is the motivation in the person that's behind the false compliment?

If a person looks into himself deeply, he can discover that it really comes from a feeling of low self-worth; this comes from his *nefesh habehaimis* (animalistic level of the soul). He might not be aware of it, and he doesn't realize that the reason why he falsely compliments others is really coming from his own low self-worth! He really wants to find *chein* (favor) in the eyes of others, and he doesn't even realize that this is his motivation when he compliments others.

For example, a person attends a family *simcha*, and he goes around giving compliments to everyone. If he's very used to this, he probably hopes that everybody else compliment him as well. This is a subconscious expectation he has; a person is not always aware of it. He's not smiling at others because he learned that Chazal say that you should smile at people; that's not his actual intention when he smiles at others. He's smiling at others because he wants others to make him feel good in return! His *nefesh habehaimis* has gotten him used to making others feel good for this very reason: he really is hoping that others will also make him feel good.

It could be that he started out making others feel good and smiling at them because he was inspired by the words of Chazal, or because he heard a *mussar shmuess* about it. But as he gets used to always complimenting others, he might not realize that he really wants others to make him feel good in return, and in fact, it could very well be that his entire motivation in making others feel good is so that others will make him feel good! He has trained himself to live according to what others expect of him. This is really a form of flattery.

### ***The Solution***

Now we will explain how to do it the right way - how to give compliments to others and make others feel good in a non-flattering way.

When one give compliments to others and he says nice words to others to make them feel good, first of all, he needs to really focus on a good point in the other, and upon that, he should then give the compliment. It should be something that is a true virtue in the person, and not something that is made up.

What happens, though, if you're asked to speak in public by a *simcha* and you have to say nice things about a person, but you have nothing nice to say about the person that's true? For example, when you're asked to speak by a *Sheva Berachos* about the *chosson* or the parents or the in-laws, and you need to come up with all kinds of nonsense that praises the person whom you're speaking about (and often one sentence has nothing to do with other in these kinds of speeches) - is that okay?

Fact of the matter is, you should get up and speak. You have no choice. But try to think about something that's true about the person you're talking about. If you focus on something good about the person which is true, at least you'll be starting from something true about the person.

Of course, it's better not to speak at all about the person whom you have nothing nice to say about. When you have to speak about someone in public, you are forced to make up things about him that aren't true, so it's always going to involve some lies. Therefore, you should not deliberately speak at these kinds of events, because you are placing yourself in a situation where you will have to lie.

But if you are in a situation where you are basically forced to speak, you have no choice; you can't

back out, because that will not look nice. So you have to speak, if you're asked to. What do you do?

At least find one nice thing that's truthful to say about the person. In this way, at least there is some truth lacing your words, and although you still have to make up false compliments about the person, the fact that you said something truthful will protect you from engaging in more words of flattery than necessary. It's still flattery, of course, but at least you're putting some truth into it, which will lessen the amount of falsity you're saying about the person.

However, if you are a person who is usually negative towards people, it might be better for you to speak in public and try to come up with nice things to say about the person, because it is upon you to acquire more of an *ayin tovah* (good eye) to people. But if you're not a negatively inclined person, it's better for you to avoid flattering and falsely complimenting people in public, as we explained here. This is a subtle point you need to clarify with yourself.

Here is another example of how to chip away at flattery. When you go to a *simcha* and you find yourself complimenting the *baal hasimcha*, ask yourself if you're doing so to really be kind to him, or if it's because it's coming from a need for flattery.

### ***Becoming Aware of Your Speech***

Earlier, we addressed the lack of awareness in one's speech. A person should try to become consciously aware as he's saying the words of *Shemoneh Esrei*, to the words he's saying. Even if you know that as you daven *Shemoneh Esrei* that your mind and heart is not connected to the words, still, if you're at least aware in your conscious state that you're saying words which you don't feel connected to, that itself will already protect you from spacing out.

We used *davening* as an example, but the point of the concept is to become aware of the words that come out of your mouth and what's motivating you. You need to clarify this internally.

When you discover that certain words you say to others are really stemming from a need you have to flatter others in order to win their approval, now you are aware of those words of flattery you say, and you should refrain from saying those words of flattery. According to *Shulchan Aruch* it may not be forbidden, but if you want to work on your middos in an inner way, it's forbidden for you to say the words of flattery. And even if your compliments to others are earnest and for the sake of making others good, you should still suspect that there is some flattery involved in your words.

### ***Flattering The Wicked***

We have mentioned in the past the statement of Chazal say it is "permissible to flatter the wicked". What does this mean, and how far does this go?

First of all, you should bear in mind that when you have to flatter the wicked, it's only "permissible," - it's not an obligatory *mitzvah* upon you.

Also, Yaakov Avinu was allowed to flatter Esav, but it bothered him afterwards. So even when you are permitted to flatter a wicked person (like in a situation where you need something from him), it should still bother you afterwards that you had to engage in flattery.

If one flatters the wicked out of his desire to flatter, there is no permission granted for this. It's only permitted when you need something from them. To flatter for the sake of flattery is prohibited even towards the wicked. Why? Because through flattery, one will come to connect to them.

Therefore, in order for one to know if he has acted correctly after he has flattered the wicked person,

he should check himself if he feels a connection to the wicked person. If one feels connected to the wicked person, it shows that he engaged in a forbidden kind of flattery with him. The only flattery which is permissible with the wicked is when you use the flattery as a tool to get what you need, and not for the sake of flattery.

### ***In Conclusion***

We have explained here that flattery is defined as a superficial form of speech with others.

We have said that the evil side to flattery is that a person engages in superficial speech in order to find favor by others. The holy kind of flattery is when a person speaks to others from an inner place in himself to make others feel good - with intention to truly be kind to them. Holy flattery is that the words are not true, but the person's heart has intention to bestow good on the other.

We have explained here that evil flattery (expressed either through actions of flattery or words of flattery) really stems from a subconscious need to win others' approval, which really stems from a lack of identity. The solution is thus for one to build his sense of identity for himself.

We have also explained that it is better not to speak about others in public, because then you are forced to flatter people, but when you are asked to speak, you should not decline; but you should still try to say something truthful about the person which is a compliment about him.

In situations where you need to flatter a wicked person, you may only do so if it is necessary, and not to form a friendship with him. But your intention should be only to get what you need, and not for the sake of bonding with him.

The way you can know if you acted properly with this is to check yourself afterwards and see if you feel connected to him or not. If you feel that you have bonded with the wicked person, it shows that your intention in flattering him was the for the sake of flattery, which was forbidden; if you don't feel a connection to him, it must be that you only used the flattery as a means to get what you needed, which is permissible [when it is towards the wicked].

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