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# WEEKLY SHMUESS

## Vayechi Illness & Purfying the Body

DRASHA FROM THE  
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## *Vayechi (Shovavim) – Illness & Purifying The Body*

### *Illness – Physical Weakness And An Opportunity For Spiritual Greatness*

In *Parshas Vayechi*, the brothers informed Yosef, “Behold, your father is ill.”

The *Gemara* says that before Yaakov *Avinu*'s times, there was no such thing yet as *choli* (illness). *Tosafos*<sup>1</sup> asks that we do find that there were people who became ill who lived before Yaakov *Avinu*, and *Tosafos* differentiates between an illness that had never been around before with illnesses that were already known. But the first time that the Torah mentions illness is with regards to Yaakov *Avinu*.

The lower connotation of the word “*choli*”, illness, hints to *chullin* (mundane) and *chalal* (void), something incomplete and imperfect. But illness has also has a spiritual implication. *Chazal* say that the *Shechinah*<sup>2</sup> resides above the head of one who is bedridden from illness.

When a person is ill, there are two parts to the illness. One part of it is that it weakens the body. This is a “void” that happens to the body, which weakens it and doesn't allow it to perform as it should. The other part of illness, on the other hand, is that it brings the *Shechinah* with it, which hovers above the head of the one who is ill.

To understand it better, there is no person who doesn't go through illness, and the only issue is what kind of illness he will go through. There are all kinds of illnesses. No one goes through this world without becoming sick. Let us understand that if a person is always living with Hashem in every situation, and he always wonders of how he can serve Hashem in any situation, he reflects about illness and he wonders how he can serve Hashem when he is ill. There is a unique *Avodas Hashem* upon a person when he is ill, and this is what is meant by the words of the verse, “Behold, your father is ill.”

We will analyze the roots of this.

### *The Body and The Soul*

Man is comprised of a *neshamah* (soul) and a *guf* (body). The body conceals the soul. The body is from the earth, whereas the soul is the spirit of life breathed into the body from Hashem. The material and physical makeup of the body, which is formed from the element of earth, conceals the soul.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tosafos Bava Basra 16a*

<sup>2</sup> *Hashem's Presence*

The soul is more clearly revealed in a person's speech, for man is called "*nefesh chayah*" (a living soul), and *Targum Onkelos* translates this as "*ruach memalelah*", "a talking spirit". Man is called a *medaber*, a "social creature", due to his unique ability of speech, which is an expression of the soul. The soul is concealed by the body, but through speech, the soul is revealed outward. Speech is just for the means of speech, then, but a way to reveal the soul. The soul cannot come forth from any of the other parts of the body. The only place in the body where the soul can escape from is the mouth, through the power of speech.

Even more so, there is also the power of thought, where the light of the *neshamah* resides, as the *Nefesh HaChaim* writes. It remains inside the mind, though, and it does not come outward. But the Raavad writes that the brain is connected to the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Therefore, on a deeper level, the four senses of sight, hearing, smell, and speech are revelations of the soul, which is contained in the brain and which comes outward through the senses. That is the power contained in the light of the soul contained in the brain.

So the body conceals the soul, but the soul can be revealed through the holes of the face, which include the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. There are additional holes in the body, in the lower sections of the body, but those holes are connected with the sin of Adam, so they became damaged and they cannot be a means to reveal the soul. If not for the sin of Adam, those places in the body would also be places where the soul can be revealed outward from the body (this includes the ability of reproduction). But although this is all true in concept, the body conceals the soul from being revealed.

A person, ever since he is born, is naturally dominated by the body, and his soul is hidden, and this is how he grows up. He connects himself with pursuits of materialism, and this furthers the dominance of the body and conceals his soul even more. By contrast, the more a person has exertion in Torah and performance of mitzvos and he truly does the will of the Creator, his soul becomes more revealed. It is mainly revealed through his power of thought, which can extend to the eyes, ears, nose and mouth; and in his heart. The mind (which is connected to the senses) and heart are the main places where the soul is revealed.

### ***Illness And How It Affects One Who Lives A "Body" Existence***

When a person does not work to reveal his soul, and he is instead living a materialistic life, where he is not connected to the spiritual - or even if he tries to reveal his soul but he has only reached a very minimal revelation of it - what will happen to him when he becomes ill? His body weakens, and since it was his body that had been dominating him all along and his soul had not been accessed, he has nothing to hold onto. He had been living only through his body, and now his body is inactive, and his soul, which he had never revealed until now, is surely much harder to reach now, because he has no strength.

When a person is ill, even the little spirituality that he may have had until now will weaken. He is in bed all day and he can't learn Torah or do *mitzvos*. The Rambam says that a person is obligated to

learn Torah even if he is ill, but usually a person cannot concentrate on his learning while he is bedridden from illness. He might be able to learn superficially, but he won't be able to learn with depth. When a person is ill, his Torah learning suffers.

Illness causes a person to be distanced from whatever spiritual level had been on beforehand. With the more ill he becomes, the less spiritual work he can do. That is the usual scenario of what happens to most people when they are ill, which they are familiar with.

### ***The Higher Way To Experience Illness***

But there is a higher way to go through illness. *Chazal* say that “the *Shechinah* resides above the head of one who is bedridden from illness”. How indeed is there a revelation of *Shechinah* to one who is ill?

If a person has begun to reveal the light of his soul, and he exerts himself in Torah study and in the performance of *mitzvos* and in doing the will of Hashem, this enables the light of the soul to shine more and more upon the body, purifying his thoughts, eyes, ears, and speech. But the body still prevents the light of the soul from being shined completely. When the body is weakened [such as in a time of illness], on one hand, the person has the disadvantage of not being able to learn Torah and do *mitzvos* as much, for he is bedridden. But on the other hand, he has a unique *avodah* now. The body, which had been preventing the light of his soul from being revealed, has now been weakened - and now the soul can be more revealed. That is the meaning of how the *Shechinah* is above the head of an ill person.

If a person lives a totally “body” kind of existence and his soul is almost completely concealed from him, becoming ill will only be a further descent into the physical trappings of the body, as we explained. His soul hadn't been active before the illness, and now that he is ill, the body, which had been his central point, now becomes weak, and he has no spirituality to hold onto. This is also because even the revealed amount of spirituality in his life had only been minimal, and little spirituality that he did have until now will not be enough to keep him going as he is ill.

But if one merited, on his own level and to a certain degree, to penetrate into his soul, and to enable its light to be shined onto the body – illness will be an opportunity for him to get further past his body. Until now his body had been preventing him from totally accessing the soul, and now that the body is weakened through illness, the body cannot fight the soul as much, and the soul can then shine. The result will be, “The *Shechinah* is above the head of an ill person” – he will see more of a revelation of his soul.

As we mentioned before, it is very possible that the physical suffering of his body is preventing him from serving Hashem as he would like to, so it is very hard to actively serve Hashem when one is ill. But there can be more *d'veykus* (attachment) to Hashem that one can merit as he physically suffers through the illness. This seems like two contradictory forces taking place at once, but it can be understood as it has been explained here.

A person can reach a greater recognition of the Creator when he is ill. The clarity of the mind is weaker then, but the connection to the depths of Torah and to Hashem that he had until now will intensify, as he goes through the illness. His connection to Hashem and Torah that he has formed until now can become more clearly revealed - and this is the *Shechinah* that comes to the ill person. As we emphasized, this will only be true for one who has indeed begun to reveal the light of his soul, before the illness arrives.

This is a deep way to view illness: When one is ill, on one hand, he feels confined to his bed and that he cannot serve Hashem as much, but on the other hand, it is also an opportunity to reach higher spiritual levels, for the weakening of the body can enable the soul to shine more clearly, and this enables a person to discover companionship with Hashem.

### ***Aging***

Another point connected to the topic of illness is the topic of aging. Rabbeinu Yonah says that until the age of 35, a person is more energetic and aspiring, and after 35, a person is already at the other half of his life, which is heading closer to the time where he will leave the world. This is a very clear way to view life.

The older a person becomes, the weaker his body becomes (in most cases). How is old age supposed to look like?

*Chazal* say that “the older that the unlearned become, the more their *daas* (wise mind) is weakened, [whereas the older a Torah scholar becomes, the more refined his *daas* becomes”]. This is along the lines of what we have been explaining until now, with regards to illness. If a person did not reveal any of his soul yet, illness only makes his spiritual situation worse. When he gets older, his body weakens, so his main resource of strength is gone. It is like the statement, “What difference does it make to me if it is halfway killed or entirely killed?”<sup>3</sup> As he draws closer to the end of his life, he gets weaker, and even the spiritual idealism which he had when he was younger now becomes weaker, because it all had been performed from his body alone, which is now weak.

But if a person merited on his own level to reveal the light of his soul, the weakening of the body as he gets older will be an opportunity for him to enable the soul to get past the body.

As long as one has revealed the light of his soul to some extent, before old age arrives - and surely if he had been revealing it more and more - the period of old age will only serve to continue the revelation of the soul.<sup>4</sup> His physical energy will be less, and he won't be able to actively serve Hashem as much, but at the same time, with the more he is physically weakened, the more his *neshamah* will shine.

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<sup>3</sup> *Talmud Bavli: Bava Kamma 65a*

<sup>4</sup> See also *Tefillah #0108 – Balance In Your Avodas Hashem*

The simple reason for this is because he is continuing to exert himself in serving Hashem in spite of his physical limitations, but the deeper understanding of this is because Hashem designed it this way, that old age weakens the body and in turn reveals the soul more.

Had Adam never eaten from the *Eitz HaDaas*, he would have lived forever, and it would have been a different story; there would be no such thing as death and aging. But now that Adam did eat from the *Eitz HaDaas* and death was decreed upon man, not only is there death, but there is a slow process of death, which involves aging. Although death was a form of destruction that came to the world, where man's body returns to earth, it is also a form of rectification, because when a person becomes older and his body weakens, his soul is able to shine better.

This is the meaning of how “Torah scholars, as they age, their *daas* becomes refined.” Their *daas* doesn't just get better if they exert themselves in Torah and in *Avodas Hashem*; that is a separate matter. Their *daas* gets better because their body weakens, and then the light of the *neshamah* is more revealed.

The difference is most apparent at the time of death itself. A person who lived his life only through his body alone, without having accessed the light of his soul, will have nothing to hold onto at death. There is no more body, and his soul is out of reach. But when one ages like a Torah scholar, his soul becomes more and more revealed as he gets older and his body weakens. At death, the body will be gone, and he will be left with the soul in its fully revealed state: “The soul You have placed in me is pure.”

### ***Shovavim – A Time To Purify The Body***

We are now entering the days of *Shovavim*<sup>5</sup>, a time for a person to fix his personal deficiencies. To be brief about this topic, the *sefarim hakedoshim* prescribe different fasts, which atone for the sins that need to be rectified during the weeks of *Shovavim*. But in the later generations, and in our generation especially, most people do not have the physical energy to fast. The alternative in our times for fasting is Torah study, which can atone like fasting, for Torah study weakens the body.

This is the custom of many today: to replace fasting with Torah study, and especially to learn Torah with more concentration, as practiced in Kelm and in other places.

Based upon the discussion here, we can now have a little more of an understanding of this matter.

If a person is living entirely through his body, he would need to purify his body in order to weaken its hold upon him. When one is too attached to his body, and all that he lives and feels is his body, even if he exerts himself in Torah study and in mitzvos and he tries to do the will of Hashem, he is still living his life through his body, and he needs to go through a purification process, in order to weaken the body's hold upon him.

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<sup>5</sup> Editor's Note: “*Shovavim*” stands for the weeks spanning Parshas Shemos, Va'eira, Bo, Beshalach, Yisro, and Mishpatim (and in some years, it extends to Parshas Terumah and Tetzaveh).

**Obviously, one needs to go about it very sensibly, and he must receive individual guidance on how to go about purifying the body.** But one must come to a point in which the body does not have such a strong hold on him.

That is one part of the purification process that is needed. It is especially applicable to teenagers and adolescents, and also with even adults who are still heavily attached to their body's hold: the body's hold on them must become weakened, to a certain extent. How to do it exactly is a matter which a person needs individual guidance for, and each person must follow his own teachers for this. But the common denominator in all situations is that there must be some weakening of the body's hold.

In childhood, the body is dominant and the soul is almost completely hidden. As a person gets older, he connects more outward, and he becomes more attached with the materialism of This World, which further strengthens the body's hold upon him and makes it almost impossible to reach the soul. He might be a person who exerts himself in Torah study, he does the *mitzvos*, and he does the will of Hashem – and in spite of this, he is still attached to the hold of materialism, and it even continues to get stronger. This is because it is only natural for a person to want to connect more and more to materialism of This World, and when a person follows this natural orientation, that is what will happen.

For this reason, there is a need for us to purify the body, such as lessening our intake of food. There is the concept of “*Taanis HaRaavad*”, the fast prescribed by Rabbi Avraham ben David, in which one takes pauses as he eats, or, to leave over a little bit of food on his plate (which is a higher level). The point is that we need to weaken the body's hold somewhat, so that we are not being controlled completely by the urges of the body. That is the first step of our *avodah* of purifying our body, during *Shovavim*.

After that, when the body has become somewhat purified and the soul is beginning to become more revealed, comes the second step of our *avodah*: To try to access the soul more, while at the same making sure to weaken the body's hold even more than before. In order to reveal the light of the soul more, one needs to concentrate deeply on the words of the Gemara he is learning, along with weakening his attachment to his body and to the materialism of This World.

If a person has not purified his body at all, even if he learns Torah and he concentrates on his learning as everyone else does, he is still attached to materialism, and materialism will have a hold on him just as much as before. If he exerts himself in Torah learning in order to weaken the hold of materialism upon him, this will purify the body. But if he is just learning Torah habitually and he has no intentions of purifying his body through it, it will do almost nothing to purify him, and materialism will still have a hold on him, and his *neshamah* will not be able to come through.

At some point, any person, if he truly seeks Hashem, must be able to weaken the hold of his body from upon him, and as emphasized, it should be done sensibly and with individual guidance.

Once the body and the pull towards materialism is weakened, a person's *avodah* becomes deeper. The *avodah* then is to increase the light of the soul, through concentrating deeply on the words of

Torah one is learning, which awakens and reveals the light of the *neshamah*; at the same time, one must make sure to weaken the hold of physicality on him. Then a person's physicality will continue to weaken, and the light of the soul will continue to increase.

### ***Going About This Sensibly***

This is a very subtle path, which must be tread very carefully.

Weakening the body's physicality can imply two different things – one of which is commendable, and another connotation that is detrimental. Weakening one's connection to the body's physicality and to the materialism of This World is something we want to accomplish, but **weakening our physical energy itself is something that we must be careful to avoid**. Of this it is said, “Break the barrel and save its wine” – when we are “breaking” the body's hold, we must do so very carefully, so that we don't damage our physical health in the process, because then we cannot serve Hashem properly.

Unfortunately, many have failed in this area. On one side of the spectrum are those who have left the world having never purified their body, who have never revealed the light of the soul; and on the other extreme are those who have overcome their physicality, but in extreme ways, which weakened their physical health, and then they were depleted of physical energy and they couldn't serve Hashem properly after that.

Therefore, as we said, fasting and lessening our intake of food is a subtle path to tread. On one hand, one needs to lessen the hold of physicality upon him, but at the same time, one needs to make sure it is not extreme. We are not souls living in Gan Eden now. Our souls are currently inside a physical body which is on This World. We need exertion in Torah study with a healthy body, or else we cannot properly do the *mitzvos*; we won't be able to do *chessed*, and other *mitzvos*, with no physical energy.

So it is a very sensitive issue to know how much one needs to weaken his physicality. The basic outline of it is that we need to weaken our physicality to the extent that our connection to This World becomes lessened, while at the same being able to maintain our physical health and energy, so that our performance of *mitzvos* and spiritual growth isn't being damaged.

The more a person lives internally, the more he can derive *chiyus* (energy) from the holy Torah that he learns (for the Torah is called “*chochmah*” (wisdom), from the words “*koach mah*”, and “*koach*” is energy); and from the light of the *neshamah*, just as “the Aron lifted its carriers”. Many people tried to be like this [to get all of their energy from Torah and from the light of their *neshamah*], and they were not successful, but in any case, one must make sure that lessening his connection to physicality and to This World is not weakening his health, to the point that he does not have the strength to serve Hashem, *chas v'shalom*.



That is the common denominator for all people, no matter what level a person is on. As emphasized, each person needs to weaken his physicality on the level he is on, so it will apply differently with each person.

### ***How The Shechinah Can Be Revealed During Illness***

Now we can understand that which is said in this week's *parshah*, that the brothers informed Yosef, "Behold, your father is ill", from which *Chazal* learn that the *Shechinah* resides by the bedside of the ill. The *Shechinah* is with an ill person to the extent that he has traversed the path described here, especially the last point that we explained. If one has lived a life in which he has weakened his connection to the body and the pull towards materialism, as well as weakening the body's hold from upon him to a certain extent, he will live a life in which the weakening of his body will result in an increase of the light of the soul. When illness arrives, it will not make him descend into emptiness, but the opposite: "the *Shechinah* is above the head of the ill." The reality of Hashem's Presence will become more revealed to him, as well as the light of his *neshamah*.<sup>6</sup>

These words are subtle and they are about a sensitive matter, which needs to be carefully traversed. Many have erred when it comes to this matter, and there are those who have damaged themselves physically, *rachmana litzlan*, from improper guidance of how to weaken the body.

This is especially the case with teenagers and adolescents, who tried to weaken their body without using any common sense. (Often it was because their intentions were not pure, and therefore they didn't receive proper *siyata d'shmaya* (heavenly assistance) to succeed in it). In some cases, this resulted in becoming deathly ill, *rachmana litzlan*; either through losing all or most of their physical strength, or a loss of their mental abilities, or a loss of motivation. Whatever the result, it is always because there was a lack of understanding of how to properly weaken the body.

Exact guidance cannot be given here on how much one needs to weaken the body's physicality. Here we explained how it works, what the "*derech hayesharah*" (right path) is that a person needs to take, what the will from Creator really is from a person. Hashem doesn't want a person to weaken his body to the extent that he doesn't have the strength to serve the Creator.

This is the "*derech hayesharah*", the straight and sensible path, which enables one to weaken his physicality and at the same time reveal the light of the soul. When one breaks the hold of the body from upon him, he will age like a Torah scholar, whose *daas* mind increases with the older and physically weaker that he becomes.

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<sup>6</sup> The Rav has also spoken about illness in the following *derashos*:

*Derashos* #081 – *Chizuk For One With An Illness*;

*Search For Serenity* #009 – *Coping With Suffering*;

*Tefillah* #039 – *When We Get Sick*;

*Tefillah* #070 – *Hashem Is Our Doctor*