

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH # 26

TOOL #17

Think about the last time you were with a group of people in a social setting. Was it a productive use of your time? Did you accomplish something positive in your service to Hashem? Think about the last time when you were alone: Were the results any different?

Today's tool is to realize that, knowing our obligations in life toward Hashem and toward our own growth, we would do well to strive for as much solitude as is feasible in our lives, in order to avoid the pitfalls of sin that often come from associating with others. The Chovot Halevavot lists 10 drawbacks that occur quite often in a group setting:

1. There is a lot of superfluous, idle chatter. This is, simply put, "Bitul Z'man" - a waste of time.
2. There is a lot of Lashon Hara.
3. People tend to speak falsely and lie.
4. People tend to swear falsely and unnecessarily.
5. People exhibit arrogance, sarcasm, and antagonism to others and act flippantly.
6. People do not fear Hashem in their hearts when they socialize and speak with others.
7. People incidentally reveal financial matters that could prove to be harmful when they are revealed to unscrupulous individuals.
8. People act like hypocrites in hopes of acquiring a good name, and exaggerate their knowledge and accomplishments.
9. You put yourself in a position where you become halachically obligated to rebuke and correct other people who are involved in wrongful behaviour. Invariably you become exposed to negative behaviour that others are involved in, and you will be held accountable for not correcting them.
10. Your intellectual ability for sound reasoning suffers, and you learn bad traits.

The Chovot Halevavot shares with us a golden rule: Most transgressions (including illicit sexual relations, illegal business transactions, false oaths, offering false testimony, and verbal sins) are committed by people in pairs and in the company and companionship of others. Solitude and isolation save you from all those sins, and are the most effective way to acquire good traits.

Does this mean that it is preferable to lead a hermit's life? No. Certainly, it is not being suggested that one should avoid the good, wholesome, company of G-d-fearing individuals, and preferably seek a life of isolation. In fact, being in the company of others accomplishes the same goals as isolation does, and can often be even better. The benefit of isolation is to avoid the above-mentioned drawbacks and to be able to focus on one's spiritual development. Being in the company of spiritually high-calibre people who are focused on their spiritual growth can be more effective than solitary contemplation.

What we are being taught is to select our company wisely. We should always look for opportunities to meet and speak to wise, caring and spiritual people. If we had to list a social hierarchy, it would look like this:

1. Spend as much time as you can with high-quality people.
2. If you can't find those kinds of people, keep your own company.
3. Avoid groups that breed the aforementioned drawbacks.

This does not mean that one should avoid groups that may contain drawbacks. We may have an opportunity for outreach in some groups. We do not want to isolate ourselves from them totally. However, we must be careful to orchestrate the gatherings in such a way that we will be setting the tone and steering the group in a positive direction.

We learn this lesson from the Four Species used on Sukkot. Even though the etrog, which represents the Tzaddik, is held in one hand, distanced from the other three species; yet when it is time to do the mitzvah of waving the four species, we place our hands together and have the etrog join the rest. Certainly, the Tzaddik needs his isolation to grow spiritually, but he must set aside times to show his unity with the masses during positive experiences. He can invite people to his home for Shabbat, where he can set the tone for the evening. He can join with others to discuss positive ways to deal with the crisis in Israel. There are many healthy opportunities available. Similarly, when you find yourself at public gatherings (community rally, wedding), try to gravitate toward those people who will provide you with positive interactions that will stimulate your growth. How can you tell who they are? Listen to what they say, and remember the golden rule:

- Small minds discuss people
- Average minds discuss events
- Great minds discuss ideas

Today's Exercise:

Set aside a few minutes a day to be alone, and spend them doing Cheshbon Hanefesh. Look around and find high-quality people. Make an effort to be in their company. (How about doing lunch with your Rabbi?) Be involved with people who are actively involved in helping others.

Decide which group situations you should begin to avoid, and which groups you should be involved with only under optimum conditions, where the aforementioned drawbacks will not surface.