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Fire-of-Fire: Ascension Based On The Destruction of Previous Levels

With the help of Heaven, let us now continue to learn about the element of fire, which is at the root of *gaavah* (conceit).

Fire is all about destruction; fire destroys anything that it is in its way. This particular nature of fire, destruction, is the “fire” of fire.

Fire-of-fire subdivides into four possible scenarios: the aspects of earth, water, wind and fire that are all within fire-of-fire. We will go through each of these in the order of lowest area to highest area: earth, water, wind, and fire.

The Four Branches of Fire-of-Fire

(1) Earth-of-fire-of-fire refers to the “nullifying” aspect of fire (*bittu*\nullification). When we nullify something [such as *chometz* before Pesach], we say “Let it be nullified and disregarded as the dust of the earth.” Earth is considered to be unimportant, worthless, and nullified in our eyes. When one wants to go to a higher level than the current level, he first has to “nullify”\destroy the current level; this is the “earth” of fire-of-fire.

(2) Water-of-fire-of-fire is a desire to go higher when one is no longer deriving pleasure (water) from his current level. His motivation for pleasure propels him to progress to the higher level, and this is the “water” aspect of fire-of-fire.

(3) Wind-of-fire-of-fire is a desire to go higher when one wants to experience new kinds of movement (wind). When a person feels that he has finished the movements of the current level and now he feels ready to go on to the next level, this stems from the wind\movement aspect within fire-of-fire.

(4) Fire-of-fire-of-fire refers to the actual destructive nature itself of fire.

At this point, these concepts will sound very closed and mysterious. We hope with the help of Hashem that as we go along that these concepts will become understood.

Earth-of-Fire-of-Fire: Nullifying The Previous Level

As mentioned in the past, the element of fire is all about ascending higher. **Fire-of-fire** refers to the

destructive nature of fire, and **earth-of-fire-of-fire** specifically is where a person 'destroys' his previous level, because he now sees it as worthless and important; "like the dust of the earth."

In simpler terms, it manifests in the soul as follows. As long as a person feels that he is aiming for a higher and more heavenly level, the current level is deemed as the more earthly level. But if the heavenly level now seems like it is the 'earth' to him (he now has higher aspirations than before), a person no longer sees the importance of the previous level, and now he aims for higher levels. (Indeed, we are taught by our Sages that the *avodah* of a person is to "turn Heaven into earth" and then strive for an even higher Heaven than before).

Evil Conceit: Belittling Others In Order To Feel Higher

This power (*bittul*/nullification) can be used for either good or evil. It is evil where a person doesn't see the importance of the previous level and his disregard for it doesn't cause him to aspire higher.

The desire for ascension is at the root of *gaavah*. How does this work? In actuality, the "earth" aspect of fire keeps a person from moving past his current level (for earth causes permanence), but when a person sees that others are on a higher level than him, he cannot stomach this, so his conceitedness causes him to disdain and to disregard them as worthless, which provides him with a feeling that he is "higher" than others. In reality, though, he has not actually gone higher - he has remained exactly where he was before.

This is essentially what lies behind the trait of *gaavah*: [evil] *gaavah* is about destroying\disdaining others in one's mind, for the sake of feeling higher than them.

Holy Conceit: Striving For Higher Levels, Regardless Of Others' Level

By contrast, the holy way to use the power of "nullifying" is, that instead of me nullifying others in order to feel that I am on a higher level, I can realize that it is time for me to progress to a higher level than the previous level, regardless of how this will relate to other people. I can demand from myself aspirations to grow higher from my current level without trying to nullify others in the process. This causes the "**earth**" aspect of **fire-of-fire** to activate on a strong upward movement.

Summary

We have explained here the fundamental difference between evil *gaavah* and holy *gaavah*. The trait of *gaavah* is evil when one is not actually going higher from his current level and he has no desire to improve, and as a result, he disdains others in his eyes, so that he can feel like he is going higher. In contrast, *gaavah* is holy when I simply want to go higher from my current level because I am dissatisfied with my current level.

Evil Conceit: A False Sense of Identity

Let's go deeper into what lies behind *gaavah*.

There are basically two different ways in which we can view the world. When a person has *gaavah* (conceit), it is really a corrupted sense of identity towards oneself, in which a person determines his own self-worth based on how he compares to others. He compares himself to others, sees that he is indeed doing better than other people (at least when it comes to certain areas), and comes to feel conceited from this.

(When one is busy comparing himself to others all the time and that is how he evaluates himself, it's very possible that he suffers from feelings of low self-worth, which is negative *shiflus*, a sense of

lowliness; or, he has the opposite problem: he is conceited. We are discussing here the second option: when constant evaluation of oneself in comparison to others leads to *gaavah*).

So *gaavah* (conceit) is essentially when one identifies his sense of self-worth and importance based on how he compares to others. He looks at others and he thinks, "Where do they stand, and where do I stand?"

This is his root perspective, and it can lead to either evil or holy *gaavah*. If it leads to evil *gaavah*, a person will disdain others and stay complacent with his current level. If it leads to holy *gaavah*, he will be propelled to improve himself, as we explained above; included in this is "jealousy of scholars" (holy jealousy), where a person feels jealous of others' achievements and he is inspired to improve because of this.

The common denominator between all of these scenarios is that the person evaluates his own level based on how he compares to others. This mentality can be very damaging to oneself - let us explain why.

When a person is using the holy kind of *gaavah*, he strives for higher levels of growth regardless of this will relate and compare to other people; his concern is purely that he should acquire the higher level he is striving for. When a person is using the power of *gaavah* for evil, he is busy examining others and wondering how he can be on higher levels than them.

For example, Reuven sees that his friend Shimon is on a higher spiritual level than he, and he is tossing and turning at night in his bed with anxious thoughts about this, wondering how he can be more like Shimon. He is "examining" Shimon in his mind and scrutinizing what his spiritual level is, and if he's on a higher level than him or not. He also "examines" his friend Levi's level, trying to evaluate what Levi's level is, in comparison to his own level. He is busy agonizing over these kinds of thoughts, and then he asks himself, "And what level am I on...?"

The Truthful Perspective Towards Spiritual Growth

The inner perspective for one to have is entirely different. The inner perspective of the soul does not look at others in order to determine its personal level; it looks at things on a purely objective level of simply: "Where do I have to get to?" without wondering how this will relate to *others*.

The ladder of growth which Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair describes, which is explained in *Mesillas Yesharim*, is: "Torah brings a person to *zehirus* (watchfulness), *zehirus* brings a person to *zerizus* (zeal)", etc. Our focus needs to be on aiming for higher levels of growth, and it makes zero difference if you see *others* who are on a higher level than you or on lower level than you. The point is not to become better than those around you; that should not be the issue. The entire concern should be about if you are truly the acquiring higher levels that you need to get to.

When a person has a truthful perspective, his concerns are: "What are the steps of growth that have to be traversed? What is the order of steps I will need to take? What is the current level I am on, and which of the higher levels can I work on currently acquiring?" And when he sees that there is more work to be done and that he hasn't yet gotten to the finish line, he seeks to go higher than the current level.

This positive kind of sense self-evaluation is all a use of **earth-of-fire-of-fire** when it is used for holiness. It enables a person to have a deeper perspective, in which he is not concerned about how he compares to the spiritual level of others. It is when you are motivated to grow to higher levels simply because you know that there are more levels you can reach. How others are faring makes no difference to one's actual growth.

The Way We Evaluate Ourselves

From the simpler perspective, we are busy analyzing other people and on what spiritual level they are on, and we just make sure not to disdain them. As the *Mishnah* states, “Do not judge your friend, until you are in his place” – and as the Kotzker famously explained, “You will never be in his situation, therefore, don’t judge him.” However, although this is true, the person here is still evaluating his own level based on how others are doing, which is not the truthful perspective. It is this erroneous attitude which lies at the core of understanding the trait of *gaavah*.

We can also see this in children. A child does not have a truthful sense of identity towards himself. A child evaluates himself based on how he compares to others that he sees. Children like to do what other children enjoy doing and mimic their surroundings. A child will often measure his own self-worth based on how the other children in his grade: “What grades are they getting? How good is their memory?” And based on that, he will consider himself as either successful or as a failure, because it will entirely depend on how others are doing.

The further a person is from his own individuality, the less he experiences himself, and instead he is experiencing all of that which is outside of himself: other people. Often this childish perspective remains in most people, and deep down, the person identifies based on how *others* are being affected.

Besides for the problems that this mentality in the person causes, it is a detrimental mentality at its very root. In order to have a truthful and inner perspective, we need to see the actual reality (*havayah*) of something, and we cannot define its reality based on how it relates to others in our surroundings.

The Sages said, “Therefore, man was created individual.” The root of how we view reality is from the part of our soul that is ‘individual’. We must love others, but we also have our own individuality. The ‘individual’ aspect of our being sees reality through our own “I”, and it doesn’t measure the reality based on how others are viewing it.

This inner perspective is the root of rectifying *gaavah*, and it empowers a person to stop nullifying other people in his eyes and to instead focus solely on the higher levels he needs to acquire.

The Problem of Talking About Other People

We have outlined the root perspective which one needs to have. Now we will explain how it can be applied practically.

The Gemara says that it is forbidden to speak of another’s praise to others, because by speaking of his praise, the person will also come to speak disparaging remarks about the person. Besides for the simple reason which the Gemara says, there is also a deeper reason that is not mentioned in the Gemara (as is well-known, there is a rule that the Gemara reveals only one of the reasons for a *halacha*. There are always more reasons behind the *halacha* which the Gemara does not bring). The deeper reason for why it is forbidden to praise a person to another is, because talking about another person takes a person away from his own inner world; it makes him less inward as he turns outward from himself to discuss others.

When someone talks *lashon hora* (evil gossip) about another person, it is really a sign that he is far from his own self. Speaking *lashon hora* is to abandon one’s own self and to instead involve himself with others in his surroundings.

This is true whether he simply wanted to talk about the person, or whether he began by praising him

and he ended up talking negatively about him, or whether he began the conversation to begin with in order to speak negatively of him (G-d forbid). In either case, a person talking *lashon hora* has always abandoned his own personal world, and he has involved himself with the world beyond the borders of his "I". Once a person starts talking about other people, he has left his "I", and this can eventually lead to the evil outcome of speaking *lashon hora* about another.

It is indeed difficult for a person to put a stop to the habit of talking about other people. In the world we live in and recognize today, it is the nature of people to talk about others and to discuss them. The Gemara says that there are few people who sin with adultery, many people who steal, and that all people speak *avak lashon hora* ("the dust of gossip"): conversations that are apt to lead to *lashon hora*. The reality of speaking *avak lashon hora* envelopes our world - and if only it would stay at that level and not become actual *lashon hora* itself.

We live in a world in which almost every person talks about everybody else in his surroundings. We are born into a world where it is natural to talk about other people; which really means that we are born into a world where people are constantly leaving their own selves, by always talking about other people's lives. There are levels and levels to how much people talk about other people, but in any case, the accepted attitude in the world is to talk about others; sometimes in front of the other and sometimes not in front of him.

That being the case, since a person is so used to talking about other people, he is experiencing his life based on how he perceives what others say and think. A person tends to have a sense of self-worth based on how he thinks *others* view him; he will think according to how *others* think; and he becomes involved with *others'* lives, leaving his own individual world behind him as he does this. It even becomes the very way he lives life.

Let's take for example a person who is not immersed in the world of Torah and in learning it; even someone who makes sure to strictly adhere to all of the Torah. Let's examine his conversations. How much of his day was spent talking about other people? Forget about if he spoke *lashon hora* or not, or how much he praised others and how much he spoke negatively others; that's a different issue. How much did he speak about others? A very small percentage of the conversations are *not* about other people (and we can apply the rule of "nullified by a sixtieth"); most of the conversations were spent talking about other people.

If we can change this long-standing habit of human nature, we have the root of change that is needed in order to rectify *gaavah*.

Again, we will emphasize that it will be difficult, because we are used to growing up in a world that naturally does not think there is anything wrong with always talking about other people. Changing this habit will feel like uprooting the very lifestyle that most of us grew up with and grown comfortable with (may Hashem have compassion on us that this has become our normal situation), so it will indeed be a difficult task for us to change this habit.

Superficial Sense of Identity

In our generation of *ikvesa d'meshicha* (the footsteps of Mashiach), there are many different "groupings" of Jews, like different flocks of sheep that follow their own herd. Each sect of religious Judaism today follows its own community and its own ways; how does each group look at the other group? Sadly, it has become 'justified' in the eyes of each group to speak negatively of other types of Jews, and it has even become deemed as an obligatory '*mitzvah*' to do this! Living life in this way places a person into a state of constantly comparing himself with others and to evaluate his own level based upon his level of judgment.

We can give an extreme example of this problem, which all people are familiar with. There are those whose entire level of *Yiddishkeit* is based on a comparison with the level of the irreligious and the secular. This type of person feels that he is on a very high religious level, simply because he is not a "Chiloni" (irreligious Jew in Israel) – even if he doesn't say so. For example, he sees all the signs which warn us to stay away from the wicked people that rebel against the widely accepted views amongst religious Torah Jewry, and therefore he thinks that he is basically doing very well, compared to all those wicked people he reads about.

Going further with this, even within the observant Torah world there are controversies about certain people, and there are some people who believe that it is a *mitzvah* to speak harshly against those people and to totally destroy them, and they feel that certain people are deserving of the death sentence in *Beis Din*. Such a person feels that he is a very good person, compared to all of these wicked people that must be condemned. It becomes his perspective with which he lives life with.

It shows that he has no sense of identity of his own. He draws his entire sense of self-worth from the fact that he is not a wicked person who deserves to be belittled, shamed, and destroyed. He derives vitality from this. It's very possible that when he eventually has to go upstairs to Heaven one day, he will find out that his entire level of *Yiddishkeit* was entirely based on how his view of others who were below his religious level - and that this was his entire source of vitality in life.

This might sound a bit too far-fetched at first when we hear this, but we must know that a large percentage of people who keep the Torah and the *mitzvos* don't have a genuine sense of identity, and they are instead getting their entire feeling of self-worth from the fact that they aren't irreligious or that they aren't as bad as certain people.

Judging Those Who Are Greater Than Us

That is all with regards to how the religious may view the irreligious, but let's go further within the observant realm, of how we can see this nature manifests: there is a nature to judge others in our own surroundings.

The Chazon Ish said that a very important part of our life is to observe the wise people of the generation (the *Gedolim*). This has become second nature especially to *bnei Torah*, to scrutinize and analyze what greater people say. But although it is true in concept, it can get out of hand, making us become too analytical of every detail of every word of a *Gadol* that we come across, to the point that it is apt to make us judge people who are much greater than us.

If it was merely the *halachic* ruling of the *Gadol* that people are discussing and talking about, there is some room to validate this; after all, it is the way of Torah to analyze every word we come across. But that is not what often happens. When people question the words of a *Gadol*, they usually end up evaluating the *Gadol's* level and how he compares to other *Gedolim*. It is no longer a purely intellectual discussion about a *halacha* at hand; it becomes personal. There is this tendency to always "evaluate" a *Gadol* in comparison to other *Gedolim*.

There are people who always have to state their opinions about people who are far greater than them, in knowledge and breadth of Torah, in *Avodas Hashem*, and in *dikduk hadin* (strict adherence to follow *halachah*). This kind of person, from his narrowed and immature perspective, thinks that he is gifted with Heavenly assistance to evaluate people who are greater than him and determine their level. In fact, he will even look to expose faults in great people, and he will think that it is a *mitzvah* to speak negatively against them.

If one thinks he is far removed from this perspective, there is a good chance he is fooling himself

when it comes to this. We are living in a generation in which this kind of behavior pervades the air; we grow up in it. In the more recent years, a child being born into the current generation is like a *tinok shenishbah* ("captured child") with regards to this aspect, because he doesn't know any better, when he grows up in a generation like this which is missing respect for great people.

When one gains his sense of self-worth through destroying others in his mind (whether he reads about those people or whether they are people in his close surroundings), he has no authentic self-worth. His entire "I" is built upon his negativity towards certain people, and with the more he 'destroys' people in his mind, he is further and further from his own "I." This is a painful fact of reality that most people can recognize in today's generation.

1) Stop Talking About People

If we want to change this superficial attitude and we want to have the correct perspective, we will need to make the following resolutions.

The first thing we need to do, which we began to mention before, is that we need to stop talking about people. Period.

This doesn't mean that from now on and until forever, you will never be able to say another person's name ever again, and it doesn't mean that you cannot mention the name of a sick person whom you are *davening* for in the *Refoeinu* blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*. Of course we do not mean that. A sensible person understands that we cannot change instantly in one day, especially not extreme changes. It is no different than any other resolution you make; take on realistic changes.

For example, when you have a conversation about someone, just try not to mention any names. Never mention the name of the person you are talking about.

Of course, in certain pressing situations, you have no choice. But as a usual course of action, try your utmost not to mention any names of people, in your conversations. If you have to talk about a certain situation with others and it involves other people, stick to talking about the *situation*, and not the names of people that are involved.

To practically work on this, make a simple resolution that for three times a day, when you are with others and you feel an urge to talk about someone, you will resist the urge and you will not mention the name of the person you are talking about. Slowly but surely as you get to this, you will no longer want to mention others' names in your conversations. It will become more and more distant to you.

As a person gets used to this, he will realize that he is less involved with trying to figure out other people. Instead, he will find a more inner world in front of him than what he was used to. He will find that he is no longer interested that much in giving his opinions about people, and from discussing people altogether.

2) For Those Who Learn In Yeshiva\Kolel

Now we will take this idea and expand upon it.

Imagine if people would learn Torah in-depth as much as they analyze and discuss people in-depth; they are both the desire to get to the truth.

If a person is very interested and curious to know about certain pressing issues of our times - which involves the understanding of opinions of other people - he can spend time on this during *Bein HaZemanim* and do his research then. But during the *zman*, one should avoid getting involved with

any issues of *machlokes* (disagreements).

During the *zman*, one's entire focus should be on his Torah learning during all of his regular learning sessions. Unless there is a pressing issue of *halachah* that must be clarified and cannot be pushed aside, one must not discuss any of the issues of our times that involve discussing other people. If you want to do your research on an issue of our times, leave it for *Bein HaZemanim*. Even then, you will need a lot of *tefillah* and *yishuv hadaas* (calmness) and cautiousness to make sure that you don't cross any lines.

In Summary of The Two-Step Solution

To summarize, the first step of change is to resolve not to mention names of people in our conversations, and the second step is not to discuss topics or issues that involve other people. Throughout the day, you need to only be involved in what you must be involved in: three study sessions of Torah learning, and a session for *mussar*.

Disconnect From The Generation

With the more a person gets used to this way of living (understandably, it is because the the external changes lead to internal changes), he will begin to feel that he has detached himself from those who live in this generation.

It has become more necessary than ever, for our own spiritual survival, to feel disconnected from those who live in this current generation.^[1] As a person gets used to being disconnected from the world, by not discussing what goes in the world [and remaining focused entirely on his Torah studies], he will find that he is not that interested in what goes on in the world today.

It is a very high spiritual level if one were to totally disconnect from all that goes in the generation; it would take a lot of long and inner hard work, but long before reaching that level, as a person gets used to being disconnected from the generation today, he begins to see the world from a calmer and quieter place in himself. And then he will begin to realize the stark reality that is happening to this generation: that people in this generation are quickly losing both This World and the Next World, all of their eternity, in the blink of an eye.

With the more a person feels disconnected from this generation, he begins to feel his pure "I" as it is. This is not the ego, but the "I" in its pure form - the soul. The more a person exposes his true "I", he will find it *naturally* difficult to speak about others.

In the beginning stages, where a person has simply resolved not to speak about others, he is not yet in touch with his pure "I", and he is rather performing external actions that can eventually cause inner changes; at this beginning stage, it is not yet within his natural level not to talk about other people. But as a person grows used to not talking about people, and he makes sure not to involve himself with the controversial issues of our times that involve other people, he slowly becomes more and more disconnected from this generation - which puts him in touch with his own inner world.

Upon reaching that point, he will *naturally* find it difficult to talk about other people. Not only will he will feel less interested; he will feel like he is leaving his inner world when he talks about other people, and that is why it will feel very unappealing for him.

Stop Being A Judge

Now we can understand the depth of "Do not judge your friend until you are in his place." There are many explanations of this matter, but one of the explanations of it (which is the one relevant for our

discussion here) is that you should not be a “judge” over other people. After all, who appointed you as the ‘judge’ over others, to give judgments on them? Even if a person has received *semicha* (a Rabbinical graduation certificate) for becoming a *dayan* (judge to serve in a *Beis Din*), that doesn’t give him the right to ‘judge’ others. The more a person reaches his inner self, the more he realizes that there is no place to judge other people.

We see that Hashem metes out judgment to people. The Torah says that there are curses that befall people who commit certain sins, and the entire people had to answer “Amen” to each curse. We must accept Hashem’s will, for everything He does is good. But the simple nature of our soul is not to judge others; it is not busy thinking about other people. It is concerned only for what truth is.

Holy Earth-of-Fire-of-Fire

With the more a person is disconnected from the generation and he is instead in touch with his inner world, this rectifies his previously impaired **earth-of-fire-of-fire**, which had been providing him until now with a false sense of identity, by nullifying others in his mind - in which he was not actually growing higher from his current level.

When a person gets used to the above resolutions and he has become more in touch with his own inner world, he is no longer busy thinking about other people. It is the holy way to use **earth-of-fire-of-fire**.

When a person is using his **earth-of-fire-of-fire** for holiness, he is involved with learning the words of our Sages on a regular basis, and he sees a “clear world” of where he has to get to (climbing the ladder of growth described in *Mesillas Yesharim* that we mentioned earlier). It makes no difference to him how others are doing, if they are doing better than him or if they are worse off; this doesn’t concern him. Even if thoughts about others come to him, he is aware that we really cannot know the true level of another person anyway.

Thus, he becomes totally far-removed from any “comparing” kinds of thoughts with others. He has entered a totally different mindset which does not measure growth in comparison to others.

This is the holy use of **earth-of-fire-of-fire**, which enables a person to constantly demand from himself a desire to grow higher to the next level. When thoughts about others come to him, he immediately recognizes the fallacy of this. Although there is a rule of our Sages that “Jealousy of scholars increases wisdom”, it is explained elsewhere in the works of our Sages that “Jealousy makes the bones rot” - even if it is holy jealousy.

We have described here a kind of life that enables a person to realize the meaning of “Therefore, man was created individual.” When one realizes the meaning of his own individuality, he has an inner world that he has built for himself, and he becomes capable of reaching “his” obligation on “his” world, as the *Mesillas Yesharim* states.

Genuine Love For Others

The more a person becomes in touch with his inner world, his individuality, his true “I”, he is able to relate to others in a more genuine way and to connect to others Jews out of pure *ahavas Yisrael* (love of Jews).

This is a totally different kind of life than the way the world looks like right now. In today’s world, most of the connections that people have with each other are spiritually damaging, and the few connections that are not harmful to us are usually lacking love.

But if one traverses the path here, he is on the path towards revealing true love for others. At first, he will feel that detachment from the world is making him into a cold and detached and unfeeling person, but eventually, he will be able to reach total love to others, as he continues to expose his true “I” with the more he remains disconnected from the rest of the world. It is only when a person reaches his true “I” that he can genuinely love others; the love for Hashem that he acquires, as his inner world is revealed to him, will enable him to love *Klal Yisrael*, for love of *Klal Yisrael* is ultimately rooted in love of Hashem[2].

When he reaches that place of love in himself, it is of this place that it is written, “*Love conceals all faults.*” The love he will feel for others, in spite of their faults, will “bribe” him from focusing on their faults.

(Of course, even though this is true, a person must still make sure he doesn’t get too carried away with this concept and to come to love and connect to others who can harm him spiritually. There must be boundaries when it comes to how much we allow ourselves to love and connect with others, because if we don’t set boundaries, we endanger ourselves to getting pulled down with others who are too attached to the evil found on this world).

He will be looking at others from a place of love in himself that he has reached, instead of seeing their faults and judging them. Even if it happens that he notices the faults of another, his love for other Jews will enable him to overlook the faults he sees, for “*Love conceals all faults.*”

This is how **earth-of-fire-of-fire** is used for rectification\holiness.

[1] Editor’s Note: This is a central theme of the Rav’s talks. See ***Derashos #0103 - Surviving Spiritually***; and ***Tefillah #0148 - How To Survive The End of Days***; and ***Tefillah #0150 - Descent of the Generation***

[2] The source of this is in the words of the Zohar: “There are three crowns that are tied to one other: Yisrael, the Torah, and the Blessed One, are all one.” The Rav has quoted this concept in many places.

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/fixing-your-fire-conceit-013-source-identity>