

TOOL # 21 - Part One

In life there are no overachievers--only underestimators.

Rich Ruffalo, Motivational Speaker

Today's tool teaches us about a phenomenon that enables a person to reach spiritual levels way beyond those he is actually capable of reaching at the present time. How does this happen? It is actually a two-step process.

1. Determine what level you are presently capable of reaching based on where you are now. Put all your effort into achieving this goal and become accustomed to operating on that level.
2. Once you are comfortably resting in your present maximum level, make efforts to reach a level that is presently beyond you. Make adequate preparations for operating on this new level; long for it, and ask Hashem for divine assistance in accessing talents and strengths you never realized you had. If you are sincere and consistent in these efforts, you will succeed. Hashem will open the gates of knowledge to you, strengthen your reasoning abilities and your strength, and enable you to fulfill the commandments that are now beyond your reach. Afterward, the cycle continues over and over again, step by step.

There is a spiritual explanation for the mechanics involved in this process. The Almighty wants us all to grow. He starts off by endowing us with a set of talents. He says, "Okay, I have given you a certain degree of ability that allows you, without any help from Me, to accomplish what you are capable of. Use all your potential and you will reach your goals. You do not need my help, because I have already given you all the talent necessary for you to reach your level of accomplishment. Once you have "maxed out," I will not let you stagnate at that level. First, however, I want to hear your feelings about your own status. If you are happy with where you're at, then we will leave things as they are. However, if you want to grow further, and you see levels that are presently beyond your reach ASK ME FOR THEM! CRY FOR THEM! TRY FOR THEM! I will not let you wallow in the rut you are in. I will help you move on to the next level."

Remember the golden rule of spiritual development: "Hashem only gives you what you truly need and honestly desire."

The following parable illustrates the human potential: A king offers a handsome treasure to anyone who can climb a million-step ladder. No one makes the effort to try this feat, knowing that it is impossible. One clever person says, "The king is not interested in teasing us. If he has promised a treasure to the person who succeeds in climbing the ladder, there must be a way to get to the top."

And so, our clever friend begins to climb the ladder. After one thousand steps he is exhausted. He can climb no more; he certainly cannot climb another 999,000 steps. He perseveres, and climbs another ten steps. That's it he can go no further; however, he makes a supreme, painstaking effort, and climbs one more step. Unbeknownst to him, the king has secretly placed a powerful magnet at the top of the ladder. Its magnetic force will be able to pull up

anyone who has reached the 1,011th step. The moment the man's foot touched that step, he was pulled all the way to the top, and was able to claim the treasure.

This same mechanism works when applied to spiritual development. Attempt to break through your limit, and Hashem will pull you higher. Judaism encourages you to dream of achieving what is, at present, impossible. Don't worry about pragmatics: that's His problem, not yours. Your problem is to invest 100% heart, desire and effort. The Almighty will take care of the rest.

Let us offer a practical example: It is a mitzvah to have children. Every additional child raised properly is another mitzvah. Let us say that the Schwartzes are presently capable of raising two children properly, and are doing so. They are considering having a third child. If they consider this issue from a purely logical perspective, they will stop having children. After all, they earn only so much money, and have only so much patience and only so much strength. If they are satisfied with this, Hashem will not give them many more abilities, and they will remain comfortable with two children. However, if they yearn to have more children and plead with Hashem to help them in areas where they are presently "maxed out," He will bless them with resources and talents they never dreamed they had. [A competent Rabbi should help in deciding such a weighty issue, for we have only presented one aspect of it. There may be other factors requiring different advice.]

One caveat to all the above: While looking to go beyond your limits, take it slow! Look at the next level only. Don't look to jump ten steps at a time, lest you crash- land. You don't deserve Divine assistance until you prove yourself at every level.

Today's exercise:

Select one area in your service to Hashem. Ask yourself, "Where do I wish to be in terms of accomplishment in this area? Is it doable? No? How much can I do? Where am I at now?" Then make the effort to move one step more. Satisfied with the level that you are at? Dream one step further. Strategize how to achieve each new level, taking into account the Divine assistance you pray for. Make the effort and make your dreams a reality.

For example, how are you doing in praying? What level of accomplishment are you looking for? You may answer, "I wish I could feel truly connected to Hashem during an entire prayer service and enjoy the experience."

Where are you at now? "I come late for prayers and mumble right through them."

Are you capable of doing better? If so, how much better? Are you capable of coming on time and reading the prayers in English? Is that your present maximum, as you can barely read Hebrew? Do what you truly can right now. Dream about new vistas. Be prepared to reach new heights one step at a time. Those dreams define who you really want to be. With sincere effort and an honest recognition of your need for Divine assistance, you will truly merit Hashem's assistance to fulfill your dreams.

DAILY CHESHBON HANEFESH # 31

TOOL #21, Part 2

Yesterday we saw two steps in the growth process: First deal with the goals that are within your reach, the Chovot Halevavot says. Once you have achieved those, only then should you go on to tackle the dream that is presently beyond your reach.

In today's tool, the Chovot Halevavot focuses on a specific area, in terms of the growth process. He discusses how the two-step process applies to the relationship between physical mitzvot and mitzvot of the heart.

All mitzvot can be divided into two categories: mitzvot that we do with our body (Shofar, Tefillin, candlelighting, etc.) and mitzvot of the heart (6 Constant Mitzvot, Bitachon, Cheshbon Hanefesh). Clearly, the latter category is the more significant one in terms of our spiritual growth. In Judaism, feeling, especially in terms of your relationship with Hashem, is more important than doing. Physical mitzvot done without any love for Hashem cannot be compared to those done with love for Hashem.

The same is true with any kind of human relationship. A spouse or a friend can do a lot of things for their significant other. However, when these actions are accompanied by the feelings and emotional connection, the quality of the relationship takes a quantum leap

What role do physical actions play, then, if the main thrust should be in one's heart? What is wrong with just being a "Jew at Heart"? What is wrong with just loving another person and doing nothing for them? The answer is that it is difficult to be certain about how truthful our inner feelings are. They can be real or they can be fantasies. How can you know? Back them up with actions. Those actions will confirm that what you are feeling is indeed genuine. If you don't ever make the effort to actually do things, your behaviour will tell us a lot about the fantasy life that exists in your mind.

Another answer is that the goal of physical mitzvot is to encourage you to fulfill the mitzvot of the heart. This process works along the lines of behavioral psychology, which tells us that a person's physical actions significantly affect the way that person will feel and think. (This parallels the famous statement of the Mesilat Yesharim: "The outward activities of a person awaken one's innermost being.")

It is relatively easy to do the physical mitzvot, but the mitzvot of the heart appear to be beyond our control. I can blow a shofar and light Shabbat candles, but how can I make myself love Hashem and trust Him? It is no simple act to trust Him when you have lost your job, or to feel enamored with Him to the extent that the feelings of love for Him take precedence over everything else in your life. What, therefore, is our challenge in life?

Is this not the very challenge we find in our most important relationships? We say that we love our significant others, but is this statement real or are we just parroting the

expected phrase society has trained us to say? Sure, we buy our spouse flowers for Shabbat and call them from the office or home once a day, but do we trust that our spouse has our best interest at heart? Would we put their needs before our needs in critical areas? It is easy to do the simple acts of love, but can we control how we should feel?

Are we capable of re-loving a spouse after 20 years of a so-so relationship? Can we rekindle the love that was once there? Most people don't think so; hence, divorce becomes the popular option. Many people feel that it is nearly impossible to ever cultivate a loving marital relationship in the first place, and so they choose the safer "single" route in life. Is it possible to achieve those sublime feelings and thoughts that seem beyond our reach?

The Chovot Halevavot tells us that in terms of spiritual development, this goal appears to be beyond our capacity. You cannot achieve an intense emotional relationship with Hashem unless you "distance yourself from most of your animal desires, control your nature, and inhibit your movements." How, then, can we ever achieve what seems to be beyond our capacity?

The answer can be found in yesterday's tool. First, work on an area in which you are totally in control: the mitzvot of the body. Make an effort to zealously and earnestly do as much as you can, and dream of eventually feeling that closeness to Hashem. The Almighty will then help you do what is beyond your capacity. In other words, do all the mitzvot of the body as if you loved Hashem and felt connected to Him. Do your mitzvot in the most wonderful way possible. Leave the rest to the Almighty. The feelings will come. The love and Bitachon will come. Dream for them and cry for them, and they will come. The same advice will work for your human relationships as well.

Today's Tool:

The High Holiday period is a time when it is customary to be more exacting in one's mitzvah observance, albeit for a brief period of time. In Elul we check our Mezuzot and Tefillin. During the 10 Days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we observe higher standards of Kashrut (Chalav Yisrael, Pat Yisrael, etc.), even though we will go back to our regular standards afterward. Why? To at least try our best in the physical mitzvot, even if only for a brief time. Why? To awaken the feelings that ought to be going on inside us.

Focus on three physical mitzvot that need improvement, mitzvot that are in your control to do perfectly. Commit yourself from today until after Yom Kippur to do them as if you loved Hashem passionately and trusted Him. Make the effort, spend the money, and study all about these mitzvot. At the same time, bemoan the fact that you do not feel like loving and trusting Him. Dream for the day when you will actually mean what you say in your prayers about Hashem's love for you and how grateful you are for that. Leave the rest to the Almighty! Experience the breakthrough of Divine assistance.