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Indifference to Pleasure

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Fire-of-Water-of-Earth: The Destruction of Pleasure

With *siyata d'shmaya* we will continue here to learn about the element of earth and its resulting trait, sadness. Here we will discuss sadness that comes from **fire-of-water-of-earth**.

The nature of water is that it becomes 'dragged' after other elements. Water is also the root of the idea of *ahavas taanugim*, the love for pleasure, which causes a person to search for pleasure. Fire, though, is a destructive element. **Fire-of-water-of-earth** is when a person has pleasure (water) and his fire 'destroys' his pleasure, resulting in sadness (earth). Hence, the sadness that comes from impaired fire-of-water-of-earth is when a person is having difficulties experiencing pleasure. The person with his nature will become 'dragged' after his search for pleasure, but his fire quickly destroys whatever pleasure he experiences.

Whenever a person experiences pleasure, there is always some end to the pleasure. This is because the element of earth in the soul places limitations on everything, including the experience of pleasure. Therefore, all pleasurable experiences will ultimately be limited, and a person will never experience endless pleasure. At some point, the pleasure ends. This is how the element of earth puts a stop to pleasure: by limiting the pleasure that a person experiences.

However, earth is not the only element which limits pleasure. Fire can also limit pleasure, by 'destroying' it. (An example of this is the day of Shabbos Kodesh, when Hashem "finished" the Creation. On Shabbos, we cannot light a fire, and the depth behind this is because Shabbos itself is a 'fire' which 'destroyed' the first six days of Creation and put an end to it. This is the deeper reason why the Torah forbids work on Shabbos.)

Fire-of-water-of-earth is when a person becomes sad because his pleasure has been stopped. To illustrate, if a person takes a grape and sucks on it, at first he will enjoy it, but if he keeps sucking on it, after some time he will no longer enjoy it. If a person eats something that he enjoys, his tongue will first feel pleasure from tasting it, and each person will have his own tastes that he enjoys. But when he keeps tasting it, at some point he will no longer find the taste enjoyable. That is a normal situation, but when a person's element of fire dominates, the fire 'destroys' the limitations of the pleasure even before the limitation of the pleasure has arrived! That will mean that a person will not be able to experience pleasure in something long before he has stopped enjoying it. As soon as his pleasure begins, it ends.

When a person isn't concentrating on the pleasure, he can't enjoy the pleasure, as the Gemara says that a blind person isn't satisfied from the food he eats¹, because he cannot see it and therefore he isn't concentrating on it. We

¹ Yoma 74a

learn from this Gemara that in order for a person to enjoy what he's tasting, he needs to be focused on the pleasure he is getting from the food.

A person might go to a wedding and glance into the kitchen there, and when he sees that how the cooks and waiters are handling the food, he might become disgusted at the lack of hygiene and then he won't be able to enjoy the food when it is served to him. He may end up eating it, especially if he is very hungry and he really needs to eat dinner, but subconsciously, he is disgusted at the food he is eating, because of what he saw in the kitchen. So even as he is tasting and enjoying his food somewhat, he feels disgust within the pleasure, and it kills the pleasure. The disgust which he feels towards the food will greatly limit his pleasure in eating the food.

Pleasure Followed By Guilt

Here is another example, which is more extreme. A person may be eating his food, and if he has a bit of *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven) and there is some room to doubt the *kashrus* of the food, he will not enjoy the food. It may be permissible according to *halachah* to eat the food, but he has a little doubt that something may be wrong with the *kashrus*, and this bothers him as he's eating the food. He will not be able to enjoy the food, because as he eats it, he feels guilty about whatever pleasure he is getting from the food, in addition to his doubts about it.

The following is a deeper example of "guilty pleasure". Whenever a person eats something, if he is not that spiritual, he just eats mindlessly, without ever feeling guilty about indulging; he is satisfied with the fact that he keeps Torah and *mitzvos*, and he doesn't see anything wrong with enjoying food, since it's permissible. As long as it's permitted to eat, he eats it, as much as he wants to, as long as it's kosher. But a more spiritual kind of person is aware of that the act of eating food has been tainted from the sin of eating from the *Eitz HaDaas*. There is also a concept of "holy eating", which resembles the eating of the *korbonos*, but most acts of eating today resemble the act of eating from the *Eitz HaDaas*, which brought the impure effects of the Serpent upon man.

True pleasure is referred to as "*oneg*", and faulty pleasure is referred to as "*nega*" [the opposite rearrangement of the letters in the word "*oneg*"].² When a person is aware of this concept, and as he eats he is also feeling pleasure in his eating, he feels a contradiction in his soul. On one hand, his soul wants pleasure (*oneg*), but he is also feeling that the pleasure from food is really faulty pleasure, *nega*, and not true pleasure, *oneg*. What will happen? His awareness of *nega* will block him from any *oneg*.

When one is not aware of this, this will not bother him. But once he becomes aware, he feels a painful contradiction. We can find two people from the same family who both eat a lot, but one of them keeps eating without feeling any guilt or feeling of emptiness afterwards, while another will eat a lot and feel that no matter how much he eats, he is not satisfied and there is a lingering sense of emptiness. His pleasure is being blocked, because he is aware deep down that the pleasure from food is *nega*, not *oneg*.

In the future, we will all have *oneg* in Hashem, and we will merit an "inheritance without any bounds"³, but in our times, pleasure is limited. The limitation on our pleasure today comes from the power of **fire-of-water-of-earth**.

² The terms *oneg* and *nega* are found in Sefer Yetzirah

³ Shabbos 118a

Water expands and causes a person to seek pleasure, but a person will be prevented from the pleasure, when his pleasure is quickly destroyed by his fire.

Even more so, there is a deeper point here. The more inward and spiritual that a person becomes, the more he may recoil from all pleasure on this world. For example, there are some people who live entirely for reward in the future - as in the statement, "Today is for doing, and tomorrow is for reward."⁴With some people, this verse is the embodiment of their lives. But when one approaches life like this, it is an attitude of "*shelo lishmah*" (not acting for the sake of Heaven), and such a person will never arrive at "*lishmah*" (acting for the sake of Heaven) by living his life that way. Although Chazal state that a person should act *shelo lishmah* in order to arrive at acting *lishmah*⁵, this does not mean that a person should base his entire life on *shelo lishmah*. But in any case, there are people who live with this attitude, of doing everything right on this world in order to receive reward in the Next World.

When they experience any suffering on this world, they comfort themselves with the fact that they will receive greater reward in the Next World. To them, everything is always about what reward in the Next World they will receive. The Next World to them is entirely about pleasure and bliss, as in the statement, "Shabbos is a semblance of the Next World."⁶ They may recoil from pleasure on this world because they are afraid it will deplete their pleasure in the next world. They may be afraid of honor for the same reason, that receiving honor will use up their honor in the next world. So they may avoid pleasure on this world because they don't want to use up their pleasure in the next world.

They may take it so far that even when they *daven*, they don't want to feel enjoyment in it, because they fear that the enjoyment they have on this world in their *davening* will use up their enjoyment in the Next World, so they will *daven* without enjoyment. They will immediately pull back from anything as soon as they begin to feel that they are enjoying something. It is because deep down, they feel that they are using up their reward in the next world. They never allow themselves to fully enjoy anything.

There are also others who are even more extreme, and they don't want to enjoy anything at all. They are afraid to have a good life. They feel that any pleasure on this world will somehow make them suffer later on, and that Hashem will punish them later for any pleasure they had, as if they will need to pay a heavy price for any pleasure. If life is going good for them, either they will think that it's depleting their reward in the Next World (as in the first kind of person mentioned earlier), or they will think that a punishment from Hashem is in store for them. So they choose to live a life of fear, living all the time in a shadow of fear over them, and they don't want their life to be good, and if life is good for them they become afraid that this will not be good for them in the end.

These kinds of people are constantly be looking for problems and faults in themselves and in their lives so that they can feel like they are suffering. These people will be very careful about avoiding ayin hara. A person like this does not allow himself to feel pleasure, because he wants to place himself in a constricted state, so that life shouldn't get too good for him. This comes from **fire-of-water-of-earth**. It is a destructive power in the soul which blocks a person from feeling pleasure.

⁴ Eruvin 22a

⁵ Pesachim 50b

⁶ Berachos 57b

Pleasure is a source of vitality-giving energy for a person. The less pleasure a person has, the less alive he is. Life is experienced when we move, and pleasure is our main movement. Without pleasure, we are not alive. A dead person doesn't move and he can't enjoy anything. **Fire-of-water-of-earth** provides a person with pleasure (water) but the pleasure is quickly destroyed by his fire, causing sadness (earth). That is the problem with **fire-of-water-of-earth**: a drying up of pleasure in the soul, which results in sadness.

Now let us see how to solve this issue.

Accessing our Root Pleasure and our Current Level of Pleasure

A person was created to enjoy the spiritual revelation of basking in the presence of Hashem, as stated in the beginning of *Mesillas Yesharim*. Therefore, pleasure is built into the design of our soul, and we need it. The main pleasure we are created for is to connect to our root, to our *havayah*, to one's true self, and to the holy Torah, and, going deeper, to connect to Hashem Himself. As it is written, "*Then you will have pleasure upon Hashem*"⁷. That is the true pleasure of the soul, and that is how the soul is designed to be.

What is the root pleasure that the soul needs to experience? It is to experience the soul's movement from the state of *shelo lishmah* into the state of *lishmah*. The level of *lishmah* is above the realm of pleasure, whereas the level of *shelo lishmah* is within the realm of pleasure. That was the ideal design of the soul, had Adam not sinned by eating from the *Eitz HaDaas*. After the sin of Adam, though, this higher root of pleasure became concealed. Now pleasure is mainly experienced through the animal soul (the *nefesh habehaimis*), which takes pleasure in the various material pleasures of This World, or, *chas v'shalom*, in pleasures that are forbidden.

To summarize, before the sin, the pleasure of the soul was to move from *shelo lishmah* to *lishmah*, and after the sin, the soul mainly experiences pleasure in the pleasures of This World, which are a mixture of good and evil, a result of eating from the *Eitz HaDaas Tov V'Ra* (which contained a mixture of a good and evil).

In the future, pleasure will be unbounded, for it will be the pleasure in the Infinite, which is unlimited. This is the "inheritance without any boundaries" that was promised by Hashem to Yaakov Avinu, and it is also the meaning of the verse, "*Then you will have pleasure upon Hashem*". Currently, pleasure is limited. There is a statement in the *sefarim hakedoshim* that "Constant pleasure is not pleasure"⁸, and this is said of our current state, where we are not able to constantly experience pleasure. Therefore, in our current state, it is already 'built-in' to our souls that our pleasure must be limited.

However, the question is: What is the amount of pleasure that a person needs? There are no clear boundaries to this. It is different with each person. It is like asking how much food each person needs to eat. Each person needs to eat a different amount, depending on his metabolism and other factors. We cannot tell each person exactly what he needs to eat, because each person needs a different amount, and the same is with pleasure. If a person gets less pleasure than what he needs, he will be missing energy, and if he gets too much pleasure, his pleasure will go from *oneg* to

⁷ Yeshayahu 58:14

⁸ Baal Shem Tov parshas Eikev 63

nega. Even if he gets too much spiritual pleasure this is true. Surely that is the case when people overdo their physical pleasures.

It would seem, then, that a person should play it safe by trying not to get any pleasure at all, so that he shouldn't endanger himself in any of the above two extremes. However, this is not really possible. A person cannot deny the need for pleasure which his physical body and animal soul needs, and one must recognize that this is his current level. Some rare individuals are above this, and they are fully in control of their physical body and animal soul. But most people are not like this, and they are dominated on varying levels by the needs of their physical body and animal soul.

That being the case, almost all people need to get pleasure of [the body and] animal soul, but they will also need to get some of the higher, root pleasure, of going from *shelo lishmah* to *lishmah*. This includes pleasure of connecting to one's very *havayah*, to the holy Torah, and to Hashem. And one will also need to get worldly pleasure which satisfies the animal soul – understandably, in the proper amount and not by indulging. One's *avodah* is to increase the pleasure of going from *shelo lishmah* to *lishmah*, so that he can enlighten the animal soul, but along with this, one will also need to provide some pleasure for his animal soul, on the level of the animal soul [i.e. the basic needs for physical nourishment and emotional well-being].

However, one needs to be very cautious with this and not overdo his worldly pleasure. If he gets too much pleasure on the level of the animal soul, this will increase his *shelo lishmah*, and it will also conceal the *neshamah*.

“B'dieved, L'Chatchilah” – Now That We Are In This Situation, It Is Hashem's Will

After a person has worked out the above, the next issue to consider is: what is the depth of the pleasure that a person needs to feel, when he is experiencing pleasure?

There are two kinds of pleasure: spiritual, and material. There are also two ways to experience pleasure: by acting in order to receive pleasure afterwards, or by directly experiencing pleasure. When one acts in order to receive pleasure, one should identify this as *shelo lishmah*. When experiencing worldly pleasure, this should cause a person to feel pained that he is experiencing a mixture of good and evil on the world, *nega*, and that it is only the pleasure of the animal soul.

However, there is also a concept of “*b'dieved, l'chatchilah*” (or “*l'chatchilah* within the *b'dieved*” - that even after we have landed ourselves in a situation that is not the ideal state, it is right now ideal, because Hashem wills it). Now that we live after the sin of Adam, there are two extreme approaches to our current state: Either we can either look at this as a very saddening situation, because it is not the ideal one. Or, on the opposite extreme, are people don't care about this change at all, so it doesn't bother them, and they forget completely about the ideal state. But there is balanced perspective in between these two extremes. Now that this is our situation, where we are found in a state that is “*b'dieved*”, we need to look it as *l'chatchilah*, the ideal situation, since Hashem wills it that we should be in this current state. The more a person fears Heaven and mourns the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, he is pained, but amidst the pain, he must also realize that it is also the will of Hashem, and he can even get pleasure from this.

To illustrate the idea, if not for the sin, there would be no such thing as immaturity. When we see a child who acts immature, should this remind us of the immaturity that was created by sin, or do we get pleasure in seeing the child? A healthy reaction would be to get pleasure in watching a child.

We also find this concept of “*l’chatchilah* within *b’dieved*” with regards to getting some pleasure from marital relations. Although the pleasure in marital relations is a worldly pleasure that is a mixture of good and evil, now that Hashem wills that we should be in this current state, we are also allowed to get some pleasure even from it. Even within the “*b’dieved*”, there is an aspect of “*l’chatchilah*”, and since Hashem currently wills it that we should be in the state of after the sin, we should also get pleasure from it.

Certainly, a person should not take this idea too far and never feel pained at all that we are after the sin. One needs to utilize this concept in the proper balance.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* says that a person should abstain from the materialistic desires of This World to the extent that this isn’t ruining his *yishuv hadaas*. This is because needs to allow his pleasure to expand. One should realize that the will of Hashem is for him to experience some pleasure, even worldly pleasure, as long as it is pleasure that is need for our sanity, and he should allow his pleasure to have its outlet. Otherwise, a person will be depriving himself of the need for pleasure, and this would be a destructive use of his element of fire.

Repairing Fire-of-Water-of-Earth: Validating The Need For Pleasure

As we are discussing in this lesson, when one’s fire is destroying his pleasure and he is saddened as a result, this is the sadness that results from **fire-of-water-of-earth**.

As explained here, there are some people who have problems when it comes to experiencing their own pleasure. They don’t know how to get the pleasure they need, and they are feeling jealous of those who throw off the yoke of Torah from themselves, who indulge themselves in cuisine, intoxication, and various worldly pleasures, who appear to be greatly enjoying themselves. (In reality, of course, this can be compared to children who become envious of other children.) There is definitely a problem if a person isn’t getting pleasure and he doesn’t agree to the need for pleasure. A person will become sad from the **fire-of-water-of-earth** that is burning up any bit of pleasure he begins to have.

One needs to allow give proper outlet to his pleasure. How much pleasure exactly, and what kind of pleasure, is a delicate issue, because there is a different answer for each person. One will need to *daven* for Hashem for help in clarifying this area. In summary, a person will definitely need to give pleasure to his soul, both in the spiritual pleasure as well as in the physical, to a certain degree and in proper balance.

In Conclusion

May Hashem help us that we merit to seek the truth, and to receive the proper amount of pleasure we need. Understandably, we still have the *avodah* to lessen our need for pleasure and to increase our point that is above pleasure, for that is the purpose of everything – to reveal the presence of the Creator, completely.