

“MEMAAYAN HACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Magiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

The Essence of Mussar: Introspection and Focusing One's Heart-- to Connect Raw Intellectual Knowledge with the World of Action

The Rambam (Pirkei Hatzlacha, letter to his son) writes, "My son, you should understand that in Scripture, "Pharaoh", the king of Egypt, is, in reality, the symbolic manifestation of the Evil Inclination, and all the references to Israel refer to a single idea, that is, the human intellect . . . and Moshe Rabeinu, zt"l., refers to the Divine intellect . . ." We see from here that all of the struggles against Pharaoh, the King of Egypt described in these Parshios of Sefer Shemos, actually symbolize, in a deeper sense, man's struggles against his Yetzer, his evil inclination. As such, we must carefully analyze the lessons in these Parshios in order to understand the ways of the Evil Inclination and the advice we are given how to successfully stand against him and emerge victorious.

In our Parsha, Va'era (Shemos 9:20-21) the Torah tells us regarding the plague of Hail, "Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem, chased his servants and his livestock to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of God to heart—he left his servants and livestock in the field." One could ask on this passage: why does Scripture call the one who disregarded Moshe's warning concerning the impending destruction of the hail "whoever did not take the word of God to heart"? Isn't the opposite of one who "feared the word of Hashem" one who does not fear the word of Hashem? What is the meaning of the phrase in passuk 21 "whoever did not take the word of God to heart"?

I heard from my Master and Teacher, R' Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l., a thought in explanation of this question: indeed, the opposite of one who "feared the word of Hashem" is truly "one who did not take the word of God to heart", and from this insight we can have a profound understanding into the essential aspect of the study of Mussar. In truth, one who "does not fear the word of Hashem" is only he who does

not penetrate his heart with the ideas of fear of God. The purpose of he who is a "yarei Hashem" (Heb. one who fears Hashem) is to constantly to analyze, to focus his heart on his ways. His job (through the learning of Mussar—trans.) is to work to connect his raw intellectual knowledge with his actions in daily life. On the other hand, one who apathetically does not look into his deeds, he is the one the Torah calls "whoever does not take the word of God to heart". Only this person stands in contradistinction with the true "yarei Hashem", one who fears the word of God. When one can focus the ideas of God's words into his heart, causing them to penetrate deep within, then these ideas change—no longer raw knowledge, but true real wisdom which can influence all of a person's thoughts and deeds.

According to this, we can well understand how it is possible after all of the plagues which struck the Egyptian people, so that they could see unequivocally the power of Hashem, they could remain in their state of mindless apathy and leave their servants and livestock in the field to the destruction by the hail. Didn't they see with their eyes and recognize that the Holy One, Blessed be He was acting in the plagues, and that He was fulfilling His warnings? The answer is as we have explained in the principle we laid out above: "A person who knows, knows; but really, he doesn't know!" It is possible for a person to possess a fully-developed understanding, but if he does not work to focus that wisdom to penetrate into his soul, work to take this wisdom into his heart (Heb. lasim al leibo, Heb. trans.), he may act in a way which is as if he does not know anything! This, then was the failure, the stumbling block of the Egyptian people (compared to the physical body)—they did not connect the raw intellectual knowledge of what they saw with their eyes to the reality of life. Thus, they often did not listen to Moshe Rabeinu's warnings and left their servants and flocks outdoors to be destroyed by the hail.

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This is what the Ramchal (R' Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, zt"l), writes in his work, Mesillas Yesharim (chapter 2): It is this consideration which underlay the counsel of the wicked Pharaoh in his statement (Shemos 5:9), "Intensify the men's labors . . ." His intention was not merely to deprive them of all leisure so that they would not come to oppose him, but he strove to strip their hearts of all thought by means of the enduring, interminable nature of their labor.

This is precisely the device that the evil inclination employs against man; for it is a warrior and well-versed in deception. One cannot escape it without great wisdom and a broad outlook. As we are exhorted by the Prophet Haggai (1:7) "Focus your hearts on

your ways." (Heb. "Simu lib'chem al darkeichem" trans.) (taken from The Path of the Just translated by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein p. 30)

We see again in the words of Rabbi Luzzatto zt"l., the comparison of the wicked Pharaoh and the Evil Inclination. Both use the same stratagem-- just as Pharaoh commanded "Intensify the men's labors" in order to "strip their hearts of all thoughts", so too is the way of the Evil Inclination. It works to hamper a person's ability to think into his ways and to place them upon his heart. These are the weapons of the Yetzer to prevent one from allowing his thoughts of holiness and spiritual attainments to penetrate into the world of action to influence them for good, and instead, cause them to remain in the world of imagination and theory.

Against this mortal danger, the Prophet Haggai cries and says, "Focus your hearts on your ways!" As Rabbi Luzzatto zt"l., stresses, he does not just "say", he "cries and says". The Ramchal heard the cry of the Navi; do we? This is not simply just another verse in Tanach! Rather, this is the fundamental command for the entire Divine service of the study of Mussar. It is incumbent upon each of us all to hear, to take heed of the cry of the Navi Haggai, to focus our thoughts, our introspection into the reality around us and into our actions. In this way we will succeed in overcoming the advice of Pharaoh and the Evil Inclination and achieve the level of being one who "fear the word of God."

I have heard it said in the name of HaGaon R' Yechezkel Abramsky zt"l., the following insight into our Parsha. Each of the plagues were introduced by a verse of "warning". In Shemos 9:14, Hashem tells Moshe to warn Pharaoh concerning the plague of hail: "For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart . . . so that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the world." Asks R' Abramsky zt"l., What is the unique nature of the plague of hail, its difference from the other plagues, that specifically

concerning this plague that Hashem stresses that it is being sent "against your heart"? He answers that alone amongst the Ten Plagues, the plague of hail was given for the Egyptians to test their free will. Would they choose to be amongst the "Yarei Hashem", those that fear the word of God, or would they be one of those "whoever did not take the word of God to heart". This choice, dependent on the heart of man whether he would introspect into his actions and control his heart (i.e. his desires), or would he succumb to the passion of the heart and its physical cravings. This explanation fits quite well with what we have explained above, i.e. that the plague of hail specifically is a test of heart, containing within it the idea of introspection and focusing oneself upon one's heart, upon man's opportunity to connect his raw knowledge to the seat of his actions, piercing the veil of superficiality.

The Ramban, in Parshas Beshalach (Shemos 14:4) writes concerning the words "And I will strengthen Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue you": Seeing that Pharaoh was already frightened from them (Bnei Yisrael- trans.) as a result of the Plague of the Killing of the Firstborn, and he had already begged Moshe and Aharon "also, bless me!", he certainly did not believe in his heart that he would pursue the Jewish people, even if they would try to escape. Rather, he understood that Moshe would do to them (the Egyptians) as he wished. Therefore, Hashem had to say that He would strengthen Pharaoh's heart so that he would run after them. Further, (at the splitting of the sea, Krias Yam Suf—trans.) the Torah tells us a second time, (Shemos 14:17) "I shall strengthen the heart of Egypt and they will come after them" because when they (the Egyptians) saw that the sea had split before the Jewish people, and that they were walking in the midst of the sea on dry land, how could they be so arrogant (lit. "fill up their heart" - trans.) to pursue them to do them evil? Indeed, there is no greater miracle amongst all the miracles of Yetzias Mitzrayim than this; this was absolute insanity for the Egyptians (to chase after the Bnei Yisrael.) Yet, Hashem foiled their base intentions and strengthened their hearts to cause them to enter into the sea.

We learn from here, that Pharaoh, from his point-of-view, had already removed the yoke of servitude from Bnei Yisrael's shoulders following the Plague of the Killing of the Firstborn. He already had no intention of pursuing them if they attempted to leave Egypt, and certainly not entering into the sea after them. But, the Holy One Blessed Be He, strengthened his heart so that he would run after the Jewish People, and more—"Hashem foiled their base intentions and strengthened their hearts" (Heb. sikel es atzasam v'chazek es libam"- trans.) to cause the Egyptians

to enter after the Jews into the sea, which the Ramban identifies as the greatest of all Yetzias Mitzrayim's miracles, which was actually "absolute insanity".

Based on the approach we've discussed above, we might ask, how did this happen? The Egyptians had seen and experienced the Ten Plagues; they had seen the signs and wonders which accompanied Bnei Yisrael throughout the entire Exodus. How could they show the arrogance, in spite of all this, to go and pursue the Jews? Even more—when the Yam Suf split for the Jewish People and Pharaoh continued to pursue and entered into the sea after them, an act of true insanity, only someone handicapped or blind would do this! Could it be possible not to see the Providential power of Hashem with all of its accompanying wonders?! How are we to understand all this?

However, we see here again, the fundamental principle we established above. Even though Pharaoh saw the Ten Plagues and the attendant wonders and miracles, he saw and understood with complete clarity how the sea split for the Jews and how they walked in its midst on dry land, Pharaoh knew all that--- and yet, 'he did not know'! The knowledge of Yetzias Mitzrayim remained for Pharaoh separate from his heart, it did not pierce it and into his world of action, not active, nor obligatory for him. It remained—theoretical. It is possible to see great things in one's life, wonders!—and yet if they remain only as raw intellection data, not going deeply into the person's heart and actions, he is as one who knows—and who yet doesn't know. Our job is to know things intimately, to maintain control over our heart and bring these ideas of sanctity, of fear of God into our psyche and our actions.

My Master and Teacher, R' Chaim Shmuelevitz, zt"l., was wont to cite a passage in the Gemora in tractate Shevuos (5a) regarding the requisite amount of foreknowledge necessary to be obligated for entering into the Beis HaMikdosh while impure. The Gemora quotes the opinion of Rebi, who held that the knowledge he had learned in his teacher's school ("yediais beis Rabo" Heb.- transl.) was sufficient for liability. Rashi, loc. Cit., explains: "(this refers to) the knowledge he learned in his Rebbe's school that a. one who touches something which has the ability to make others impure, (eg. a dead bug) is himself rendered impure, and b. he knows himself well enough to know when he touches something. However, he does not introspect to focus his attention (Heb. "lasum al libo"-transl.) to the fact that he himself has been rendered impure, as he had touched the impure object. This is sufficient foreknowledge."

It seems that according to Rashi's explanation, "yediais beis Rabo" means that a. a person knows that he touched a bug,

and b. he knows that a bug makes one impure. Nonetheless, he still goes into the Beis HaMikdosh, when he is impure. It's absolutely amazing—how is it possible that this individual had all of the requisite knowledge about the specific steps which would make a person impure—a. he knows a bug make one impure, b. he knows he himself touched the bug, and c. he knows it's prohibited to enter the Beis HaMikdosh when one is impure. Nonetheless, he does not connect all the "dots" to influence his own actions and he enters the Beis HaMikdosh when he is impure! Why doesn't he make the simple connection to effect his action, to stop himself from going into the Beis HaMikdosh?!

My Master and Teacher explained that the answer is what we've presented earlier—"A person who knows, knows; but, he really doesn't know!" It is possible for a person to know all the dots, but not make the connection, as he has never worked on this raw knowledge to let it penetrate into his heart. The knowledge has only remained separate, isolated bits of knowledge, where it cannot affect his behavior. As Rashi cited above, writes: "he does not introspect to focus his attention (Heb. "lasum al libo"-transl.) to the fact that he himself has been rendered impure." Since this person has not thought deeply, not placed these ideas on his heart, they remain only "yediais beis rabo"—or as we might say in English idiom-- what he learned in kindergarten. It makes no impression on his actual behavior. We have an obligation to acquire our knowledge deeply into our hearts so it can positively effect our actions, connecting our intellect to our deeds.

In the houses of Mussar in Navarodok, there was a saying: "If Reuven understands something, what does it matter to Shimon?" However, in the same vein, based on our analysis above, one could extend the thought like this: "If Reuven understands something, what does it matter to Reuven?!" In other words, just like some awareness that Reuven acquires has no benefit to Shimon because they are two different individuals, with different minds and hearts, so too with Reuven himself. As long as Reuven's insight remains raw intellectual knowledge, then he will be as the fellow we poked fun at earlier—Reuven knows, and knows; but he really doesn't know!

In a nutshell, this is the purpose and the process of learning Mussar, to take the ideas a person acquires throughout his intellectual life into the deepest recesses of his heart, his psyche, and finally, into his actions. Mussar means to live a life based on the knowledge, as the Alter from Kelm used to put it: "to trace the truth on the depths of one's heart." We work all our lives to penetrate the depths of our heart with the insights we gather into our intellect—truly "and you shall know this day and take to your heart" (cf. Devarim

4:39). This is also the fundamental Mussar principle to be learned from Yetzias Mitzrayim, to know, to amass knowledge from one's reality, and to connect that knowledge with one's heart into the world of action, and not to live a life of error and illusion.

We see this type of mistaken life in the story of the wicked Bilaam. He praises and blesses the Jewish People over and over, until he even requests for himself that his end should be like theirs. Yet, on the other hand, he never stops for a moment from his opportunities to curse the Jews, even though he obviously recognizes their stature and sees that the Almighty prevents him from doing so. Isn't it a wonder—how can Bilaam not see the contradiction in his words and deeds? The answer is simply that Bilaam, while he indeed does know all that he knows, he never “placed on his heart” this knowledge. He never connected the insights he knew intellectually to his active world of behavior. Therefore, he continued to try to curse Bnei Yisrael and act in a manner as if he did not know what he indeed did know.

In Michtav M'Eliyahu (volume 5), a correspondence is quoted between the Rav zt"l., and a group who wanted him to give a shmuess in Yerushalayim during the Eseres Yemei Teshuva in the Beis HaMussar. Rav Dessler writes in response: “It is my intent, bli neder, to come to Jerusalem to fulfill your request be”h. Please do me a favor, though; please arrange that the Gaon R' Yechezkel Levenstein shlit”a, could present his talk before mine. I would be simply humiliated to “jump to the head of the line” to speak before him. He is one of the remaining “Shocharei Mussar”, those who seek Mussar in truth, who speak from within themselves, to themselves.”

We see in this letter, Rav Dessler's articulation of the goal of the study of Mussar: that one “speak from within himself, to himself”. To use other words, Rav Dessler zt"l. is describing one who introspects on the wisdom he has acquired till it has entered the deepest place of his being, and from that deep place in himself, he speaks to himself, “placing on his heart” the insights he needs. Yet, for a person to connect these intellectual insights to his world of action, he has to be able to control his heart, an ability given specifically to tzaddikim, as the Gemora says, “the heart of the righteous is in their control”. This is in contradistinction, though to the wicked, who are said to be “in the control of their hearts”. The wicked are not in

control of their hearts; rather, their hearts, their passions and physical desires, control them. We see this in the Midrash (Breishis Rabba, Toldos Parsha 67:8): “The wicked are under the control of their hearts, as it is said—“And Naval said in his heart”, “And Eisav said in his heart”, “And Yeravam said in his heart”, “And Haman said in his heart.” But the righteous have the control over their hearts, as Scripture says, “And Chana spoke on her heart”, “And Dovid spoke to his heart”, “And Daniel placed on his heart.” Similar all to their Creator, “And Hashem spoke to His heart.”

From all the insights above, we have learned that the primary purpose of the learning of Mussar is the connecting of our knowledge and spiritual insight from the world around us to our behavior. This process requires a middle-man, or a catalyst, which is the act of penetrating this knowledge into our deepest place, our heart, for between our intellectual knowledge and the human heart is an enormous void of thousands of miles. Nonetheless, one must live a centered life, with constant introspection into his deeds so he can pierce these insights into his heart. This ability of “know this day and take to your heart” is mainly found in the righteous as their hearts is under their control i.e. they control their feelings and natures to the point that they are able to speak “from within themselves, to themselves.” The opposite is with the wicked, like Pharaoh King of Egypt, they do not control their heart and thus, cannot connect their intellectual insights to their actions. Therefore, their lives are full of contradictions between their knowledge and their deeds. Our task is to make this connection between what we perceive in our reality and our world of action and our heart.



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

The shmuess for the month of Adar will be published, please G-d, the week of Parashas toruma



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