



Yisro

Empathy

Drasha from the author of **Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh**
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Empathy

A Prayer For Mercy

In the blessing of **על הצדיקים**, we ask Hashem, **יהמו נא רחמיך**, to please have compassion upon Creation. We are asking Hashem to awaken His *middas harachamim* (attribute of mercy).

Chazal say that at first, Hashem wanted to create the world with *middas hadin* (attribute of justice), but He saw that the world wouldn't last, so He included in it the *middas harachamim* (attribute of mercy).

This is connected to the concept of "Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world." At first, Hashem wanted to create the world with *middas hadin* alone, which comes from the Torah, but then He used the *middas harachamim* as well, which also comes from the Torah. The Torah is called "*rachmana*", compassion, for the Torah is the revelation of Hashem's *rachamim*. Hashem used that *middas harachamim* contained in the Torah in order to create the world along with *middas hadin*.

Thus, when we ask Hashem to use the *middas harachamim*, we are really asking Hashem to use the light of the Torah, which is the root of the *middas harachamim*.

That is the simple understanding of the prayer of **יהמו נא רחמיך**. Now let us reflect into a deeper understanding of what we pray for here in these words of *Shemoneh Esrei*.

Reflecting On The Suffering of The World

Hashem included *middas harachamim* in creating the world. That does not mean that He retracted completely from the original plan to use the *middas hadin*. The *middas hadin* still exists. If not for *middas hadin*, people would do as they please and never have to be afraid of repercussion. Thus, there has to be a judgment and a Judge who presides over mankind.

If we reflect even a little bit and we take a look at what goes on in the world, we can see a world full of "*middas hadin*". There is suffering all over the world. People suffer with major problems as well as with minor problems. Chazal say that if a person reaches his hand into his pocket to take out a coin and out comes a coin that is smaller of value, this is called a degree of suffering.

How much suffering have we gone through in just one year alone? If we reflect, we can remember many episodes that happened to us this year which involved lots of pain. We don't remember every single time we suffered, all the little discomforts; we only remember the big events of suffering that happened this year. But all of us still had lots of suffering, big and small. Chazal say that forgetfulness is a blessing, because if we would never forget anything, we would remember all our

suffering, and we would cave in from all the suffering we recall. For this reason, Hashem designed us in a way that we forget about every small amount of suffering we went through.

If a person would write down how much he suffered in his lifetime, imagine how big the notebook would be! Add to that all of the suffering that every Jew has gone through since the beginning of time. Each of our souls is at least 5780 years old, because we have been around in previous lifetimes. Add to that all of the suffering that people have gone through in *Gehinnom*.

In one lifetime alone, there is so much suffering; add to that all of the suffering from all the lifetimes that a person goes through, and add to that all of the suffering that every Jew's soul has gone through, in all lifetimes, ever since Avraham Avinu when we became the Jewish people....

And what about the *goyim* (the gentiles)?? They have also suffered so much! How much suffering has the entire world gone through, all 70 nations of the world, since the start of Creation! Although Chazal say that *goyim* are not called "*adam*" (man), still, there is no question that they are definitely people. The *goyim* have suffered so much!

And how many animals have suffered since the start of Creation? Animals have pain too. It is prohibited to cause pain to an animal – "*tzaar baalei chaim*". (Even according to the opinion that it is not a Biblical prohibition, it is still prohibited Rabbinically). And the *Talmud Yerushalmi* mentions that even plants and rocks have feelings.

If you ever take some quiet time to think calmly about this, of all the pain that the entire Creation has gone through since the beginning of time until today, you will begin to feel overwhelmed. The suffering in Creation until today is astronomical, too much for us to bear when we think deeply about it.

Why Is There So Much Suffering?

Most people are self-absorbed in their own troubles, so they don't think that much about how much the rest of the world is suffering. But if someone is able to come out of his self-absorption at least a bit and reflect a little about the situation of the world, he begins to see how much suffering is going on - and it feels overwhelming.

It is difficult for most people to feel very thankful to Hashem for what He gives to us. The Sages that there are four people who are required to give thanks to Hashem when they undergo a certain danger (such as traversing a desert or a sea).¹ But other than these unique situations, most people do not feel that much thanks to Hashem over what goes on in the world, and instead, most people are very bothered by all of the suffering that goes on in the world.

When a person never reflects about the suffering of the world, he is aware in his mind that people are suffering and that there are tragedies and difficulties, but he thinks to himself in the back of his

¹ *Berachos 54a*

mind, “I have no idea why, indeed, there is so much suffering on this world.” He leaves off with a question on this, just like when he leaves off with on the words of the *Rashba* and *R’ Akiva Eiger*...

In one day alone, so much suffering takes place. There are so many widows and orphans each day! There are people falling ill each day! There are people who go through so much pain each day! There are so many wars each day! In one day alone there is so much suffering in all of Creation! What is the inner root behind all of this? Why does this go on?

The Root

The root of it all is, because when Hashem first created the world, He created it with the *middas hadin*. The *middas hadin* remained as the main part of the design of Creation. The *middas harachamim*, which was introduced at a later point, was annexed onto the design, but the main factor was the *middas hadin*. Thus, there is mostly *middas hadin* in the world. Hashem saw that the world would not last if there would be just *middas hadin*.

We need to connect ourselves to the meaning of this concept. The less a person is involved in his own worries and the more he lives others – when he is mainly concerned with love for other Jews and with love towards Creation, which is reached with the more that one loves Hashem – the easier of a time he will have in *accepting* all of the pain and suffering that goes on in Creation.

Closer To The End Of The Circle

Creation is like a circle. The end of a circle meets the beginning of a circle, so whatever the beginning is like, that is what the end will look like. The closer we are coming to the times of *Mashiach*, the closer we are to the end of the circle. Thus, we are closer to how the beginning of Creation looked like, in which Hashem saw that the world cannot survive with just *middas hadin*.

So we have the power during these times, more than ever, to see how indeed, the world really cannot survive with just *middas hadin*. We can see it more clearly than ever in our own times.

In order to see it, though, we will need to remove the “blockage upon the heart” (*orlas halev*), the immature outlook (*katnus*) in which a person lives solely himself and doesn’t experience others; then our hearts will become opened to feel others.

We will then be able to feel a love for other Jews and for the entire Creation as well, and we will then be able to see how the world cannot really survive anymore with all of this *middas hadin*. And that will get us to really *daven* hard when we say these words of *Shemoneh Esrei*, יהמוּ נָא רַחֲמֶיךָ.

Leaving Self-Absorption\Immaturity

In order to feel others and come out of own self-absorption, we need to open both our **mind** and our **heart**.

If we don't open our mind and heart, then even if we *daven* these words of *Shemoneh Esrei* that Hashem should have mercy on Creation, it will just be a lip service, and our prayers won't be emanating from a truthful place; it will instead be turned into a personal request that Hashem should take away one's personal suffering.

We ask Hashem to have mercy **עלינו**, "on us", which implies on all of Creation, and not just for ourselves on a private level. So we have to make this prayer truthful, that we are indeed asking Hashem to have mercy on all of Creation.

When a person is self-absorbed, both his mind and heart are in a state of *katnus* (immaturity); he remains with a mind that is in *katnus* and a heart that is in *katnus*. It's possible that a person *davened* his entire life this part of *Shemoneh Esrei* and asked Hashem for mercy on Creation, yet he only thought of himself, yet he never once thought about others.

Thus, we need to remove our *orlas halev*, the "blockage of the heart", in order to feel others and *daven* for others.

Until now we have addressed one side of the coin in this: that a person needs to come out his *katnus* (immature outlook) and instead enter into *gadlus* (the mature outlook), in both his mind and heart. This will bring a person to love for other Jews and for all of Creation, to feel the pain of others.

After this part comes the next part of our *avodah*. After our mind and our heart has become opened to feel the pain of others, we must be able to see that indeed, the world really cannot survive with all of the *middas hadin* that is going on.

Softening Up After You've Been Hardened

Any person with a bit of sensitivity can feel that the suffering of this world is unbearable.

There are those who were born with a softer heart – and there are many people like this – who are very feeling people for others. They cannot bear the suffering and pain of other people, due to their sensitive nature. It can happen that a person with a very soft heart is so pained from all of the suffering he hears about that he can't bear it, so he will harden himself and train himself not to feel emotions for other people.

Just as Hashem hardened the heart of Pharaoh, so are there people who harden their hearts, when they find that they can't take the pain anymore that they hear about. A person might harden his emotions either towards himself or towards others, and become apathetic towards life.

These people do so because they have been suffering so much from feeling pain at what goes on in the world, and because they can't take the suffering anymore, as a defense mechanism they teach themselves how to detach from their own emotions. They become hardened, even though their real

nature is to be soft-hearted. They put up a thick wall inside themselves so that they don't have feelings anymore, so that this way they will be saved from feeling pain and suffering.

We must know how to go about this; there is a way to deal with this problem, and it was addressed by our Sages. The Sages said that there are three people whose life is not a life, and one of them is a sensitive person.² The meaning of this statement of our Sages is because people who are very sensitive are always suffering from their deep emotions which feel so many things.

Thus, the true way to experience life is to develop both our mind and our feelings, where our intellect and emotions are working along with each other, where we are not too rational and detached nor are we acting overly emotional.

If someone has a more emotional nature, he finds the suffering of this world to be unbearable when he thinks about it. Therefore, a person who has become emotionally hardened has a two-part *avodah*. One part of his *avodah* is that he needs to open up his heart again to feel his own emotions, to feel others, to feel other Jews, and to feel a love for Hashem. At the same time, he also needs to develop a strong mind that will be able to handle his powerful emotions and stabilize them.

Developing The Mind

The mind is developed mainly through exertion in learning Torah. Learning the Torah, with exertion, can keep both our mind and our heart in check with other, that our mind or our heart is not overpowering the other.

Does that mean that the purpose is to detach from our emotions and ignore our heart? Not at all. Rather, what we need to achieve is a connection between our mind and heart, so that our mind and heart are working together.

If someone is the type to let his heart run his life and he lets it overpower his mind, he will still have a hard time digesting this concept, but this is the outline of what he has to do. If someone doesn't use his mind that much and his heart is dominant in his life, of this the Sages refer to that such a person's life is not a life. A person whose emotions dominate his mind lives a life of constant pain and suffering - a life that does not feel like a life.

The Essence of The Heart – Sensing Reality

There is also a third part of the *avodah* here as well that needs to come after working through the first two stages mentioned above.

There is a place in the heart which is above the area of the emotions. Our emotions are not all there is to our heart; the emotions exist only on the outer layer of our heart. The essence of our

² See *Pesachim* 113a

heart, our heart itself, is not the emotions, although our heart is clearly the seat of our emotions. The inner essence of our heart is the ability to **recognize reality**. Our heart can sense the **reality of Hashem**. The inner essence of our heart is Hashem's Presence, for He resides deep in our heart; *"The rock of my heart and portion is G-d."*

This deep point is not so known to most people; it is hidden. We usually think of the heart as being our emotions, and nothing more than that. But if we merit to penetrate deep into our heart, we reveal in ourselves a whole new heart, which senses realities. *"A pure heart G-d created me with"* – the "pure heart" we can reach is not just to purify the heart, but it is to receive a new heart entirely.

So the way to feel true empathy towards Creation is a three-part *avodah* – we need to develop our **mind** (through learning Torah – each person as much as he can, according to his specific abilities), together with opening our **heart** towards our own feelings and to having feelings for others³, and finally, we need to use the inner point of our heart, which is to **sense Hashem's existence**.

This will particularly help a person who was born with a more emotional nature. It can also apply on a general level to all people, even to those who were not born with a very emotional nature, and open up a person to feeling others, as well as to feel the existence of Hashem. But it will mainly be of use to people who have a very emotional nature.

In Conclusion

One must come to feel others' joy and others' pain as his own, as the *Tanna D'vei Eliyahu* states. This ultimately awakens the *middas harachamim* of Hashem – towards ourselves, and towards all of the Jewish people and to the rest of Creation that is in so much need of it.

Translated from the Hebrew shiur: תפילה 0111 – רחמיך

³ To learn more about this, see *Getting To Know Your Feelings, Part 2, specifically Chapters 8-9*.