

UNEDITED INTERNET VERSION

[01.29.2018]

WEEKLY SHMUESS

YISRO

Self-Purification

Through Torah Study

**DRASHA FROM THE
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Yisro – Shovavim | Self-Purification Through Torah Study

The Mitzvah To Remember Standing At Har Sinai – An Ongoing Revelation

In *Parashas Yisro*, we learn about the giving of the Torah, which is one of the six constant *mitzvos* we have every day: “Remember the day in which you stood at Horeb.”

The Torah was given in front of all the people, and we have a power to remember it, to bring the past into the present and future. It was not just something that happened in the past, but something which has bearings on the present, of “It shall be to your eyes like new, each day, as if you have received it from Har Sinai.” There are other such expressions in *Chazal* which depict our power to remember the giving of the Torah, and this shows us that it is not just a remembrance of history, but a remembrance which awakens something in the present, in resemblance of the past.

“It Is Our Will To See The King” – Through The “Eyes of The Intellect”

Rashi says that when we stood at Har Sinai, they requested of Moshe, רצונו לראות את מלכינו “It is our will to see our King.” In other words, the inner core of the giving of the Torah, the spiritual light present then, was this desire of “Our will to see our King.” This was only possible at Har Sinai, but after that, we can no longer have this revelation of “Our will to see our King.”

However, our Sages teach explicitly that there is some continuation of this revelation.

The *Chovos HaLevovos* says that one has an obligation to recognize the Creator in various ways, and one these ways is יראהו בעין שכלו, “to see Him through the eyes of the intellect.” Every generation has a *mitzvah* to remember the event of standing at Sinai and to continue the revelation of “It is our desire to see our King” – through the ability of the “eyes of the intellect.”

We cannot see Hashem, because “No man can see me and live”, but in the depths of our *seichel* (higher intellect), we can “see” Hashem through these “eyes of the intellect”. What does it mean, though, to see Him through the eyes of the intellect?

Obviously, we have no comprehension of what this means. Most people cannot relate to it at all. People think of the *seichel* as the power to learn the Torah with in-depth analysis, and those who exert themselves in Torah study can know what this is, but to “see Him, through eyes of the intellect” is basically a complete secret, which is hidden from almost all people.

The Two Parts of our Seichel (Intellect)

There is a part of *seichel* which is in our brain, which is the human logic (*seichel enoshi*) that we are familiar with. Within the *seichel*, however, is the “light of the *neshamah* (Divine soul).” Rays of the *neshamah* are present inside the brain. When a person is only making use of the lower part of his *seichel*, the human logic, he is only able to understand things that

he can logically comprehend, and he can use that very same ability when learning Torah. But when a person exerts himself in Torah, he can reach the higher part of the *seichel* - the light of the *neshamah*, contained inside his *seichel*.

Exertion In Torah: Physical, Verbal and Mental

One part our exertion in learning Torah is to have **physical exertion** in learning. For example, *Chazal* say that Torah scholars lose sleep as they diligently learn Torah, and that one needs to “vomit the milk nursed from his mother” in order to acquire Torah. [In other words, one needs to get rid of his false notions in order to learn Torah, which puts him through some physical suffering in order to learn Torah.] *Chazal* also say that one must be like an ox carrying a load, or a donkey carrying a package, and to bear the yoke of Torah.

There is also another kind of exertion in Torah, which is “inner”. This is the **mental exertion** which one needs to go through, in order to learn Torah.

In between these two levels is **verbal exertion** – a person also needs to speak words of Torah constantly (“*And you shall speak in it*”), and to avoid idle chatter. He needs to sharpen the words of Torah in his mouth by making sure that he knows what he’s learning, so that if he is asked a question, he will be able to respond clearly. For this reason, one needs to review his learning (“*And you shall review it*”).

The higher part of exertion in learning Torah - the mental exertion - uses the **brain**.

It also includes the **heart**. The main part of mental exertion in learning Torah, however, is with our brain.

The first step we need when we begin exerting ourselves in learning Torah, is to exert the physical body. The second step is exertion in speech; to constantly speak of Torah.

But the main part of exertion in Torah is to exert the brain, to always think about words of Torah. When mentally exerting ourselves over Torah, we must be able to think about Torah wherever we go, except if we are in a place that has a foul odor, and other places where it is forbidden to think about Torah. But even more than getting used to thinking words of Torah, one needs to exert his mind over Torah by remaining focused in his thoughts and by concentrating deeply with his mind. This uses the mind’s analytical abilities as well as other abilities of the mind, which a person needs in order exert oneself in his Torah learning.

The verbal part of the exertion in Torah, however, does not reveal that much intellectual depth. It is rather a way to attach one’s emotions, by connecting himself to the words of Torah he is learning, via the means of speech. However, verbal exertion (speaking words of Torah) is still counted as a part of exertion in Torah learning. **The main exertion in Torah lies in exerting the mind**, where a person needs to train his mind to become more concentrated on his Torah studies, and to learn how to subjugate his mind to exertion in Torah.

If a person is only exerting himself in Torah physically, his mind doesn’t become

purified. If he loses sleep, or learning even when he's tired, or if he is only having verbal exertion in learning, by making sure to always speak about Torah with others, as long as he hasn't yet exerted his mind over it, his mind has still not been purified. He will still get a *mitzvah* for learning Torah, and he is certainly considered to be exerting himself over Torah, but his mind will not yet get purified. Only when a person is thinking into the depth of the words of Torah he is learning, and subjugates all of his mental abilities to think about Torah, both in quantity and in quality – and it is mainly about the **quality** – only then, is the mind purified through Torah study.

When one has purified his thoughts through mental exertion in his Torah learning, this purifies his entire *seichel*/intellect. He elevates the lower level of the intellect which is called the *seichel enoshi* (human logic) which he was born with, the more his *seichel enoshi* is purified. As the Chazon Ish writes, at first when a person begins to learn Torah, there is only exertion, and there is not yet pleasure. But after a person continues to exert himself in Torah, “a new gate becomes opened to him, where the intellect can revel in an endless bliss.”

The opening of that “new gate” which the Chazon Ish describes is essentially when the lower intellect of the person has become purified, through exerting his mind over Torah (besides for the physical and verbal exertion in Torah, which a person also needs to start with, as we explained above). As a person gets used to exerting his thoughts over his Torah learning, slowly with time, his mind becomes purified. He has to use **all** of his

mental energies in order to have the “new gate” opened to him, whereupon his intellect will receive endless bliss when he thinks about Torah – he must make sure that he is using his mind to its full extent.

Shovavim – A Time To Purify The Mind, Through Torah Learning

The days which we are in now, the period of “*Shovavim*”, lasts for 42 days, and it is pointed out in our *sefarim hakedoshim* that “42” is equal in *gematria* to the word **בם**, alluding to the *mitzvah* of **בם ודברת**, “*And you shall speak in it*”, which shows us that *Shovavim* is a particular time to strengthen ourselves in speaking words of Torah.

In Kelm, however, they did not stress “speech” in Torah during *Shovavim*, but instead focused on improving the area of “thought” in Torah. The reason for this is because the sins which we are trying to rectify during *Shovavim* are related to the brain, for all lustful desires begin in the brain and then emanate to the rest of the body. Therefore, the main area that needs to be rectified during *Shovavim* is the brain, which we accomplish through learning how to concentrate thoughtfully in Torah study, which in turn stimulates the brain.

Training the mind to concentrate on one Torah thought alone, is difficult work. It takes a lot of mental exertion. At first one needs to train himself to get used to it in small amounts; he can try concentrating on a Torah thought for 20 seconds, and then he should slowly try to increase his amount of concentration. He should do it slowly and patiently, and not try to jump levels too fast.

He just needs to train his mind to concentrating on one thing alone.

The sins related to *Bris Kodesh* cause a person's thoughts to become trapped in the liquid of the brain, which scattered in the rest of the body. The rectification is to learn how to concentrate, which builds the power of thought in one's brain, and this returns each thought to its root, so that the thoughts are no longer scattered. We have explained here that in order to achieve this rectification, **one** needs to first train his mind to concentrate on just one Torah thought, and then to slowly increase the amount of the concentration, with time.

Concentration of the Mind and Concentration of the Heart

Usually people experience difficulty concentrating on one thought. People have a hard time concentrating as they are exerting themselves in Torah study, but they mainly experience concentration problems during *davening*, where their thoughts are floating around, like birds in the sky who can fly to any of the four directions.

Even when people do succeed in remaining focused while they are *davening*, most of the time it is not because they have learned the art of focusing their thoughts, but because their **heart** wants something very badly which they are *davening* for, and when the heart is very passionate about something, it can cause the brain to concentrate. When a person is *davening* with passion, when he is pouring out his heart before Hashem he is really using his

ratzon (will). The *ratzon* of a person can get the mind to concentrate on whatever he wants. This comes from the heart's desire, and it is not stemming from mental concentration.

When a person is exerting itself in learning Torah, his mental concentration is surely improved with more passion and *ratzon* to learn Torah. Just as a person can get his brain to concentrate while he is *davening*, because his heart desires something badly, so can a person mentally concentrate on what he's learning when he has a passion and a love for learning Torah. The *ratzon* of a person to learn Torah, in order to fulfill Hashem's will that he learn Torah, can cause a person to have more mental concentration on his learning. However, as we are explaining, this is a different kind of concentration; it does not stem from the brain/mind, but from the heart.

The main way to build concentration in one's Torah learning is not just through having a passion and a will to learn Torah, but from training the mind to concentrate on a Torah thought. Slowly as a person gets used to thinking into one Torah thought at a time, with time, his power of thought becomes developed.

In different terms, the **external** part of building the power of thought is to get used to concentrating on one Torah thought, and the **inner** part of the building the power of thought is to have a will, a passion, and a love for learning Torah. The inner part, of attaining mental concentration via a passionate will, is attained through a passionate *davening*, along with a passion in one's Torah learning.

When a person trains his mind to think and reflect into a Torah thought, by

examining all of its angles of understanding and to all of the possible outcomes that result from this understanding, then slowly the mind is built, via the mental concentration in Torah.

The more a person improves his mental concentration, the more he builds his mind, and the power of thought contained in it. One needs to train his mind to think and concentrate into one thing alone, **patiently** but also **firmly**. This will feel like a contradiction; how do you do it slowly and patiently, but also firmly, at the same time? In spite of this contradiction, herein lays the key to success.

In Summary

As we explained until now, building the power of thought includes two parts. One part of it is through having a passionate heart, which activates the *ratzon*/will; and the other part of it is to train the mind to think and concentrate about one Torah thought, and this includes trying to uncover all angles of understanding in a certain Torah thought.

Attaining A “Yearning Intellect”

When a person gets used to deeply analyzing a Torah thought and he’s trying to uncover all of the possible angles of understanding in it, he causes the intellect itself to yearn for more Torah knowledge.

Both the heart and the intellect can have a yearning. We are familiar with the yearnings of the heart – these can include both the materialistic desires for This World, and on a

spiritual level, the yearnings that a person has when he is *davening*. But our intellect can also yearn; the Ramchal in *Derech Hashem* calls it “*seichel hamishtokek*”, “an intellect that longs”. The more a person is utilizing his intellect for Torah, his intellect will yearn for more and more wisdom of the Torah. Herein lays the deep connection that one can form with his Torah learning.

Connecting To The Torah Through Utilizing Both The Mind and The Heart

A person forms a connection to Torah in two different ways – through the heart, and through the mind.

The heart becomes attached to Torah when one has a passion, will, and a love for learning Torah; this can be worked upon through the area of *davening*, and through other areas as well, which awaken the spiritual yearnings of the heart.

The mind becomes attached to Torah when one trains his thoughts to think and concentrate about a certain Torah thought, and as a person perseveres with this, the mind slowly becomes attached to the words of Torah he is learning. As we mentioned, one also needs to analyze deeply what he is learning, trying to cover different angles of understanding in it, seeing it in general terms and in detailed terms, exhausting the topic as much as he can.

As we have been emphasizing here, the main exertion in learning Torah is when we utilize the potential of our intellect, by exerting our minds in it. Some people were born with very gifted mental abilities, so it comes naturally to them; but even if someone

was not born with particularly gifted mental abilities, after exerting his mind in Torah, he utilizes the potential of his intellect, and he reveals the “yearning intellect”.

The Ramchal calls it the “*seichel hamishtokek*” (the “yearning intellect”), but the Vilna Gaon calls it “*cheifetz hasichli*”, “desire of the intellect.” When a person reveals this *cheifetz hasichli* [or *seichel hamishtokek*], his mind becomes connected to Torah, in its yearning and longing for more and more of its wisdom. Then the words of Torah he is learning become connected with his own intellect, and they become unified into one piece; his intellect then harmonizes with the Torah’s thinking.

The True Meaning of A Torah Scholar

This is the true meaning of a Torah scholar, whose thoughts become Torah thoughts. His mind is always thinking about Torah, his mind becomes more purified and subtle and refined as he continues like this, and his own soul becomes purified along with this. The mind becomes refined and it harmonizes with the words of Torah he learns, when he traverses all the steps that we explained until now [which included physical exertion in learning, verbal exertion in learning, focused concentration on a Torah thought, passion for learning, and analyzing all the possible angles of understanding in a Torah thought].

This integration of the mind with the Torah causes the *seichel enoshi*, the human logic, which is the lower part of the *seichel*/intellect, to become aligned with the Torah’s holy wisdom. His own logical thinking patterns will become subservient to

the Torah’s thinking. That is why a true Torah scholar attains the level that is called “*Daas Torah*”, for his very *daas* (mind) has become integrated and aligned with the Torah’s thinking -his mind thinks like the Torah.

When one reaches that level, his thoughts will always be found in Torah, but he won’t even have to exert his thoughts anymore in order to do this. Instead, his thoughts are always thinking about Torah because his very mind has harmonized with the Torah. Of course, there is always more exertion needed in order to acquire Torah. A person will always need to deepen his understanding about whatever he is learning in the Torah, and to connect his thoughts even further to the Torah, and to exhaust all of his mental abilities, in his exertion over Torah study.

The Sensible Way To Go About The Process of Exertion In Torah

However, one needs to go about this entire process very sensibly. One cannot begin with the final state, which is to exhaust all of your mental abilities in Torah. It is dangerous to do so, and it may harm the brain, because a person will be straining it too much when he tries to jump levels.

There have been people who tried to heavily strain their minds in Torah, and they harmed themselves in the process; they can’t think normally afterwards. They can’t even think about Torah all the time. This is because they tried to skip all of the previous

levels of exertion that we explained until now, and they attempted to jump to the final level. “Many did like Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, but were not successful.” Not only won’t a person succeed if he tries to some of the levels here, but he will damage his mind, *chas v’shalom*.

But if a person goes about this process sensibly, along with *davening* from an earnest and pure heart to reach all of these levels, and he works his upwards through the levels here that we have laid out [beginning from the more basic levels of exertion, to the deeper levels of exertion], he will eventually reach the level in which his mind is naturally thinking about Torah. Only after his mind is naturally thinking about Torah, should he attempt to exhaust all of his mental abilities in Torah. Then the “new gate” will be opened to him, where “his intellect will revel in endless bliss.”

In order to reach that revelation, one needs to go through a certain process that refines the mind, and at the final step, one needs to have traversed the level in which he is exhausting all of his mental energies over Torah. However, as we have emphasized here, a person needs to first reveal the *cheifetz hasichli* (or the *seichel hamishtokek*), the level in which mind is yearning for more and more Torah wisdom.

If a person has not yet revealed the *cheifetz hasichli*, and he tries to exhaust all his mental abilities over Torah, he is essentially forcing his mind to attain a level that is above his current level, because he doesn’t have the mental capacity at that point to think so heavily. It will go against his nature and it will strain him too much.

But when he has revealed a yearning for more Torah – both through a *ratzon* for

Torah, through the *cheifetz hasichli/seichel hamishtokek* – he will then be able to go against his nature, because he is then having *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice) over Torah. He is completely devoting his mind to the Torah which his intellect is yearning for, and he is giving all of his thinking towards exertion in Torah. Only then does he have an *avodah* to exhaust all of his mental abilities over Torah, because then he will be at the appropriate level of doing so.

This is the depth of the *tikkun* (rectification) that lies in the days of *Shovavim*. As mentioned briefly in the beginning, the main *tikkun* accomplished in these days of *Shovavim* is to build the power of thought.

Attaining Recognition of The Creator Through “Eyes of The Intellect”

Based upon the above, we can now understand the following.

We began with a question: When the Jewish people stood at Har Sinai, they requested “It is our desire to see our King.” This was not only a level for Har Sinai, for the *Chovos HaLevovos* says that every generation has an *avodah* to remember standing at Har Sinai, where we had this desire to see our King: we can attain it through “eyes of the intellect”. We asked: what does it mean to “see” Hashem through the “eyes of the intellect”?

When people don’t understand these words of the *Chovos HaLevovos*, they interpret “eyes of the intellect” to mean reflecting into the Creator’s ways, of the kindnesses He does for His creations. Although this is true, that is

not what the *Chovos HaLevovos* is implying with “eyes of the intellect.”

The *Chovos HaLevovos* means that in order to “recognize the Creator”, one needs to penetrate into his intellect, and then he will be able to recognize Hashem, “in the hidden depths of the heart.” When the heart becomes opened, a person then discovers Hashem’s Presence which resides in the heart of each Jew.

There are different ways to reach “recognition of the Creator”. One way is through reaching the depth of the heart. When a person merits “*A good heart G-d had created me with, and a proper spirit He has renewed within me*”, he merits an opened heart, a revelation of the depths of the heart, and there he will find the Creator, Who dwells in the heart of each Jew. But there is also another way to attain “recognition of the Creator”, and this is the “eyes of the intellect”.

There are well-known words of the Rambam, in the final three chapters of *Moreh Nevuchim*¹, describes *d'veykus* (attachment) to Hashem, through using the power of thought in the mind. But what kind of thought and intellect is the Rambam describing? The Rambam isn't talking about a person who has an undeveloped mind, who will think about words of Torah and about Hashem in the same way that he thinks of mundane things. The Rambam is talking about a person who has traversed all of the steps described until now, where a person has learned how to utilize the potential of his intellect, to the point that his mind has harmonized with the Torah's thinking; and he is also giving his entire minds towards the Torah and

exhausting all of his mental energies over Torah. Only then does a new gate become opened to a person, where the intellect revels in endless bliss, and his lower intellect (human logic) becomes refined and purified; his mind then harmonizes with the Torah, and the light of the *neshamah* begins to illuminate his brain. That is the “eyes of the intellect”.

Thus, “recognition of the Creator” is not only attained through reaching the deep feelings contained in the heart. It also requires “eyes of the intellect” - which was the level of standing at Har Sinai.

In Conclusion

To conclude and summarize these words, we must first know that each and every one of us, each Jewish soul, stood at Har Sinai, where we had a “desire to see our King”. Ever since then, this desire has become ingrained deep in our souls, where it is hidden. To reach this place in our soul is a long, arduous task. But we must aspire to get there, throughout our life. “*The end of the actions, is first with thought*” – we must know to where we are directing our lives towards.

To where we must we want to direct our life towards? To recognize the Creator, from deep in our heart, where His Presence dwells. This means to have a simple and palpable sense that the Creator is in front of you, for His Presence fills all of reality.

And along with this, we also need to direct our life towards reaching a purification of the mind, to purify our thoughts through the light of the Torah, by exerting our minds in Torah, as we have explained about at length here. Through exertion in Torah, the mind

¹ *Moreh Nevuchim* 51, 52, 53

becomes subservient to the Torah's thinking, and this purifies the mind; it enables the light of the *neshamah* contained in the brain to be shined upon the mind and purify it. This is the meaning of how "It is our desire to see Our King", and how this revelation is attained through the "eyes of the intellect."

You might think that this is too high of a level to reach, and for this reason, the process has been laid out here very carefully, beginning from the lower levels and slowly towards the higher levels, to help you get to the innermost level, slowly and sensibly. Each person on his own level can reach some of these levels, and if someone reaches all of them, this is wonderful and praiseworthy. But even if a person cannot reach all of the levels described here, he is not exempt from trying to reach any of these levels at all. One must aspire and know to where he needs to get to, and work his way upwards, as presented here.

In summary, one needs to begin by awakening a yearning in his heart for Torah. Then he should put his mind to work over

Torah, first on a superficial level by getting used to concentrating on one Torah thought at a time, and then on an inner level by deepening his understanding of each Torah thought, trying to cover all its angles, and slowly as a person gets used to this, he utilizes the potential of his intellect, and his mind begins to harmonize with the Torah's thinking; finally, after that, a person needs to exhaust all his mental abilities over his Torah learning and give all of his thoughts to it. Then he reaches the depth of the reality of life.

As long as a person stood at Har Sinai, his soul yearns for all of this. It is ingrained in him, it lies deep within him to do it, and of this it can be said, "*Remember the day where you stood before Hashem your G-d, in Horeb*" – "remember" the depths of that revelation which each Jew had then – specifically, the revelation of the Presence of the Creator: "It is our desire to see Our King."