



WAYS OF BEING CLOSE TO HASHEM

QUESTION In sefer “Bilvavi” Part 5 (*adapted in english as “How To Reveal Your Soul”*) the Rav gives a number of ways of serving Hashem. Can the Rav please explain how a person gets close to Hashem through these different ways? And can the Rav list the different schools of thinking which followed each of those ways?

ANSWER [There are three ways: Attaching to a tzaddik, attaching to the Torah, and attaching to middos.]

1) Attaching to atzaddik. This was especially the way of Breslev, and it is the way of Chassidus in general. Through becoming attached with the tzaddik, one becomes integrated with the tzaddik, and the tzaddik is integrated with Hashem, as in the phrase, “Man of G-d.” [Thus becoming attached with the tzaddik is a way of becoming attached with Hashem].

2) Attaching to Torah [by way of studying Torah]. This was the approach of the Gra and his student Rav Chaim of Volozhin [who authored Nefesh HaChaim] and other great students. Through becoming attached to the Torah, one becomes attached with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, because “Torah and Hashem are one,” and “His will and His wisdom are one.” Hashem’s will and wisdom are revealed in the Torah, as the Nefesh HaChaim explains.

3) Attaching to the middos (*character traits*). This was the school of thinking taught by Rav Yisrael Salanter, which developed the approach of mussar (*self-discipline*), mainly by uprooting negative character. It was always the way of the Chassidus of Poland, which focused on connecting to one’s good character traits, mainly on the traits of love and fear of Heaven. (*The word chassidus is from the word chessed (kindness), which corresponds to ahavah, love*). From a deeper understanding, becoming connected to middos means to become attached to the middos of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and this is a form of d’veykus to Hashem. This is because we are charged to “resemble” Hashem, and we can only resemble Him when we become similar to Him through perfecting our character.

But even more so, the middos of the Creator are imprinted within the Jewish people, and when one connects to the good

middos found within him, he is really connecting to the middos of Hashem that have been implanted within him.

STUDYING AGADTA & PNIMIYUS HATORAH

QUESTION 1) When it comes to Torah learning, since a person mainly needs to learn the parts of Torah that are particularly tailored to his soul, does that mean that I can learn agadta (*homiletics*) and pnimiyus haTorah (*the inner dimension of Torah*) all day, or at least for most of the day, such as by learning by the Rav’s commentary on the sefarim of Kaballah or on sefer Baal Shem Tov, etc.? Now, I’ve heard the Rav say that a person shouldn’t learn shouldn’t learn agadta all day, but perhaps that’s only a person who just started to learn. What about if one is already a Torah scholar, or if he’s an excellent kolel avreich and he “knows how to learn” well (*Baruch Hashem*)? Is there place for him learning agadta or pnimiyus haTorah all day?

ANSWER 1) As a general rule, this should not be done at all. But for every rule, there are exceptions, so there some souls who are meant to mainly involve themselves in this area of Torah.

QUESTION 2) Does one’s daily learning sessions need to include learning sugyos of Gemara (*shmaatsa*), halachah, and agadta? Or does every person need to spend most his Torah learning sessions on difficult sugyos of Gemara? I especially have a difficulty when I’m learning difficult sugyos of Gemara with my chavrusa, because I feel like these sugyos of Gemara are not my “unique share” in Torah learning that I need to be spending time on (*at least not now*), and I would rather be learning agadta or the Rav’s shiurim on areas of pnimiyus haTorah. What does the Rav advise?

ANSWER 2) This is a matter that is different with each person, and each person needs to find his unique place in Torah learning that’s meant for him. For example, it is clear to anyone that Rav Shach’s daily schedule of learning [which focused on sugyos of Gemara] did not look like the daily schedule of Rav Wolbe [who delved more into agadta]. And it is clear to anyone that the daily learning schedule of the Alter of Slobodka [who delved into agadta] did not look like the daily learning schedule of Rav

Shimon Shkop [who focused on sugyos of Gemara].

QUESTION 3) Since the Geulah (*Redemption*) is near, does that mean that there is less of an obligation to learn sugyos of Gemara and to instead learn more topics of agadta and pnimiyus haTorah, which more directly prepare one for the Geulah? Because it seems that people who learn about spiritual matters such as mussar, chassidus, emunah, and bitachon are growing more than those who just learn Gemara, and it seems that they're more well-prepared for the Gemara because they learn about spiritual matters which bring them closer to Hashem. It would seem that learning about pnimiyus haTorah prepares a person better for the Geulah than learning regular Gemara. Does the Rav agree?

ANSWER 3) That is not necessarily true. A person needs to become connected with every part of Torah, and one can find an inner point through any part of Torah. It is within one's ability to connect together all parts of Torah together.

QUESTION 4) The Rav has said that one reach his soul through learning pnimiyus haTorah, which includes learning about the soul. If I feel that learning about the soul is my main share in Torah learning, can I spend most of my learning time on this subject?

ANSWER 4) It is not advisable at all to do this. One's daily learning schedule should encompass additional areas of Torah. How much time to spend on an area, and how, is an individual question.

QUESTION 5) When I'm learning a sugya of Gemara with my chavrusa, I have difficulty staying interested because I would rather be learning the parts of Torah that appeal to me more, such as agadta or pnimiyus haTorah. Is this coming from laziness or from a lack of interest, or it is because I feel that my main kind of learning should be spent on subjects of agadta and pnimiyus haTorah which interest me more than regular Gemara?

ANSWER 5) It is very possible that you have never yet found your place in in-depth learning sugyos of Gemara and that's why you aren't connecting enough to regular Gemara. It's also possible that you are mainly an emotional kind of person and your emotions overpower your intellect, and that is why you are being drawn more towards pnimiyus haTorah. If that's the case, your work is to become more balanced between your intellect and your emotions.

QUESTION 6) Do all of the obligations of Torah learning (as explained in the Rambam, Tur, Shulchan Aruch, and Shulchan Aruch

HaRav in *Hilchos Talmud Torah*) apply to every individual, requiring each person to put pressure on himself to meet all of the requirements of Torah study? Or does Torah study depend on each person's individual mental and emotional abilities?

ANSWER 6) Just like the body has needs, causing a person to do certain kinds of physical work in order to take care of the body, so does the soul have needs, and that is reason for a person to study other parts of Torah's wisdom which do not go under the category of the mitzvah of Torah study. Just like a person needs to heal the body, so does a person need to heal his soul.

QUESTION 7) The Rav has said that through mesirus nefesh (*self-sacrifice*) a person can get through to his soul. But elsewhere the Rav said that studying the soul requires inner silence, as opposed to mesirus nefesh. Why isn't this a contradiction?

ANSWER 7) Actually doing inner work on one's soul can be done with mesirus nefesh, but the study of self-recognition requires inner quiet and calm. Rare individuals can have mesirus nefesh together with inner quiet and calm.

QUESTION 8) The Rav has said that a person should not spend the entire day on studying self-recognition (*i.e. by learning the 4 Elements series*), because this is not being balanced. But elsewhere the Rav has said that included in learning pnimiyus haTorah is studying self-recognition, that is, if one learns in-depth about the wisdom of the soul, not just with regards to character improvement, but with regards to the actual Torah wisdom behind the structure of the soul. So why can't a person learn the whole day about wisdom of the soul? I think a good example of this would be the Rav's series on the 4 elements of the middos, the series of "Understanding Your Middos", which focuses on the abstract wisdom behind each of the middos. Why can't a person spend a whole day learning such a series, and why can't it count for Torah study?

ANSWER 8) Studying the soul, by studying and clarifying these matters as their root, is part of Torah study. But it is only a "part" of Torah study, and you cannot spend your entire learning only this part of Torah.

There are some souls who are rooted more in pnimiyus haTorah, or they are more drawn to study pnimiyus haTorah because they have returned in this lifetime so that they could study this part of Torah. For those souls, their main study of Torah is in the areas of pnimiyus haTorah. In order to know if this is the case, one needs to clarify very deeply if it is indeed uniquely meant for him to pursue the study of pnimiyus haTorah, and that his interest to learn pnimiyus haTorah isn't coming from a

desire to merely run away from learning Gemara and halachah.

SUGGESTED READING & ADVICE FOR LEARNING WHEN STUCK AT HOME

QUESTION: 1) I decided after hearing the Rav's derasha [about corona] that now is the time to learn more about avodas Hashem (*serving the Creator*), because I'm not getting any younger and time's running out for me. I would like to deepen my understanding of Judaism and avoid the influences from the secular culture. Can the Rav give me a "recommending reading list" of sefarim to learn, which will give me a full picture of what the world of avodas Hashem looks like?

ANSWER: 1) Refer to sefer Michtav M'Eliyahu vol.1, and sefer Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh, part 1.

QUESTION: 2) Also, because I'm at home all day with the kids [because of the corona situation] I have very little time to learn Torah, and I have a lot of disturbances. Can the Rav recommend any specific kind of Torah learning that I can do even when I'm in the midst of disturbances?

ANSWER: 2) Learn Gemara, and review what you learn orally, so that you keep can be learning [mentally] even when you're not in front of a Gemara. Alternatively, spend time on a question on what you're learning that interests you, and continue to think about the question after you're finished learning, when you're not in front of a sefer. May you grow and succeed!

MITZVOS, D'VEYKUS & TORAH LEARNING MEET

I had asked the Rav that if the purpose of doing all the mitzvos and learning Torah is to come to emunah and palpable closeness with G-d, why is it that lack of doing mitzvos is worse than lacking intellectual and emotional connection to G-d? Shouldn't it be the opposite, since the main thing is how much we attach our heart to have thoughts of emunah and closeness with Hashem? Also, what's the point of trying to attain palpable closeness with Hashem if a person is not 100% careful when it comes to doing mitzvos (*i.e. missing a word of hearing megillah or wearing tefillin straps that aren't totally black*)?

The Rav answered me that it is can be compared to building a structure with many floors. The mitzvos are the first floor, and the second floor is the development of our world of feelings. So first we need to do all the mitzvos before we try to grow further.

Additionally, the Rav answered that since we live in the "world of action", the basis on this world is to do the mitzvos, whereas it is only in the Next World and Gan Eden that spiritual feelings are regarded as the main thing.

But I don't understand this at all. I would like the Rav to explain more about this to me. I do not understand why actions (*doing the mitzvos*) is the basis. If anything, it would make more sense for a person to first develop his heart, by working on emunah and d'veykus in Hashem, without doing the mitzvos – or at least not being so exacting when it comes to how he does mitzvos. Because we can see that there are people who seem to be closer to Hashem even though they aren't so careful in doing the mitzvos, and we can also see people who are very careful in their mitzvah observance but they have nothing to do with Hashem. And if a person learns works on the steps that are explained in the sefer Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh (*Part 1*) and he develops his emunah and closeness to Hashem, this doesn't entail doing mitzvos that carefully....

And regarding what the Rav said that we live in a "world of action" and that's why the main thing here is to do the mitzvos, I don't understand. According to that, the center of life is not feeling close to Hashem. Rather, the central point of life revolves around doing the mitzvos that we have on this world, and the world of spiritual feelings is just on the side and not as important. But as it is obvious, the sefer Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh (*Parts 1 and 2*) are crying out that the main thing and the purpose of life is to attain the feeling of closeness to Hashem, here on this world! And also because this world is an entrance-way to the Next World. Therefore it seems that the main thing we need to work on in this world is to prepare ourselves for the Next World [by attaining a palpable closeness to Hashem], so how can it be that the main thing on This World is not the same main thing in the Next World? Please enlighten my eyes on this, because I really want to understand.

Also, how can it be that learning Torah, which is the mitzvah that brings the greatest closeness to Hashem (*as Chazal said, that Torah learning is equal to all of the mitzvos*), is also a mitzvah which contains the dangers of forgetting about Hashem and forgetting about fear of Him? The Nefesh HaChaim and also the Chassidim are all in agreement that if a person feels like he is forgetting about his fear of Hashem, he should interrupt his Torah learning to remind himself of being afraid of Hashem. Why doesn't Torah learning itself bring a person to strengthen his emunah and his fear of Hashem?

I'll be honest, I'm a bit weak in my desire to learn Torah. I

don't feel that I get closer to Hashem though learning Torah, and neither can I think about Hashem while I'm learning Torah (*except for when I take breaks in the middle of my learning*), and it's because I need to concentrate on my learning. I certainly don't meet all of the conditions for learning Torah that the Rav describes in sefer Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh Part 3, which explains how a person can reach d'veykus through learning Torah. And when I don't have a sense of Hashem through my Torah learning, I am continuing to bring spiritual harm into the world, as the Ramchal says, about a person who learns Torah shelo lishmah.... From someone who is searching for clarity about what the main thing in life is.

ANSWER

[Doing Mitzvos and Feeling Closeness With Hashem]

The purpose of Creation is to reveal HaKadosh Baruch Hu not only in the Heavenly spheres, but throughout every level and plane of Creation. And therefore, we need to reveal HaKadosh Baruch Hu in the realm of actions as well. The "world of action" is the "vessel" which can contain the spiritual light of Hashem's revelation on the world. Therefore any act of a mitzvah is another "vessel" that furthers the revelation of Hashem. Any aspect within doing a mitzvah is an additional detail to the "vessel" which adds to that revelation, adding on a specific aspect of revelation. That is why it is very important to be exacting to fulfill all of the details of a mitzvah – because without being precise in our mitzvah performance, we are missing a detail that could have brought more revelation of Hashem into the world of action.

If a person is close to Hashem but he isn't that exacting when it comes to doing a mitzvah, this can be compared to a person who knows the general information of a sugya (*section of Gemara*) but he doesn't know the exact details that are in the sugya. However, there are also some souls who are mainly rooted to be this way (*of being close to Hashem without being exacting when doing the mitzvos*), and that is their place. This applies both to Torah and avodas Hashem [meaning that there are some people who have a general understanding in Torah but they are lacking detailed information, as well as people who have the general grasp of avodas Hashem (*they are connected to Hashem*) but they are lacking the details of avodas Hashem (*they are not being careful when doing the mitzvos*)]. Their souls are designed to be this way because that is their root, and that is how they are meant to be.]

On This World, the main thing is to first build your "vessels", which is by observing the mitzvos carefully. Without this, there is nothing to contain the spiritual light that could have gone into it, and it is like a tower hanging in middle of

the air. That is why our first obligation to fulfill is to observe all of halachah. But it is not the purpose. The purpose of it all is to reach closeness with Hashem, and to reveal this closeness within our "vessels" – within our acts of mitzvos.

This World is a preparation for the Next World. However, in This World, our task is to reveal HaKadosh Baruch Hu within our physical "vessels", while in the Next World, we reveal HaKadosh Baruch Hu by divesting these "vessels" [the mitzvos] and instead gaining "vessels" that are completely spiritual. The common denominator between This World and the Next World, though, is that we reveal HaKadosh Baruch amidst "vessels". On This World, we are meant to reveal Hashem within the "vessels" of physicality, and in the Next World, Hashem is revealed within spiritual "vessels". That is why This World is a preparation for the Next World – it is because both worlds are essentially about revealing Hashem within different "vessels".

[Why Torah Learning Doesn't Always Bring A Person Close To Hashem]

[Regarding the question why Torah learning doesn't always improve a person]: The entire Creation is about the concept of "something and its opposite". Everything can either become spiritual or physical. On This World, in the world of physicality, the spiritual and the physical are separate. The soul is separate from the body. But in the Next World, the upper and spiritual world, spirituality and physicality are integrated at once.

The purpose of the entire Creation is to reveal HaKadosh Baruch Hu. The opposite of this is when Hashem's presence is concealed. At the root, even these two opposite concepts [revelation of Hashem and concealment of Hashem] are actually integrated at once. That is why the Torah, which is the root of everything, is able to be the root of all levels of spiritual revelation, but is also able to be the root of all spiritual concealment.

That is where the root of our power of bechirah (*free will*) in. The root of the power of free will is to choose either to reveal HaKadosh Baruch Hu or, chas v'shalom, to conceal Him. The root of this matter is in the Torah itself [which is able to either reveal the spiritual or conceal the spiritual].

Closeness to Hashem contains two main parts: (1) Feeling – to feel the reality of Hashem, to feel His love, etc. (2) Recognition of Hashem. Part of "recognizing" Hashem is to recognize His will and His wisdom, which are both revealed in the holy Torah. This is the part of the closeness to Hashem that a person attains through Torah study.