

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #7

The Chovot Halevavot is now discussing the second tool one should think about in order to have Hakarat Hatov and be drawn to His service.

The first tool taught us how wonderful it is that we were created as human beings, and that we must focus on how fortunate we are from an existential and spiritual perspective.

The second tool focuses on how fortunate we are from a physical perspective. We should focus and see how generous Hakadosh Baruch Hu is in the way he has structured human beings. Our composition is such that our body – the shape of our limbs and every part of us – is a perfect structure, with just the right combination of parts that enables us to use our body in a wondrous fashion.

We need to really focus on how wonderful it is to have arms with fingers, and legs with toes, and eyes that can see, and ears that can hear – all the different organs of our body that function in such wondrous harmony to make human beings work in such a great fashion. The Chovot Halevavot gives the famous analogy of the child on the doorstep. Imagine if you are a child left on a doorstep. Imagine that, when the generous benefactor picks you up, he sees you don't have any arms or legs. And imagine that, in his boundless generosity, he puts in the arms and the legs that are missing.

If a person did not have an arm, how much would he pay to have one? How much would you pay to have a new leg, or a new eye? You would pay millions of dollars for each of these limbs. Now that the Almighty has already given you these wonderful components, this reality should not minimize your perpetual appreciation for having been given these amazing things. Therefore, the Chovot Halevavot says that, to really appreciate what you have, you have to stop for a moment and consider what life would be like if you didn't have those limbs. If you didn't have an eye, what would it be worth to you? Now that you do have eyes, he continues, how grateful you should be for having them.

Many years ago, on two occasions within the same week, I was required to fill out a medical form that detailed my health history. You're all familiar with the long form that has about 40 questions asking: "Do you have heart disease? Do you have thyroid problems? Have you ever had surgery? Do you have high blood pressure? Diabetes? etc." Boy, what a long list! What a tedious list! We know that doctors need to get a full picture of the individual, but sometimes we feel annoyed by having to fill out that whole form. When I started to fill out my medical history for the second time, it suddenly dawned on me that this was the second tool of the Chovot Halevavot. Yes, the doctor may need to know this information. But I felt it was good information for me to consider and check off: "Have you ever had thyroid problems? "

"Baruch Hashem, no!"

When you look through the list of 40 questions and can answer “Baruch Hashem, no” to all 40 items, you realize that Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave you a great body that really functions. Look at all the things that could go wrong! Imagine having to answer “yes” to all those questions.

A Healthy Exercise:

A healthy exercise you can do in order to appreciate this concept is the following: Next time you go to the doctor, ask for a copy of that medical form and take it home. Go through it every night for a minute and see all the things that were given to you free of charge, and that you are able to use without any effort. That certainly is a means of generating a tremendous amount of excitement and gratitude. The Chovot Halevavot completes the analogy of the child on the doorstep:

Now that your benefactor has given you all these tools –the ability to use the hand or the leg or the eyes you did not have before –he may say to you: “Can you read this for me? I’m having a little trouble reading it.”

And you can say, “Well, you gave me vision; of course I will read it for you.”

He might say, “Can you run over to the store and get me a quart of milk? I can’t seem to make it right now.”

And you’re so thankful you have legs that you say, “Of course I’m going to do that.”

In similar fashion, analyze how your body can do many other mitzvot in a better way:

For example, Hashem wants you to go to shul. Do you use your legs to run to shul? Hashem says, “I want you to learn Torah.” Therefore, you should use your eyes to read, and your mouth to speak. If you didn’t have these organs, you certainly would not be able to use them for your own personal pleasures. Now that Hashem has given them to you, certainly you should use them for the things He asks you to do, too.

After you run through the medical list, say to yourself: “What would I not be able to do if I had to check off “yes” to a particular question on the list? Now that the answer is ‘no’ and, Baruch Hashem I now know I am healthy, what mitzvot can I do better?”

Certainly, it can be understood that if a person does have a disability, he would not have the responsibility to have Hakarat Hatov for the specific area where he is lacking. However, if a person is alive, even though he may have some disability, most of the body parts are probably functioning. And if that is the case, to the extent that they do work, one is required to have the proper Hakarat Hatov.

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #8

We are now on tool #3. The Chovot Halevavot tells us that we should think about how good Hashem is to us, by virtue of the fact that he has granted us an intellect—Sechel – and perception, as well as other good and desirable traits and qualities that make us superior to other beings.

We are qualitatively different from animals because we are able to think. Animals may have an instinct for survival, but they do not have a capacity for abstract thinking and creativity. The Chovot Halevavot gives us a mashal, and tells us:

If you were an ignoramus or a boor and someone provided you with intellect, you would certainly realize how much better your situation in life has improved now that you have the intellect; and for the rest of your life you'll be a different person qualitatively. All the more so must we appreciate what Hakadosh Baruch Hu has done for us by giving us this kindness called Sechel.

The last two tools focus more on detail than the first two. We were talking about the child who was picked up from the doorstep, and we saw how everything was given to him. Now we're focusing on specific details – yesterday, on the human body; today, on intellect – Sechel. Truly the Sechel is unique, because, as the Rambam explains, when we say man is created in the Tzelem Elokim – the image of G-d – this means, with Sechel. This Sechel may be similar to G-d's Sechel in one way, although certainly to a lesser degree. This is critical. If we didn't have a Sechel, and we didn't have an ability to develop characteristics emotions and feelings, we wouldn't be capable of having a relationship with the Almighty. This aspect, too, is critical in maintaining and fostering a relationship with G-d. It's more than that: Sechel gives us the ability to grow and to change. Animals are the same creatures doing the same routine, day in, day out. Human beings, as he grows and uses his intelligence and works on his middot, will change into being a different person.

We should look at this capacity for change as a tremendous gift. Many people like to continue life with the same status quo, day in, day out. But a person should really feel gratified by the fact that he can look back at how he was a year ago and say, I'm a much better person. Change is something people are quite afraid of. They think, If I am better now, it means I wasn't good before.

That is not the definition of "change." "Change" is telling us that, because we are human and because we have an intellect, and because we interact with new circumstances on a daily basis, we have the ability to grow. And although we may have been fine before, we can be better now. That's a tremendously invigorating feeling. A person should never be in a rut. We may be in a physical rut, even though we move from one physical pleasure to another. But it's because of our intellect that we are able to grow and feel that life is exciting That is something for which we have to give a lot of Hakarat Hatov to Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

Today's Exercise:

Look back a year ago, two years ago, five years ago, ten years ago – and consider where you were like emotionally and intellectually in the past. Think how you viewed your marriage, your friends, life. Then ask yourself where you are today. Realize that it is the Sechel that has changed your points of view. Be thankful that you've been able to grow, and not remain in the same, boring routine all this time.

Obviously, it is this very same Sechel that gives us the ability to make Cheshbon Hanefesh. And in order to find the motivation for Cheshbon Hanefesh, you need the Sechel, and you need the area of middot development. G-d created us with that ability to change and grow, in order to show us how much more enriched our lives are because we grow. There's nothing as exciting as growth. Recognizing this great truth should motivate us to have Hakarat Hatov and become more involved in our own Cheshbon Hanefesh that, over time, will allow us to be more satisfied with ourselves for having made those tremendous changes.