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Wind-of-Earth-of-Fire: Moving Towards Your Goals

With the help of Hashem, we continue here to discuss the element of fire. We are currently up to discussing **wind-of-earth-of-fire**. Previously we dealt with **fire-of-earth-of-fire**, which is the power to be motivated towards the goal of life. **Wind-of-earth-of-fire** is about *how we move* towards our goal.

It is the concept of having a “**derech**”, a way, of how we get to our goal of life. The goal of life is the same for all of us, but the “way” to get there is different with each person. There are many valid “ways” to get to the goal of life.

Many Paths of Serving the Creator

The Jewish people, when we left of Egypt, consisted of 12 **shevatim** (tribes), and there were three different sections that traveled through the desert, with each section having its own place; none of the groups mixed with the other groups. This was not coincidental. It was a symbol that although we were all traveling together in the same place and heading towards the same goal, we have uniquely different paths.

In addition, when the sea was split for us and we traveled through it, the Sages state that there were 12 paths going through to the end, with each tribe having his own path. The miracle of the splitting of the sea was for everyone, but within this general miracle, there were 12 different paths.

At the splitting of the sea, it was clear to each person which tribe he belonged to; each person knew the *derech* he had to go on. That was the case back then, when the inception of the Jewish people began, after we left Egypt. After the Torah was given and after we entered Eretz Yisrael, there was still a division of 12 tribes, and each tribe knew his way. But after the wicked king Sancheriv came and mixed up the nations of the world, we lost our lineage, and now nobody knows which tribe he stems from. *Kohanim* know where they come from, but even *Kohanim* sometimes are unclear about where they come from.

So we don't know which of the 12 tribes we each come from. Even more so, a person is unclear of what his inner **avodah**(way of serving the Creator) is: which of the 12 tribes represents his unique path of *avodah* that is meant for him to take.

The *Arizal* said that there are many “*nuschaos*” (texts) of *tefillah* that have appeared throughout the generations, and this is because there are several paths based on each of the 12 tribes. Superficial people think that there's only one correct “*nusach*”, and that all other *nuschaos* are incorrect. But we

have a tradition from our Rabbis that there are many different *nuschaos*, for each tribe had its own *nusach*. Nobody knows which *nusach* is his real *nusach*, because we don't know which tribe we come from. But even if we would know which *nusach* is for us, we still don't know which of the 12 tribes our own personal *avodah* is rooted in.

These are just examples. The point is that we don't know which path we are rooted in, and therefore, we are unclear today of which path we need to go in, what the order of our *avodah* should be.

This is yet concerning the 12 general paths found in the Jewish people which are rooted in the 12 tribes, but there are even more divisions after that. Our Rabbis teach that there are 70 souls who went down to Egypt, so there were 70 divisions who branched out from the original 12, meaning that there are 70 unique paths of *avodah* that are contained in the 12 roots. The Jewish people actually consist of 600,000 souls, and Chazal say that each person thinks differently.

Besides for the fact that none of us know where we are rooted in the general sense, there is an additional factor that adds to the lack of clarity. There are 12 paths of *avodah* based on each of the 12 tribes, yet there is no one *sefer* that explains to us what the *avodah* of the tribe of Reuven was, what the *avodah* of Shimon's tribe is, what the *avodah* of Levi's tribe is, etc.

So we don't even know what the *avodah* of each tribe is. There is no *sefer* which explains to us how to go from point A to point Z in our *avodah*. There are a few *sefarim* which are written in an orderly fashion, such as *Mesillas Yesharim* and others, which explain to a person how to go from one step to the next step in his *avodah*, but even these *sefarim* are written in a general format, which do not specify the details of any one path.

So forget about the fact that we don't know the paths of all 12 tribes. We don't even know even one path of any one of the tribes!

The Lack of a "Derech" In Avodas Hashem In Today's Times

There is much knowledge we have in our hands about the details of *avodah*, but there is no *derech* that shows us how to go in order. Many of us know a lot about *Avodas Hashem*, but does anyone have a *derech* within all of this information, knowing how to apply it and what the order of the steps should be?

Most people do not even know of even one existing *derech*. If you ask someone who belongs to a certain 'sect' of Judaism, and you ask him what his *derech* is, you will not get a clear answer. People give all kinds of superficial definitions, and based upon this, they form the basis of their way of life.

I meet all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds. I asked a person once, "What are the main points that your place emphasizes?" He started to think hard and wonder about it. He was in that place about 30 years, but he had never thought before about this.

If a person is in a certain place for many years and trying to "serve Hashem" there in that place, but he doesn't even know what his *derech* of *avodah* is, he might gather a lot of knowledge about different aspects of *avodah*, but it's all just a "generalized" kind of knowledge that's outside of him and not a part of him. Although all of this knowledge that he is aware of can be true, it is still superficial knowledge to the person, because the person only knows about these things in the general sense and he does not relate to it personally.

It's possible that a person has lived his entire life and he is of a certain 'type' of Jewish community or way of life, yet he never clarified what the *derech* of *avodah* was in the place that he lives in that he's involved with. The definitions of *avodah* he knows of may be true and correct, but he is only aware of

them in terms of general information, and not more than that.

What results from this ignorance? People are not being able to recognize and be familiar with even *one* solid approach in serving Hashem; they are not even sure of the very "*derech*" they are taking. When asked what their "*derech*" is, they might answer that they are a "*talmid*" of a certain *Rebbi*, or that his father or grandfather is of a certain type of Judaism, and that this is his *derech* as well. If this is true, then it's wonderful. But the question is: Does a person really recognize well the *derech* of *avodah* in the place he's found in?

In most cases, the answer is "No". People are mostly aware of the superficial layer of the *derech* they are taking, and they are not really in touch with it.

Thus, even when a person really wants to be a *ben aliyah* (growing, spiritual person), this is not enough, because many times a person does not even know his *derech*. The *derech* he is currently taking is something he has never clarified; he doesn't know if this is a *derech* that will bring him to the goals he wants to reach. Yet he might even spend his whole life involved with such a *derech* even though he has no idea what it is. Compare this to a person who travels from Jerusalem to Tzefas yet he never thought about the roads that get him there, and he is only aware of the direction to get there but he has no idea how to get there.

I am not talking about a person who simply doesn't care about how to grow in his life; our words here are talking even about someone who really wants to serve Hashem, who spends much time and energy at his *derech* in life, and he is the type to be really bothered if he is not reaching his goals. Just because he is bothered at failures in his *Avodas Hashem* doesn't necessarily mean that he has a *derech* of *avodah*. He might be heavily involved all the time in a *derech* that he has no idea of, and he spends so much time and energy at it, yet he has never even clarified what the *derech* is!

Mixed Up

Going further with this, even if a person is involved with a certain *derech* in the place where he is, there is no person who is so insulated and restricted to the exact *derech* he is taking. He's accumulated lots of knowledge from all the different places he has learned in and spent time in, before marriage and after marriage, and he has read certain *sefarim*.

Basically, each person has accumulated a certain amount of knowledge about life and *Avodas Hashem*, and if one tries to somehow incorporate into his own life all of the information that he has come across, this is risky. When questioned if he is acting correctly and if his approach is proper, he will defend himself; sometimes he will be right, but sometimes, he is not.

Often a person will mix together different paths of *avodas Hashem*, and in fact, sometimes he is mixing together paths of *Avodas Hashem* that are totally in opposition of each other. He never understands any of these ways of *Avodas Hashem* that he's mixing together, therefore, he doesn't see the depth of the contradictions he is forming.

If one properly understands a *derech* in *Avodas Hashem*, he might know how to harmonize it with other paths of *Avodas Hashem*. But if one never understands the first path and he mixes another path of *Avodas Hashem* into his way of life, he does not know what he is doing, and he will be forming contradictions in his way of life.

When one lives most of the time with an unclear path of *Avodas Hashem*, he will attempt to combine all the information he has learned about, and the result will be some "new" path of *Avodas Hashem* that no one has ever heard about. (It's like building a private altar).

Eventually, he will find himself broken, realizing that he was severely mistaken all his life. If this doesn't happen, he will go his whole life with a mistaken approach in *Avodas Hashem* and in how to live life, and he will end his life that way, having spent his entire life in misconception.

The words here are not describing some distant certain place in the world that lacks a solid *derech* in *Avodas Hashem*; we are describing issues which most people face.

Most people do not clarify what their *derech* is in *Avodas Hashem*, and when people do feel a desire for spiritual growth, the tendency is to borrow ideas from here and there and put them together. (Understandably, there are others will not add on anything at all to their *derech* if it something that did not come from their tradition). But either way, many people are not clear in what their *derech* is, and when a person wants to really grow and to become a *ben aliyah*, he finds himself without a *derech*, and in desperation, he combines many different approaches together, in the hope of growing in this way.

He takes the risk, and there is no guarantee he will succeed. He thinks that he was basically successful until now, and that is what he basis his decisions on. He will live his whole life with a *derech* he has formed for himself which he has no idea of.

All of this misguided thinking stems from an impaired use of **wind-of-fire-of-earth**. On a simple level, wind-of-fire-of-earth is used for evil when a person is conceited, after having built a solid approach in life that is a recognized *derech*. But here we have described a step that must be traversed way before that problem: when a person builds for himself a *derech* which is not even a *derech* in the first place. It is a *derech* which is non-existent and it cannot last.

Developing A Solid Path

The proper way to approach our life and our *Avodas Hashem* is entirely different than the above one mentioned until now. It will feel like a longer path, but you will see that if you do traverse it, it actually ends up taking less of your time, in the long run of things. The superficial approach mentioned until now is a quick and impatient path which ends up taking longer than expected - and even more so, it's not even a 'path' to begin with.

When we learn a *sugya* of Gemara, all of us to a certain extent have a certain path as we learn the *sugya*. We start from the beginning of a *sugya* and we get to the end, we learn the *mefarshim* (commentaries) along the way. Some people have a hard time with learning more than one approach in the *sugya*, so they will only stick to one approach, whether it's the approach of Reb Chaim, Reb Shimon Shkop, or Rav Naftali Trop; others are able to be more expansive and they can absorb more than one approach towards the *sugya*. Either way, it is understood by most sensible people when learning a *sugya* that there is a certain path, a "*mehalech*", from beginning of the *sugya* until its end.

The same concept needs to be applied to matters of *avodah*. We must become clear in a path of *avodah* just as much as being clear in an approach towards a *sugya* of Gemara.

So just like you have a *mehalech* in a *sugya* of Gemara which you are used to sticking to, so must you stick to a certain *mehalech* when it comes to your *Avodas Hashem*. We all understand that to understand a *mehalech* in learning Gemara, it is not acquired in one day. It is very vast, so it requires years and years of exertion in Torah study. So too, when it comes to having a path in *avodah*, you need to exert yourself to clarify what your path should be.

Now, there is an obvious difference between exerting yourself in learning Gemara and exerting yourself in matters of *Avodas Hashem*. When it comes to learning Gemara, the ways of thinking are already well-known, and each *beis midrash* has its own *mehalech* they're following. But when it comes

the different paths of *Avodas Hashem*, the matters are not arranged in an orderly fashion, so it's more difficult to research. It is thus more difficult to clarify a path in *avodas Hashem* and gain a *mehalech* in it.

Yet, even so, you still need to try as hard as you can to know what it is, and discussing it with others can help for this. Learn these matters in a way that you find yourself with a *mehalech* in your *Avodas Hashem*, as opposed to just gathering details and facts.

Steps 1: Know Your Current Path

(1) To start, begin becoming familiar with the "*derech*" in *Avodas Hashem* that is of your type that you belong to, or of the community you are found in, or of the the *beis midrash* you currently learn in, or of the *beis midrash* you grew up in.

Step 2: Recognize Some of The Other Paths

(2) The next step is, that besides for being familiar with one path of *Avodas Hashem*, you need to become familiar with other approaches of *avodah* as well that exist. Obviously, you cannot totally understand other approaches, but at least have some minimal recognition of them.

Ignorance

If we ask different people what the approach of the *Vilna Gaon* was, what the path of the *Baal Shem Tov* was, and what the path of the *Rambam* was, we will get different answers! People are often not familiar at all with any one approach: not the way of the *Vilna Gaon*, not the way of the *Besh"t*, and not the way of the *Rambam*. At best, there are people who can tell you some of the faults of each of these paths of *Avodas Hashem*, and based upon that, they build all kinds of arguments about it. But they are often totally ignorant of any one path of *Avodas Hashem*.

First of all, one must understand that each of the paths of *Avodas Hashem* of previous generation are each a valid "*mehalech*" (path) and totally based on the words of our *Chazal*, whose greatness we cannot fathom. Therefore, each of the existing and paths of *Avodas Hashem* are all vast and deep. But although they are all very deep ways, each person can have some connection to any one of these paths, according to his respective level. Each person needs to know the *mehalech* he grew up with, and after that, he should get to know some of the other *mehalchim* that are in his surroundings.

This is a learning process that takes time and research, and it needs to be discussed with others, so that one can keep refining his understanding of these matters. One has to know the existing paths of *Avodas Hashem* no less than how he must know other parts of Torah, which requires understanding and discussion with others. The point is to understand what a path in *Avodas Hashem* is, and it is not merely about collecting random pieces of knowledge.

When a person gets to that point - when he has absorbed a certain path of *Avodas Hashem*, and he is aware that there other paths as well - he approaches his learning of the words of our Sages with a clearer perception. Instead of viewing the information as random details that are dispersed from each other, he tries to see how the dots connect to form a certain path. This doesn't mean of course that he'll always fully understand what he learns each time. But he'll at least be able to understand the general path of the information, as opposed to seeing random details.

When it comes to learning Gemara, one must be able to write lengthy discussions on what he's learning. So, too, *Rabbeinu Yonah* wrote that "one must write lengthy discussions on fear of Heaven". (He didn't just mean 'fear of Heaven'; he meant all spiritual areas). The point is to learn of the existing paths of *Avodas Hashem* and to be able to build upon that information.

Included in this, as we said, is to recognize other paths as well, in *Avodas Hashem*. The more a person becomes familiar with other paths of *Avodas Hashem*, the better he will know his own path. There are no exact guidelines that can be given for this, but each person according to his abilities can get to know his own path of *Avodas Hashem*, as well as a little more than that.

I can't say exactly how much "a little more" is, because with each person it will differ. Just like we cannot define clearly how much a person has to learn in the Gemara, so too when it comes to *Avodas Hashem*, it cannot be clearly defined how many different approaches one must learn about it. It will depend on each person.

But the common denominator between all people is that all people need to recognize the path in *Avodas Hashem* one is taking, as well as some of the other paths that exist.

<strong">Step 3: Know Your Unique Path

(3) After this step, the next step is for a person to try to recognize which path in *Avodas Hashem* is the one that is meant for his own soul to follow: the path in *Avodas Hashem* that is designed according to his own soul root.

Until now, we were discussing that one must get to know the path he is taking, but now we are discussing a different point: one must get to know the path in *Avodas Hashem* that is meant for him to take.

How can a person know it? The clearer that a person has become about the different approaches of *Avodas Hashem* **and** he is also in touch with his own soul, the combination of these two factors together can lead him towards knowing what his unique path will be.

The Story With The Convert Who Became A "Gerrer Chassid"

I remember from my younger days in *yeshivah* that there was a student there who converted to Judaism. At his wedding, he was dressed like a *Gerrer Chassid*. He continued to live like a *Gerrer Chassid* and to associate himself with *Gerrer Chassidus*, etc. At some time later, I met up with him and I decided to ask him: "Why did you want to be a *Gerrer Chassid*?"

He said to me, "I remember once, when I was in Russia, the first time that I saw Jews. I saw people dressed in this type of clothing, so I knew that this is what I have to be." He became a *Gerrer Chassid* because that's the first type of Jew that he saw, so it was his first impression of Jews, and that is what moved him to become a *Gerrer*.

The fact that he converted was wonderful; it surely came from a truthful place, from inspiration from Heaven, and perhaps from merits of his ancestors. But who says that he took the right path in *Avodas Hashem*? Just because he saw others wearing this type of clothing means that he must wear it also? Why should his first impression of Judaism dictate the exact path he must take in life? He could have become a Jew without becoming a *Gerrer Chassid*.

It's very possible that a person bases his entire path in *Avodas Hashem* and his way of life upon a certain point or thought which was really not stable. Others have a problem in which they do not think at all; they are born into a certain community and they never think about what their path should be; that is where they live and that is where they are buried. But the opposite problem of this [which we are addressing] is when someone bases his entire life on a certain foundation that was not substantial.

To illustrate further, there is another story that brings out this point. Reb Chatzkel Levenstein zt"l

would always speak about *emunah*, as is well-known. Once he said that he suspected himself of ulterior motivations in this, and that it did not stem from a quest for *emunah*. He remembered that he had once been very moved by a speech from Reb Yeruchem Levovitz zt"l in Radin, where Reb Yeruchem spoke about *emunah*. If so, he said, he suspected that his speeches about *emunah* were motivated by his first impression of Reb Yeruchem, rather than coming from a quest for *emunah*.

He was a person who was very purified in his inner being, yet he suspected that his entire *Avodas Hashem* is based on some personal impression, which he deemed as an ulterior motivation. If Reb Chatzkel suspected himself, what should we of this current generation say, when we are not even clear about any one path of *Avodas Hashem*...?

In Summary

The clarification process is, as we said: one must know recognize the different paths of *Avodas Hashem*, and then he must clarify which path is meant for him.

As this becomes clearer, one also needs to *daven* to Hashem for help, that he be guided to find the true path that's meant for him to take.

Superficial Growth Vs. Inner Growth

A person who is superficial will make this clarification too quickly, confident that he's clear in his path of *Avodas Hashem*, but all the changes he will make will be external and superficial. He might change his entire external situation, such as what he wears and which type he dresses like, and he might move from his community and blend in with the other type that he now associates himself with.

But if a person is more internal, he knows that the main changes take place in one's inner world, which is hidden from plain sight. He can make some external changes of course, but most of the changes will be taking place on the inside of himself, not on his outside. There will be changes in how he thinks, in his *middos*, in his inner *avodah*. Slowly but surely, he will become clearer about how he must serve Hashem.

At some point, he will be able to direct himself to which path of *Avodas Hashem* he should take, and through getting to know his soul more and more, he can know which aspects of other paths can be integrated into his own path, and which points should not.

Clarity In Your Path

At the beginning of one's way as he begins to serve Hashem, it is impossible for one to know how to integrate various aspects of *Avodas Hashem* into the current path that he's taking. But the clearer he becomes, he can know which aspects can be integrated into his own path, and which aspects should not be integrated into his path. One needs to be concerned all the time if he is seeking a clear path.

At first, one must remain with the current path of *Avodas Hashem* that he is found in, and he should do so with *temimus* (unquestioning faith), but as time goes on, he should keep clarifying what path he is on and what it contains. As a person gets older and he matures, he can become clearer of which path in *Avodas Hashem* is meant for him to take.

There were only a few individuals who merited to find a new path in *Avodas Hashem* that they had never traversed beforehand. But it wasn't from a lack of knowledge of other paths or from confusion. To the contrary: because they were so clear about *Avodas Hashem*, they knew how to find a unique path that was meant for their soul. But these were only rare individuals who merited this, and we are not speaking about this here.

‘Orach’: Finding Your Unique Path

Earlier in this chapter, we spoke about the 70 root paths of serving the Creator, which further split into 600,000 paths that are each parallel to the 600,000 souls of the Jewish people. In other words, there are general paths which all Jews must traverse, and there is also a concept of an ‘individual’ path that each Jew can find – a path that is private and unique only to the one who traverses it.

The *Vilna Gaon* said that there is a concept of a “*derech*”, a “path”, which can either be a general path that all Jews traverse, or it can be a private path; and there is a level called “*orach*”, a “way”, which applies to any person, no matter who he is.

When one is truly serving Hashem, he will eventually reach his own “*orach*”, which is his unique way that no one else will know of. It will not be learned from his *rebbe* (teacher) and it will not be taught to him by his father; and it is not the way that his son or student must follow. It is the path that is uniquely meant for him, which is not meant for others. But in order to reach one’s own “*orach*”, he must traverse all the previous steps that were described here.

Reaching one’s own *orach* will mean that he has reached his own individual essence. This is a very subtle point to describe, because it is not reached through rebelling or contradicting one’s teachers. It is rather a subtle form of originality that is developed within the paths that one has received from his teachers, who taught us the words of our Sages.^[1] ^[1]

The common denominator between all people is that every person needs to be aware of what the paths of *Avodas Hashem* are; and to be in touch with one’s own soul; and to know what his path is in *Avodas Hashem* must be.

After all those steps have been reached, one can then know what his unique path in *Avodas Hashem* is. If one does reach his unique path, he fulfills the words of the *Mesillas Yesharim*: “The foundation of piety and the root of inner work is, for a person to know what his duty is in *his* world”. Everyone has “his” own inner world, a unique path of *Avodas Hashem* that only he can reach. He merits to be unique both on this world and in the Next World, and he is the kind of person who merits to serve Hashem with a complete and pure kind of *avodah*.

^[1] ^[2] See **Getting To Know Your Thoughts, chapter 002 (Building Your World of Thought)**

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