

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #4

The Chovot Halevavot now gives us 30 tools that, when a person thinks about them in terms of his understanding of his obligations toward Hashem, he will then put his heart into them and accept upon himself to delve deeply into them, think about themselves constantly and accomplish them:

Tool #1: Be grateful that you were created as a human being

1. A person should realize exactly where he comes from. He should be looking at the beginning of his existence, how he came from nothingness to reality; how he was changed from nothing to something. When he came into existence, there was intrinsically no good reason, from the human perspective, why he should have been created; rather, it was only because of the abundant kindness of Hakadosh Baruch Hu.
2. A person should understand that the situation he finds himself in is so lofty and so wonderful. His makeup is incredible, much more than that of other aspects of existence, such as the inanimate objects, the plant life, and the animal life. Think about this as you're sitting on our chair in front of your computer. Would you rather spend your whole existence being a computer or a chair? Or a dog? If you have a pet, look at your pet and say to yourself, "Would you like to be a pet all your life? A blade of grass all your life? Or a human being, the ultimate creation? It's a tremendous gift from Hashem.

The Chovot Halevavot further illustrates this point with the following parable: A person is born. Shortly after his birth, his mother throws him into the street. Someone passes by, sees the person, has mercy on him, brings him to his house and is engaged in raising the child until he grows up. He does everything for this child. He makes sure the child is educated and set up and can support himself. To what extent would this person be careful to do whatever his benefactor wanted? If his benefactor were to say, "Could you please get me a glass of water?" the person would run to bring him water. He would do whatever his benefactor asked him to do, because he knows that without him, he would be nothing. He'd be careful not to do anything the benefactor told him not to do, and would be obliged to him all his life.

Let us apply this same situation to ourselves. If we would only think about how much Hashem has given us: He has given us existence, he watches over us, he has given us everything we need from the beginning of our lives until now. If we would realize that, commensurate with that, we would then require of ourselves to be drawn to G-d's service and accept upon ourselves all the mitzvoth Hashem has asked us to do. It's a question of awareness; it's real. But are we in sync with this reality? Do we realize that, without Hashem, we would have absolutely nothing? The truth is, being a human being is wonderful. If we realized how great our state of existence is, we would know that the least we could do is a mitzvah to show how grateful we are.

Today's Exercise:

*Today's lesson is to reflect constantly on the above idea, at least during our time of Cheshbon Hanefesh. Let's realize that, from the beginning, it's all been the work of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. He has given me everything. **I am that orphan on the doorstep.** What should I do to show my gratefulness to Him? During your personal Cheshbon pretend that Hakadosh Baruch Hu, who has picked you up from the doorstep, is asking you to do something that you have been previously negligent in. Are you going to do it or not? For example, Hashem is asking you:*

- Could you come to Shul tomorrow, on time?
- Will you stop talking Loshon Hora?
- Could you stop getting angry with people and stop yelling at them?
- Could you get involved and help stop one Jew from giving up on his Judaism?

Daily Cheshbon Hanefesh #5

Now that we have gone through Tool #1, do we feel any different realizing that we are that abandoned child who was picked up from that doorstep by a benevolent benefactor? Do we feel any sense of Hakarat HaTov (gratitude) for that? There are many that still do not, and this is because there is an issue that some people may have with the parable.

A person may say: **“I did not ask the benefactor to pick me up. I did not ask him for any favors. I don’t owe him anything. He did it on his own accord, probably because it made him feel good to do that. Perhaps, he never had any children, and my being on the doorstep presented an opportunity for him to raise the child he never had. His intentions were for his own benefit, not mine. Therefore, let him take pleasure in what he did, but don’t expect anything from me!”**

Incredible as it may sound, it is true. I have personally spoken to people, and demonstrated to them how much the Almighty loves them; still, they respond with these same words: “I don’t owe G-d a thing. I did not ask him to bring me into the world. He did not ask my opinion in the matter or give me a choice in the matter. So let’s keep G-d out of the picture.”

There are many ways to respond to this question. [One can look in Rav Dessler’s essay on Hakarat HaTov for a beautiful explanation of what Hakarat HaTov is.]

I believe that the Chovot Halevavot has the answer to this question, by the particular pasuk he brings to prove the point of Tool #1.

[A good rule to know about the Rishonim (medieval Jewish scholars), who bring pesukim to prove their point, is this: Analyze and look into the commentaries on the pasuk that they quote. Ask yourself why they picked this particular pasuk to prove their point, and did not choose other pesukim that would seem to prove the same point? There is usually a great lesson to learn from the pasuk selected. The issue here is a good case in point.]

The Pasuk the Chovot Halevavot brings to support the above tool is from Devarim 32:6. “Is it to Hashem that you do this, O vile and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Master? Has he not created you and firmed you?” The Kli Yakar has a beautiful interpretation of this Pasuk that sheds light on the issue at hand. He connects this pasuk to the one before it, which says: “Corruption is not His – the blemish is His children’s, a perverse and twisted generation.” [For a fuller appreciation of these pesukim, it would be beneficial for the reader to look them up in the original Hebrew.]

The Kli Yakar quotes chapter 35, verses 6-7 in the book of Job (Iyov): “Were you to have transgressed how would you have affected Him? Even if your rebellions

were numerous, what would you have done to Him? Were you to have been righteous, how would you have benefited Him? Indeed, what would He take from your hand?"

This pasuk helps us understand the pesukim in Devarim. Before Moshe is about to rebuke the Jewish people, he gives an introduction by saying: **"Don't mistakenly think that it makes any difference to Hashem if you do good or bad things, or that G-d is looking out for His own interest, trying to avoid getting damaged by the sins that you do and help Himself to benefit from the mitzvot that you do. Nonsense! You are mistaken in both points."**

Regarding any possible damage that can come to Hashem, pasuk 5 says: "Shicheit Lo lo" – Corruption is not His." As the Targum explains: The destruction that you bring is not to Him, because even if your rebellions are numerous, what could you do to Him? When you do an aveira, the destruction and blemish are yours, not His! You suffer the consequences of your mistakes – Hashem doesn't!

Regarding the other mistake, The Kli Yakar explains that the word "gemul" means a reward for a good deed. Consequently, he explains the pasuk as follows: "Do you think G-d gets any reward or benefit from your positive actions? No way! You get all the benefit."

To summarize, these pesukim are saying that the only one who suffers or benefits from what a person does, is the person himself. You don't affect G-d in any way. That is why the Chovot Halevavot brings this pasuk to support the first tool. You are the child at the doorstep, and you have to realize that it made no difference to G-d if He picked you up or not. You could grow up to be the Chafetz Chaim or (lehavdil) Adolf Hitler, and it won't impact on Him. But it will make a big difference to you. **So don't doubt G-d's sincerity when He picked you up from the doorstep – the only one who benefited from being picked up was you.** This should motivate us to have more Hakarat HaTov. People who feel that the benefactor has benefited through his own giving are less likely to feel gratitude than they would towards a benefactor who gives solely for altruistic reasons. When the altruistic benefactor tells you to do something, you will likely respond in a positive fashion.

However, many people cannot believe that a benefactor, or even G-d for that matter, can be so altruistic, and will, therefore, still be reluctant to have Hakarat HaTov. Where does that reluctance come from? We will see tomorrow.

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #6

Yesterday we mentioned that people who feel that their benefactor is giving solely for altruistic reasons are more likely to feel gratitude than they would towards a benefactor who has benefited through his own giving. Yet there are people who cannot believe that a benefactor, or even G-d for that matter, can be so altruistic, and will, therefore, still be reluctant to have Hakarat HaTov. Where does that reluctance come from?

The Kli Yakar continues with his interpretation of Pasuk 5. After explaining that G-d does not get any reward or benefit from our positive actions, he explains the second half of the Pasuk to show why people would mistakenly think that Hashem does benefit from what we do.

The second half of the Pasuk says **“Am Naval, Velo Chacham”** – “O Vile and unwise people.” There are 2 reasons for this mistaken notion: 1) People who have the characteristic of “Naval” and 2) not being wise.

What is “Naval”? The Kli Yakar brings proofs that the definition of a “Naval” is: **“a miserly person with no philanthropic heart”** – someone who constantly takes from others, but does not give anything to others. **So the Torah identifies the particular personality trait in a person that would cause him to harbor thoughts that G-d has something to gain by what we do. Such thoughts could come only from a person who is a Naval- someone who is so miserly and would never consider giving anything to anyone else unless he had something to personally gain from it. If he can't anticipate receiving some return benefit, he would never consider giving to others.**

The Naval obviously feels that G-d would act the same way as he does. When he sees all the kindness that G-d bestows to mankind, he thinks to himself: “Why is G-d doing me all these favors gratis? It must be because he anticipates receiving some benefit from me.” Since he “knows” that “G-d is not sincere,” he has no gratitude toward Hashem.

The pasuk goes on to refute these thoughts by saying to that person: “Is He not your Father?” It may be true that you feel the way you do, and it may be true that there are people who give only when they expect something in return; nevertheless, in this case, Hashem is your Father. He has mercy on you, just as a parent cares for his child and expects nothing in return.

The message is clear: Hashem's love for us is just like a father's love, with no strings attached. **So even the Naval personality, who believes that “there is no such thing as a free lunch,” must accept the altruism in G-d's giving and, therefore, show gratitude.**

The pasuk also calls the Jewish people “Unwise.” This is followed immediately by the very end of the Pasuk, which says: “Has He not created you and formed you?” **The Torah is telling us that these thoughts of the Naval just don't make sense. Why? Since Hashem created you, whatever you do, Hashem a fortiori can do as well. If He made you, whatever power you have to be able to do things, He certainly has the ability to do them. So if G-d really needs something done, He can do it by himself anyway – He certainly does not need you. Only a person who is not wise and does not think things through would reach such an erroneous conclusion.**

We have concluded tool #1. Picture in your mind that Hashem:

- has picked you up from the doorstep and sustained you all this time
- is an altruistic Benefactor – gets no benefit from what we do – just as a loving parent gives and expects nothing in return

Therefore, whatever He tells you to do and avoid can only be for your benefit. You would be foolish not to appreciate Him and respond to His mitzvot. If you doubt that the above is true, check out your own feelings of giving. Do you give selflessly or do you expect something in return?

Today's Exercise:

Review in your mind the last time you did a Chesed. Was it the way Hashem does it or was it the way a Naval would do it?

Do a selfless act of kindness, where you know you will get nothing in return. You are doing it only for the other person's benefit. How do you feel? Godly? Take that feeling and multiply it a million times over, and you will have some idea as to what Tool #1 is teaching us about gratitude.