

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH CLASS #1

Question:

What is the definition of the term “Cheshbon Hanefesh” – literally, “Accounting of the Soul”?
What does this entail?

Answer:

The Chovos Halevavos [Rabbeinu B’Chaya- 10th century circa] says: “Cheshbon Hanefesh is the critical analysis a person does between himself and the situation in which he finds himself in his fulfillment of Torah and his conduct in matters concerning activities in this world; and it is also reflection – deep thought – about the good things that Hashem has done for him, in order that he know, through them [analysis and reflection] which obligations and duties are upon him that he has done, and which ones he has not done.”

In other words, a person must critically analyze what his present situation is, in terms of his Yiddishkeit:

- a. How much of the Torah is he fulfilling?
- b. How is his conduct in worldly affairs matching up according to the standard that should exist – to see where the gap is, where he is and where he should be?

To motivate us toward this analysis, the Chovos Halevavos says we have to reflect on the good Hashem has done for us. Why do we have to do that? The reason for this is brought down by the Chovos Halevavos from a verse in Devarim 4:39. It says:

“You shall know this day and take to your heart that Hashem, He is the G-d – in heaven above and on the earth below – there is none other.”

He brings other verses to prove this idea, but for now, let’s focus on this first verse. It doesn’t seem to be much of a proof of anything. However, in order to really appreciate this proof, you have to look at the whole section, which starts from verse 32 and runs through to verse 40: “

“For inquire now regarding the early days that preceded you, from the day when Hashem created man on the earth, and from one end of heaven to the other end of heaven; Has there ever been anything like this great thing or has anything like it been heard? Have a people ever heard the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of the fire as you have heard, and survived? Or has any god ever miraculously come to take for himself a nation from amidst a nation, with challenges, with signs, and with wonders, and with war, and with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm and with greatly awesome deeds, such as everything Hashem, your G-d did for you in Egypt before your eyes? You have been shown in order to know that Hashem, He is the G-d! There is none beside Him! From heaven he cause you to hear His voice in order to teach you, and on earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire, because He loved your forefathers, and He chose his offspring after him, and took you out before Himself with His great strength from Egypt; to drive away before you nations that are greater and mightier than you, to bring you, to give you their land as an inheritance, as this very day.”

In these verses (32-38), G-d goes over all the tremendous amount of kindness He did for the Jewish People. Because of the love He had for our parents, he chose us as a people, and he took us out. No one had ever experienced such a thing! Now that the Torah has been telling us to reflect on this, in the very next verse, the verse that the Chovos Halevavos brought down (39), it now says (and here the verse is now seen in its proper context):

“You shall know this day and take to your heart that Hashem, He is the G-d – in heaven above and on the earth below – there is none other.”

Reflect on this, Moshe Rabbeinu says. Think about all the kindness Hashem has done for you, and then, in verse 40, he says:

“You shall observe His decrees and His commandments that I command you this day, so that He will do good to you and to your children after you, and so that you will prolong your days on the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you, for all the days.”

It’s a three-step process. First, there are kindnesses Hashem does for us. Second, we have to reflect on those kindnesses. And third, once we reflect on those kindnesses, we will be able to serve G-d and do what He wants from us.

The Chovos Halevavos is teaching us a very important fundamental principle. He understands how difficult it is to make a Cheshbon Hanefesh, and that there has to be a motivation for us to do the Cheshbon Hanefesh. (The Cheshbon Hanefesh alone isn’t enough, either; we have to act on it afterwards.) ***The key ingredient, he says, is the concept of Hakaras Hatov – appreciation.*** If a person truly appreciates what someone else does for him, and is knowledgeable about what to appreciate about the things someone else does for him, then that person will be motivated - and more than that, he will be naturally inclined – to want to fulfill whatever obligations he has toward another person.

In summary, it behooves us to: think about the different things Hashem has done for us in our lives; develop a deep sense of appreciation, and, from that sense of appreciation, begin to ask ourselves, “What have I done in response to that?”

Today’s Exercise:

Spend a few minutes thinking about the things G-d has done for you, and ask yourself whether the things you do for G-d are commensurate with what He does for you.

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH CLASS #2

Question:

The Chovos Halevavos asks whether everyone has the same obligation to do Cheshbon Hanefesh?

Answer:

The Chovos Halevavos explains that not everyone has the same drive to grow in performance of Torah and conduct in this world. The nature of this drive depends on certain differences that exist in the level of awareness and accuracy of intellect and understanding that people have. Everyone is obligated to make a Cheshbon Hanefesh and search out for himself whether he has fulfilled his obligations in his service to Hashem – proportionate to how he understands the goodness G-d has done for him. This goodness G-d has done for him should be understood in two ways:

1. What G-d has done for him, just as He does for everyone else
2. What G-d has done specifically for him, in his unique situation

The Chovos Halevavos brings some verses in Devarim 11, 2-8, to support this idea. It says,

“You should know today that it is not your children who did not know and who did not see the chastisement of Hashem, your G-d, His greatness, His strong hand, and His outstretched arm; His signs and His deeds that He performed in the midst of Egypt, to Pharaoh, King of Egypt, and to all his land; and what He did to the army of Egypt, to its horses and its riders, over whom he swept the waters of the Sea of Reeds when they pursued you, and Hashem caused them to perish until this day; and what He did for you in the Wilderness, until you came to this place; and what He did to Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav son of Reuven, when the earth opened its mouth wide and swallowed them, and their households, and their tents, and all the fortunes at their feet, in the midst of all Israel. Rather it is your own eyes that see all the great work of Hashem, which He did.” So shall you observe the entire commandment that I command you today. . . .”

The Chovos Halevavos explains, through these verses, that the demand and the expectation that the Almighty has of the Jewish People to serve him is a much stronger demand on those who saw all these miracles themselves, than it is on their children, who did not see these miracles firsthand. Moshe Rabbeinu is saying to the people, “You saw these things with your own eyes, and therefore you have a much stronger obligation to fulfill the mitzvot. The new generation did not merit seeing all those wonderful miracles, and therefore they are not as obligated as you are.” The idea is that one who personally experiences Hashem’s goodness is much more obligated to serve Hashem than one who did not; and his service should be in proportion to the goodness he merited to receive (see #1).

It’s very clear that the level of the Cheshbon Hanefesh a person will do depends a lot upon the extent to which he recognizes the goodness of Hashem. As they say, “the fool who lives in a fool’s paradise” – the person who does not notice that Hashem has done anything – will never be motivated to make any kind of Cheshbon Hanefesh and, as a matter of fact, G-d can’t even

expect that person to make that kind of Cheshbon Hanefesh.

This is a great lesson for parents. Quite often children grow up without their parents' every having pointed out to them the great things Hashem does for us. Chovos Halevavos is saying that if a person lives his life not realizing Hashem's bounty, it's going to be unreasonable to demand from such a person to make any kind of Cheshbon Hanefesh, because he has no basis of appreciation for it.

Another stumbling block in the way of a person's making Cheshbon Hanefesh is that he sees that no one else is making it. "Why do I have to be any different?" he asks himself. One overcomes this negative reaction by realizing that all the people who are not making Cheshbon Hanefesh are fools in the fool's paradise, and Hashem regards them with pity and says, as it were: "Oy, nebuch, they don't have what to appreciate, they don't make Cheshbon Hanefesh, and I don't really have a strong, realistic expectation that they will fulfil it."

Today's Exercise:

The question we must ask today, in our Cheshbon Hanefesh is, "Am I a fool together with the other fools; and even if I'm presently the fool, do I want to continue to be that fool? And will I make that extra effort to see the wonderful things G-d is doing for me personally, which will now motivate me to make my Cheshbon Hanefesh?"

Perhaps a personal example may help here. Years ago I was in Cleveland with my family. I was driving in certain neighborhoods I was not so familiar with in Beachwood, Ohio. As we were driving from my mother's home to the hotel one night, we had to make a left turn at a particular intersection, Many places just have a curb that is slightly elevated, so if your car happens to go into the turning lane a little bit early, it will just hit the curb and you will know you should have entered that lane a little later. But in Cleveland, there is a different setup to ensure that people don't cross over an inch into the turning lane before they should. In Cleveland, on the yellow line, there is a series of yellow poles sticking up. Now when it's dark at night, you don't really see that the poles are jutting up. At the top of these yellow poles, there is some orange phosphorescent paint. Here I am driving at night, and at a distance I see the yellow lines, and I don't see any cars around at this late hour, and so I'm about to merge into the turning lane a little earlier than I should. All of a sudden, within half a second of the poles, I see these aren't just lines, they are poles jutting out. At that last second, the orange paint on the top tipped me off to the presence of the poles, and I was able to turn away and not hit the poles. It was a small thing, it took a matter of seconds, but it was a tremendous kindness from Hashem that I was able to recognize in that last second what I was going into. Had I not been able to assess the situation in time, the car would have hit the poles; great damage would have been done to the car, which is a leased car; I would have had to spend hours taking it back to the shop to get it fixed, and I would have wasted time in dealing with this repair. Moreover, who knows if any of us car would have been hurt, etc., etc.? Obviously, Hashem did a kindness by sparing me from possible health concerns and from monetary worries; and without a doubt, by saving me a lot of time. Now that I had all this free time, wasn't there a little bit of an obligation on my part to serve G-d during that time more than I normally would?

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH
CLASS #3

The Chovot Halevot now says that a person who believes in Hashem should make for himself a very meticulous Cheshbon, and delve as deeply as possible into the fine details of what he is obligated to do for Hashem – as we said before, in appreciation of the good Hashem has done for him. And he has to be as meticulous and detailed as possible, to the most extreme degree, to the best of his understanding. Once he has gone into great depth as to what he should be able to do (obviously, to reach a conclusion, one has to really analyze in depth what Hashem has done for him), then he can say to himself:

1. I should exert all my effort and try my hardest to accomplish those things that are in my power to do.
2. Those things that I am not able to do, I will fulfill them by at least knowing that I need to do them.

If the person cannot totally fulfill the things he needs to do, he should express verbally that he is longing and desiring to fulfill them, and should have longings in his heart to accomplish them. The Chovot Halevavot then cites a number of verses from Tehillim, where King David expresses these ideas. Then the Chovot Halevot says: When a person does this, the Almighty will judge the person favorably, even though he has not fulfilled these things. But still, the person, from his own perspective, is obligated to long for the time when the opportunity will present itself and he will have the ability to fulfill these obligations towards the Almighty. He concludes by saying that a person should not look for excuses and justifications to free himself from fulfilling his obligations. He shouldn't leave them or push them aside, lest he will be a lost person when the Day of Judgment comes and the ultimate Cheshbon is done for that person.

The Chovot Halevavot is telling us that it's important to make a Cheshbon even in areas we know we can't do right now. Simply by verbally expressing that we know we should do it, we know it is expected of us, we can't do it now, but we long to be able to do it – that is (for now) enough of a commitment on our part, in order for Hashem to judge us favorably. That verbal commitment can play itself out in two scenarios:

1. A person may physically not be able to fulfill his obligation. (e.g., his wife has just given birth, and he can't study daf yomi; or a person just went bankrupt and can't give tzedakah)
2. A person knows he should fulfill a certain obligation and he has the ability to do it, but he doesn't want to do it.

In both of the above cases, the person can express his inability to do that particular mitzvah. It's a very powerful tool, especially for baalei teshuvah, but for others too. Many times we find ourselves in certain situations in life where we can't commit to undertake his obligations, whether physically, emotionally or mentally. It can be very depressing and one might say, "Well, why am I doing a Cheshbon Hanefesh at this time, when I know I can't undertake to do these obligations?" Or sometimes, one would like to

move ahead and undertake an obligation, but can't do so because the spouse has not reached that point yet. The Chovot Halevot says it doesn't matter. You should never give up on that yearning. If you yearn to do it, from the depths of your heart, even if you can't act right now – whether through your own fault, or through no fault of your own – this is something very critical that Hakadosh Baruch Hu wants from you. Sometimes, when we wake up at 40 and say to ourselves, I've got to be better now, but I just can't make the transition, then we have to say to ourselves, Listen, it wasn't necessarily your fault that you were raised in a secular family. Hashem had you born into this situation, and He has a certain responsibility to take you out of it. I.e. "It's His problem,too!"

An interesting story comes to mind. A student of mine who was becoming more observant was ready to send her children to a Jewish day school. The school required that the parents be Shomer Shabbat. She basically was, except that she had a job that required that she had to work on Shabbat, and if she didn't work at that job, the family wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage. She came to me with this problem. I said to her, "The Almighty gave you a life with a secular background, and now you find yourself in a position where you have to work on Shabbat. The Almighty put you in this situation and you are trying to get out of this situation. You're trying your best. You are doing so many things. You've koshered your home, you keep Shabbat whenever you are home. Now you have to pray to G-d. Tell him you are ready to keep Shabbat. Ask Him to help you keep Shabbat. Tell him that with just a little help from Him, you will be able to get past this problem. Once you do that, it's not your problem anymore. It's His problem. He got you into this job, and He'll get you out of it. But you really have to ask him earnestly." A number of months later, just before the child was to be enrolled in the school, the manager of the branch where this woman worked, who was very difficult and didn't allow her to rearrange her work hours, was transferred to a different location, and this woman was made the manager of the branch. She was quickly able to rearrange her schedule so that she could keep Shabbat. Not only that, but subsequently, her branch received rewards of distinction for its efficient operation, and she was the one to receive the honorary plaque for the entire branch.

Today's Exercise:

We should analyze the things we feel we should be doing for Hashem, and divide them into categories: the things we feel we can accomplish, and those we feel we can't accomplish. Then we should spend part of our time praying to Hashem and longing to one day fulfill those things that I can't accomplish at this point.

In dealing with baalei teshuvah, we often find that many of them are not willing to undertake practical mitzvot because they know they can't do them. I would suggest that the book "Chovot Halevavot" is a worthwhile book to learn with baalei teshuvah who are in situations where they cannot change their lives outwardly. They can transform themselves inwardly ("Duties of the Heart") even though outwardly, they are not ready to take on the practical mitzvot.