

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #16

PART TWO OF TOOL #9

Today we will discuss the second category of activities that one does in his service to Hashem:

Mitzvot Dependent on the Heart and the Body Simultaneously

As stated yesterday, in this category we find mitzvot such as

Prayer

Torah study

Singing praises to Hashem

Learning certain wisdoms necessary for the understanding of Torah

Trying to influence other people to do what is right or to avoid what is wrong

The Chovot Halevavot focuses on only one of these - prayer. As a preface to what he is about to teach us, I would like to share with you a story told by Rav Sholom Schwadron (*The Maggid Speaks*, pp. 262-263):

A certain individual stopped to admire a fruit stand. The apples were shiny and fresh, the bananas glistened in the sun and the tomatoes were plump and luscious.

Suddenly, he felt a punch to his chest. "What's this all about?" he wondered. "Who is punching me in this open market?" He looked around and saw that no one was near him. Then he realized that he had hit himself. Why had he done that? Had he lost his mind?

In reality, this person was in the middle of davening, and had just reached the sixth blessing of Shemoneh Esrei, the blessing in which we request forgiveness for our sins. During this blessing, one strikes his chest. As he was praying, his mind had wandered to the market on Ben Yehuda Street, yet he had continued mumbling the words of the Shemoneh Esrei. His automatic gesture – the blow to his chest – brought him back to where he was supposed to be.

Today's Exercise:

Ask yourself the following question: "Can this be a description of how I daven?" If it is, then you need to hear the Chovot Halevavot's instructions on how to be 100% involved during prayer:

Here are 6 steps towards improved, focused prayer:

1. Clean and relieve your body of any filth and impurities, and distance yourself from foul smelling odours and the like.
2. Divest yourself of everything from this world or the world to come.
3. Remove all distracting thoughts from your heart.
4. Realize to Whom you are directing your prayers.
5. Concentrate on the things you asking of Him.

6. Think of the proper way to address Him - what specific words you are going to say and the contents of your words.

The Chovot Halevavot gives us two parables to explain the relationship that exists between the words we say and the concentration we should have during prayer:

a.) Two Parts of a Fruit

A fruit is composed of two parts: a peel and the actual flesh of the fruit. The peel is necessary to protect the actual fruit, to make it appear appealing, and to give us a way of handling it. But no one would be satisfied with a snack of banana and orange peels! Without the actual flesh of the fruit, the peel is of no value. Similarly, the words of prayer are the peel. They are worthless without focused concentration on what one is saying. "Kavana" is like the soul, while the words are like the body. A person who thinks about other things while saying the words of prayer produces a prayer that has a body with no soul, a fruit that has peel but no fleshy fruit; because only his body is involved, but not his heart. It's like presenting Hashem with a bowl of peels or a miscarried baby (Chas V'Chalila)!

b.) The Servant and his Family

A servant invites his master to his house. The servant commands his spouse and children to honour the master and take care of his needs. The servant himself, however, goes on his own merry way, working on his own private affairs with glee. He himself does not give the master any honour and does not take care of his needs. When the master realizes what is going on, he does not accept the honours and service that the other family members are giving on behalf of the servant. Instead, he angrily throws them all back in the servant's face!

Similarly, if we, during prayer, do not achieve harmony between our heart and inner core, on the one hand, and the rest of our body, on the other hand, the Almighty will not accept even that part of Tefilah our body was involved with. All that "*shokling*" (swaying of body), that sitting down and standing up, those words – none of that prayer will be accepted. What a waste of time and effort! This parable underscores how the physical aspects of these types of mitzvot are easy things to offer Hashem, and do not require effort on our part. They are really of no value unless they are accompanied by a heart that is focused on the mitzvah at hand and deep concentration to accomplish the task.

Just before we conclude the Shemoneh Esrei and take our three steps back, we say, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You." Can you imagine the chutzpah of a person who has let his mind wander during the Shemoneh Esrei, merely mouthing the words without feeling, to conclude his prayers by saying, "May the banana and orange peels with no fleshy fruit be acceptable to you"!!!! What a disgrace it is for a person to claim that he has spoken to G-d with his heart, when he really did no such thing; and on top of that, to ask Him to accept and be pleased with those prayers!!!!

Could this be a description of how we daven? (To be continued)

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #17

PART THREE OF TOOL #9

The Chovot Halevavot explains that in order to achieve harmony between our spoken words and our Kavana in prayer, we must be cognizant of the goals of prayer. The goals of prayer are as follows:

- 1 To express the merging of our soul with Hashem and its incorporation in His all-encompassing embrace.
- 2 To express our surrender before Him.
- 3 To exalt Him.
- 4 To praise and thank Him.
- 5 To cast all our burdens upon Him.

Think about it. Every time we pray to Hashem we should be trying to achieve those goals. Certainly the mere mouthing of words from a standard text does not accomplish those goals, unless it is accompanied by 100% focused concentration on those goals.

The question may now be asked: Why did the Men of the Great Assembly establish a standard, unified text for prayer? Doesn't that seem to detract from the Kavana required for prayer?

The answer is that the amount of information required to express the above 5 goals is vast. It would be difficult for a person to remember it all and express it properly. The Rabbis composed a list of items that most of humanity needs. From that list it becomes clear how dependent man is on G-d, and how glaring those 5 goals are. We should view the standard text as notes for our speech that highlight the main points all human beings must express. Certainly, everyone should personalize his requests beyond the standard text.

Let me give you a contemporary example of the parable that the Chovot Halevavot uses. Let us say that you must meet with someone regarding an issue about which you have no skill or experience. For example, you have no experience in fundraising and have a meeting with a potential donor from whom you need \$1,000,000 in order to begin a new project. How would you start? What would you say? You would go to a professional fundraiser and he would write out for you a number of steps necessary for you to go through in order to make a successful presentation. His instructions will be written in general terms that could be used for any presentation. Without those notes you would be lost. You yourself would not be sure of what you are really asking for, how much money you really need, how you would spend it, etc. Once you understand the general principles and steps, then you will have to customize the information within your presentation to make it "your presentation."

Any one of the standard berachot and the overall order of the Shemoneh Esrei are guidelines for a successful presentation to achieve the above-mentioned 5 goals. Now you are in a position to "customize" your tefillah through your Kavana. How foolish you would look if you presented a generic proposal without presenting your unique request. Worse yet, what if you borrowed a different organization's presentation and presented that?

A second benefit of the standardized text is that it restrains your thoughts from wandering during prayers. We all have difficulty controlling the myriad fleeting thoughts that go through our minds.

Expressing the standardized text keeps your overall thoughts focused, and also gives you direction for personalizing your requests. You always feel good about yourself after making a quality presentation, no matter what the result.

As we said yesterday, the words are like the peel. Expressing a standard text enables you to:

1. Get a handle on what you are trying to express.
2. Make it look appealing (not that Hashem needs the format, but for you to be impressed by what you are doing).
3. Ensure that the personalized content does not become damaged and lost during the presentation.

The peel is a great tool, but make sure you have the best fleshy fruit to present.

The Chovot Halevavot wonders how a person could even pray at all without Kavana. Prayer is such a remarkable sign of Hashem's faith in us and His reliance upon us, for He placed it in our care, without designating others to insure that we get it done. If we pray to Hashem in the way that we should, we will have fulfilled our obligation to believe in Hashem, and He will accept our prayers. Here our analogy of the fundraising presentation falls short; in tefillah, a quality presentation always gets results. The 5 goals of prayer will always be achieved when the words are accompanied by Kavana.

Today's Exercise;

To improve your prayers:

- 1 Review the 6 steps of prayer as presented yesterday.
- 2 Incorporate the 5 overall goals mentioned today.
- 3 If you can't remember the 5 goals, write them down on a small piece of paper and keep them in a designated place, or paste them on the cover of your siddur.
- 4 Apply these concepts in your next tefillah. I would recommend doing this before Minchah, since it is such a short tefillah.
- 5 Block off 15 solid minutes for this prayer time. Make sure you are not interrupted.
- 6 Pause right before you start Shemoneh Esrei, briefly go over steps 1 and 2, and tell yourself, "Let me stay focused for this major presentation, which I only have 5-10 minutes to present. I can hang on!" Plan this no differently from your next executive business meeting.
- 7 Just before you begin, think of a few personalized requests and plan where you will say them during the Shemoneh Esrei. Write your plan down, if necessary.
- 8 Say every word slowly, in the language you understand.
- 9 Look forward to the fact that, five or 10 minutes from now, you can sincerely end your prayer with the words: "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You."
- 10 Take pleasure in the fact that the entire success of this meeting was determined by the planning you just did. You were in total control of the success/failure of this meeting.
- 11 Book your next meeting with Hashem.