

## DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH #9

When we make a Cheshbon Hanefesh, we see how wonderful Hashem has been to us, by providing us with a tool in which a person can acquire this world and the next world; and that fourth tool is the Torah.

Not only do we have a Sechel, as we learned yesterday, from which we can grow and change *on our own*, thanks to our innate intelligence; but we also have direct guidance from Hakadosh Baruch Hu. The Torah that Hashem has given us, says the Chovot Halevavot, is capable of “removing the blindness we have, undo our folly, enlighten our eyes and draw us close to Hashem’s Will.” The Torah also informs us about the characteristics of Hakadosh Baruch Hu and teaches us what our obligations are toward Him. All this information will give us a better idea how to enjoy this world and the next world as well.

The Chovot Halevavot gives the following parable: If a person was once exposed to Torah and was knowledgeable about Torah, and then someone came and took away that wisdom, and the person lost the Torah; and then a benefactor came along and once again provided the person with that wisdom; how thankful he would be to that benefactor!

All the more, should we be grateful to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Who encourages us to study Torah and helps us to understand and observe the Torah. The Chovot Halevavot cites many verses from Tehillim in support of this idea. King David said,

- “I hurried and did not delay to keep your mitzvot.”
  - “How I love your Torah; it is my conversation all day.”
  - “How sweet your words are to my taste.”
- And the most famous verse in Tehillim . . .
- “G-d’s Torah is whole, it animates the soul; G-d’s edicts are straightforward, they gladden the heart. “

The question is, Why is the Torah so special? There are a number of answers to this question:

1. The Torah is the unmitigated experience of G-d.

It is very difficult to understand everything about Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Perhaps we can understand a little bit about Him through creation, and we can understand a little bit about Him through the way in which He runs the world. But the greatest experience we can have of Hashem is through the study of His Torah. The Torah is the book that G-d wrote. I like to refer to the Torah as the “Window to G-d’s Mind.” If the greatest pleasure on earth is to have a relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, then, in addition to our Sechel, we need to have “access,” so to speak, into Hakadosh Baruch Hu – and that access is through the Torah.

Ask any teenager what would be the worst thing her older brother could do to her. She would probably say, the worst thing would be to read her diary. The diary contains her innermost thoughts, things she wouldn’t share with anyone else, except maybe her best friend. The diary is extremely personal, and the thoughts it contains truly reflect the essence of that person. Likewise, the Torah is Hakadosh Baruch Hu’s “diary.” Hashem has given us access to that diary – the Will of G-d, as written in the Torah. That diary provides us with a tremendous opportunity to get close to G-d, and gives us access to the infinite pleasure of the relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. We should truly have a lot of Hakarat Hatov for Hakadosh Baruch

Hu for giving us the ability to get close to G-d through this Torah.

## 2. The Torah gives us clear instructions.

We can use our intellect, but quite often, our intellect, despite our best intentions, has led us on a path we discovered, only many years later, was incorrect. Every ten years, the secular world comes up with new theories regarding what it believes to be the best methods of education. Often it goes back to systems that were tried 40 years ago; now they are back in style. The truth is, We can spend lifetimes really trying to be good, but we have to realize that our intellect is severely limited in comparison to what the axioms of life are, and we do have a certain amount of bias we can't always break through. True, G-d gave us Sechel, but the Sechel is there to be able to incorporate the message of Torah and integrate it in our lives.

When we study Torah, with its instructions from the Almighty, we know we are receiving the correct instructions. There are no doubts, no second-guessing. This certainty brings us a tremendous amount of joy. Our Rabbis tell us, "There is no joy like the removal of all doubts." When a person is in doubt, he feels anxious, he feels insecure. But when a person has no doubt as to what he is doing and understands that success is guaranteed, there is no greater joy than that realization. We all know that when we follow the edicts of the Torah, although they may be painful when we first undertake to do them, they always seem to guarantee us the best results in the end.

We can appreciate the benefits of Torah even more, when we compare our lives to those of people who live without Torah. People who live without Torah follow whatever whims society places in front of them, and become the prey of public-relations groups, who sell them things and ideas that are not necessarily in their best interest. And despite the onslaught of the fickle media, they are not capable of getting the pleasure in life they are looking for. However, when we live a life of Torah, our lives are so much better.

For example: How do people deal with the subject of death? When one studies the halachot relating to shiva, one realizes how sensitive Chazal were in understanding how to go through that process. When a person learns the laws of shiva, he understands what's behind them and sees the genius of the therapy shiva offers. That person will not need to go to psychiatrists and psychologists three months later to help him with feelings of repression he may have had for the last few months. How difficult it is to help and console people without Torah! People without Torah will go through shiva but will try to have the guests divert their attention from the matter at hand, spend all that time running away from realities, and, only later, will begin to suffer. The Torah offers clear instructions on how to deal with the difficult subject of death.

Chazal tell us that, after the Jewish People said "Na'aseh v'nishma," Hashem held Mount Sinai over their heads and said, "If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, this will be your burial place." The obvious question is, If the Jewish People had already accepted the Torah willingly by saying "Na'aseh v'nishma," why did Hashem have to hold the mountain over their heads? The Maharal has an interesting answer: He says, "G-d did not have to force them. They indeed accepted the Torah of their own volition. But G-d just wanted to let them know something *by the way*. He was saying to them, 'Today you accepted the Torah upon yourselves and it was a good choice and you will be rewarded for that choice. Your lives will indeed be better because of it. But I want you to know that, had you not made that choice, you would have had no life. I held that mountain over your heads to tell you that you shouldn't think you are doing Me a favor by accepting the Torah, in gratitude for My taking you out of Egypt. The Torah is for your benefit. Years from now, when you may not feel so close to Me, and there may be other things

that steer you away from Torah, realize that your initial choice was good. Had you not made that choice, you might as well have had the mountain over your head. Don't ever forget that image of the mountain over your head, because there are times when the yetzer hara gets the better of people and they may want to chuck it all. Realize, therefore, that without the Torah, you won't have that clarity in life, you won't have that joy in life, you won't have that meaning in life.' "

That life-affirming message is precisely the verse King David wrote in the Psalms: "How I love your Torah; it's my conversation all day. " In other words, "All day I am involved in meaningful behaviour."

### ***Today's Exercise:***

Investigate how much time you spend each day in the study of Torah. If Torah is the greatest gift from Hashem – His manual of instructions that gives us insights into reality and is our greatest joy – how much time are you spending on it? You should be studying those areas that can change your life and make it more meaningful. When you are reluctant to commit certain amounts of time toward learning Torah, think back upon a specific piece of wisdom that you received from Torah and how it really made a difference in your life. Maybe it was something you studied on your own; maybe it was something you learned from a teacher.

Quite often, we find that we are unable to bridge the gap between the profound messages of the Torah and what our Sechel tells us. To clarify our vision, thank G-d we have teachers who share their insights with us. Make it a point to commit a certain amount of time each day to study Torah. Through that study, you will constantly see G-d's kindness to us, and that will motivate you to be involved in other areas of Avodat Hashem.

In Masechet Berachot, the Gemarah tells us that if suffering comes upon a person, the first thing he should do is reflect upon his ways: Perhaps he has done something wrong, and now he is being punished. If he has reflected on everything he has done and does not see anything that could possibly be the cause of his suffering, he should assume that his wrongdoing is that he did not engage in Torah study. Why? The reason is that, if you haven't noticed anything in your particular actions that might warrant punishment, it could be you are being castigated for neglecting to learn Torah.

But this reason does not seem to make sense. Obviously, if you inspected your past deeds, you would have considered the state of your Torah learning. The answer is: If you inspected your ways and didn't find anything wrong, the reason has to be that you haven't studied enough Torah to see what your mistakes are. If you had studied Torah properly and acquired the right wisdom, you would have seen that you were doing certain things wrong.

Of course, the Gemarah concludes, if you have searched out your past and couldn't find any wrongdoing in your actions, and you know you haven't been negligent in your study of Torah and nevertheless you are still suffering; it must be that you are suffering the "pains of Divine love." Notwithstanding, if a person is having problems, the first step is to say to himself, "Where have I gone wrong?"

To make Cheshbon Hanefesh real, we have to keep studying, especially unfamiliar areas. Studying new things will open up the door to things we were not aware of, and we will be able to correct all the facets of our life.