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WEEKLY SHMUESS

Parshas Chukas

On the
Outside & Inside

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Purity – On The Outside & Inside

Tum'ah (Spiritual Defilement) – When The Holiness Becomes Hidden

Parashas Chukas begins with the laws of *parah adamah* (the red heifer), which is part of the Torah's ritual purification process to those who become contaminated from a corpse (*tumas meis*).

Ritual defilement, *tum'ah*, is from the word “*tamun*”, “hidden”, because it hides and conceals the true holiness in something. When a person becomes *tamei* (defiled), his inner holiness goes into “hiding”, and he is in an impure state, until he purifies himself, depending on what the purification process (*taharah*) entailed.

Tum'ah (ritual impurity) is also from the word “*timtum*”, “blockage”, because it blocks, conceals, and covers over the holiness, placing it into a state of concealment (*he'elam*).

External Defilement

There are many levels to *tum'ah*.

Tum'ah descends upon the physical body, and the Rambam says that the concept of immersing in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) after becoming *tamei* is “to immerse in the waters of *daas* (understanding)”.¹

The source of *tum'ah* originates from the *Eitz HaDaas Tov V'Ra* (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), from the evil aspect that was contained in the *Eitz HaDaas*,

whereas *taharah* (ritual purity) comes from the “good” aspect in the *Eitz HaDaas*. Thus, returning to *taharah* after becoming *tamei* is a return to the “good”, rectified aspect that was contained in the *Eitz HaDaas*.

External and Internal Impurity

There is external impurity, and in turn, there is external purity that can remove it. External impurity comes upon the physical body, and the physical action which removes this impurity is to immerse in the *mikveh*.

But there is also impurity that descends upon the soul. An example of this is “blockage of the heart” (*timtum halev*), which comes mainly through consuming forbidden foods. Such impurity affects the person on the inside, causing his inside to become impure.

Chazal state that the evil inclination is called by seven names, and one of its names is “*tamei*” (“impure”).² This refers to an impurity that affects a person on the inside. The evil inclination resides in man, in the “left chamber of the heart”, and this is not an external state of impurity on the outside of the person, but an impurity that resides within and which affects him on the inside.

Inner impurity affects a person not only in the physical sense (for which he must immerse in a *mikveh*, in order to remove), but also in his heart and mind. When impurity contaminates the heart, it is called *timtum*

¹ Rambam Hilchos Mikvaos 11:12

² Sukkah 52a

halev (blockage of the heart), which we mentioned earlier; and when impurity affects the mind, it manifests as thoughts that are closed, blocked, and unclear (“*stumin v’chatumin*” – “closed and sealed”), and the person can’t think correctly.

Thus, inner impurity affects both the mind and the heart.

Impurity In The Heart – An Indifference To The Spiritual

When the heart has become impure - for example, if a person ate non-kosher food, which causes “blockage of the heart” - the heart’s feelings will become blocked, and he will become insensitive to the spiritual. His feelings will become “hidden” deep in him, and he will lack emotion or have indifference towards that which he should feel emotion towards.

“A dead person cannot feel” – the impurity of a corpse can be in the heart as well, which causes the heart not to feel holiness. “The wicked in their lifetime are called dead” – a person can be dead even while alive: when his heart has become blocked from feeling holiness, and he is insensitive to the spiritual. In order to undo the blockage of the heart, a person will need to purify the heart.

Purifying The Heart: Through Prayer, and Through Finding Your Holiness

Generally speaking, in order to purify the heart, there is a prayer: וטהר לבנו לעבדך באמת, “*And purify our hearts to serve You in truth*”.

This is a prayer, and in general, “prayer accomplishes half the task.”³ What is the other half we will need to do, in our personal *avodah*, in order to merit purity of heart? The *avodah* is as follows.

Whenever any person sins, even he has committed all of the worst sins in the world, such as Eliezer ben Dordaya did⁴ – he will feel like he is indifferent to holiness, as a result of sinning. Still, he will not become completely indifferent. The impurity can’t ruin the heart totally. His feelings will be blocked, but he will still be able to feel some small crack in his feelings, which can be open to the spiritual. That little crack is always there, and one can always feel it, no matter how blocked his feelings have become from sin.

“A Jew, even when he sins, is still a Jew.”⁵ Even the worst sinners in the Jewish people, when faced with the test of giving up their lives for Hashem, were willing to sacrifice their lives for Him. So there is never such a thing as total *timtum halev*, even when the *timtum halev* is very dominant. There is always a small crack of holiness that can shine through. This is true even if he committed every sin in the world!⁶

Thus, by way of *avodah*, every person will have times where his feelings towards holiness are closed, as well as times where his feelings towards holiness are opened. This is not felt in the same amount by each person, as it is a matter that depends on the particular spiritual level of each person. But in any case, the

3 *Vayikra Rabbah parshas Tzav 10:5*

4 *Avodah Zarah 17a*

5 *Sanhedrin 44a*

6 *Editor’s Note: This concept is mentioned in the works of Rebbi Nachman of BreslEv, as well as in sefer Nesivos Shalom (Slonim) and many other holy sefarim.*

avodah of a person is to feel some small feeling of holiness that he does have.

One can try this with a particular aspect of holiness that he strongly identifies with the most, and concentrate his thoughts on that area. From reflecting deeply into it, along with prayer to Hashem to be guided to the truth, a person can succeed in feeling the small opening to holiness that is always with him.

When a person becomes aware of the strongest feeling for holiness he identifies with, which is already opened to him and which is always with him, he has the key towards feelings for holiness.

It is written, “*Open for Me an opening, the size of a needle, and I will open for you an opening the size of an entranceway.*”⁷ The simple understanding of this concept is that there is previously no opening at all, and a person has to make the opening, and then Hashem comes and assists the person. But the deeper, truer understanding of this is that there is already a small opening that is there, and a person’s *avodah* is to just to open it a little bit more – “the size of a needle”, just as a needle makes a rip in a cloth. After there is that small opening, a person through it can work harder on himself and further connect himself to the opening towards holiness.

Every Jew already has this small opening – not only the opening the size of a needle, but an opening that comes before that, a tiny, hidden opening that can be subtly felt. It is always some small feeling towards something that is holy, and through it, a person can further connect to the holiness and make the opening bigger. Every *neshamah* that is a

member of *Yisrael* has one point – *at least* one point – that contains a small opening towards holiness.

If a person is trying to work on himself and to improve, with the attitude that he doesn’t have this small opening, and that he needs to “create” this space in himself, then his *avodah* will be most difficult. It is very hard to improve when you can’t sense any sensitivity to holiness already present in yourself. You need that small opening in yourself in order to work on yourself, so you must discover it in you.

The Proper Attitude Towards Self-Improvement and Spiritual Growth

So far, we have described one side of the coin [finding the small opening in yourself]. Now we will discuss the other side of the coin [how to improve].

Whenever a person learns the words of *Chazal* which describe the qualities of good character or higher spiritual levels, usually, a person views these matters as outside of himself, and not as something that is already present in him. He views self-improvement and acquiring higher levels as matters that are outside of him and which need to be drawn onto himself so that they can become a part of him.

However, this is an unsuccessful approach. With such a perspective, a person usually will not acquire the matters he is learning about. He doesn’t consider these levels as part of him, but something ‘outside’ of him which he needs to draw into him.

There is another attitude entirely to have, when learning the words of *Chazal* about any

⁷ *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:2

of the qualities and levels we want to acquire. A person can focus on finding how the quality in question already exists in him, on some level. When you focus on whatever level you already *do* have – even if it is only small some percentage of what it should be – you are then focused on whatever personal portion you have already acquired in your *ruchniyus* (spirituality), and from there onward, you can succeed further.

For example, when a person begins to learn *Mesillas Yesharim*, he sees that the first level is *zehirus* (watchfulness). He might become discouraged, thinking that he can't even acquire this first, basic level of self-improvement, and if he tries to work very hard on himself at acquiring this level, it will be too difficult for him. Instead, he needs to see how he already has some level of *zehirus*, and to discover the areas in his life where his *zehirus* is more revealed. He needs to find the small “opening” that is already there, and then expand upon the opening.

Removing Blockage of The Mind (When Learning Gemara)

So far, we have explained how to attain purification of the **heart**, after it has become defiled. But we mentioned earlier that there is also defilement that can come to the **mind**, so let us explain how the **mind** can be purified.

The Rambam says that immersing in a *mikveh* is called immersing in the “waters of *daas*” (understanding). A person's *daas* may be pure, or it may be defiled. When a person's *daas* is defiled, a person's thinking abilities become closed up and blocked, or he won't be able to think correctly. In turn, purifying the *daas* is when there is *seichel hayashar* (straight

intellect) and a person can think clearly, purely, and logically.

The way to purify the *da'as* is as follows (understandably, there are many different approaches to Torah learning, and not every way is the same. But as a general course of action, this is the approach to take).

You can have a person who learns Torah, who enjoys looking for good questions; and then he searches for answers to his questions. Understandably, this shows that he has an interest in learning Torah and a desire to know, and it sharpens his mind. However, this alone does not build a person's Torah learning. In order for a person to build his Torah learning, he needs to find the “small opening” already existent in him, just as in the case of acquiring higher spiritual levels and feelings.

When a person has a difficulty when learning the *Gemara*, he shouldn't just think about the question. He should go back and review each step of the *Gemara* until now, and come to a point where he knows what he understands, and he knows what he doesn't understand. He must know: “What did I understand so far, until now? And what do I still not understand, at this point?”

Then, after doing so, he should connect himself to the points of understanding in the *Gemara* that are already clear to him. He must find the “opening” – a point in which he *does* understand a certain part of the *sugya*. Then he can go from there, further developing his understanding.

Sometimes, when a person tries to build upon what he already understands, his mind becomes blocked and he loses whatever he understood until now. But if you connected

yourself to the point that you did understand, it opens the way for further understanding.

The parts that are beyond me, which I don't yet understand, are called the *timtum* (blockage) in the *daas*, of the mind. In the case of difficulties while learning the *sugya* of the *Gemara*, the parts of the *sugya* which I don't understand are the areas where the *da'as* is "defiled" and hence the thinking will be clouded when it comes to those points. [It was mentioned before that a person must become aware of what he understands and what he doesn't understand]. But many times, when you focus on the points of the *sugya* that you do understand, this "opening" leads you to further your understanding of the *sugya*, and then even the difficult points become understandable to you.

This is a great, deep attitude towards all of life. In whatever matter a person is trying to acquire, a person needs to find how there is some small level of it already existent in him. If a person wants to improve in his *ruchniyus* (spiritual level), Torah learning, *davening*, *chessed*, he needs to first see how there is already a point of *chessed* existent within him, rather than viewing these things as matters that are completely "outside" of him. This is the meaning of "Torah scholars are called builders."⁸

These things are not merely "*maalos*" (qualities) to learn about, or "very big, important matters", or levels that bring you to reward in the World To Come. All of that is true, but that should not be the focus. The focus should be that all of these things are already existent in you to some level.

That is true not only in regards to developing feelings for holiness, but it is also true with regards to learning Torah, where we must also begin with a small, simple opening, and then to build upon it, step-by-step. You will still need to exert yourself in your learning, of course, but the gain will be that it will be built upon what is already existent in you.

So, in summary, the rule is that in whatever quality\level\matter\point you are trying to acquire, you first need to see how it's already existent in you to some level – you need to find the small "opening".

External Purity (Mikveh) – A Means To Awaken The Inner Purity of The Neshamah

Living in this way enables one to leave *tum'ah* (defilement) and enter into *taharah* (purity), where one's *avodah* will be from within himself, and it will be well-developed and structured.

This way of serving Hashem, the "inner light", is the meaning of "*My G-d, the soul You gave me is pure*", which can penetrate past all the defilement that comes from the outside. We can receive external purification from immersing in the *mikveh* as well, but that is a light that comes from the outside, which we should then use to awaken the inner purity, of "*My G-d, the soul You gave to me is pure.*" How exactly do we awaken the inner purity? We elaborated upon it here at length.

Understandably, if a person has become defiled, he needs to immerse in the *mikveh*, but he should not remain with this external level of purity. Rather, one needs to awaken the inner purity of the *neshamah*. This purity

8 *Berachos 64a*

exists in every Jew, and all a person needs to do is to open it further, and then, slowly but surely, it will become revealed. On a more specific level, it has been explained here that each person can feel some small feeling for holiness in at least one area in his life, as well as some point of understanding in his Torah learning. The depth of it is to awaken the pure *neshamah*, and then the inner purity will slowly extend to his outside as well.

When we combine together the purity we can attain from the external [immersing in the *mikveh*], along with the depth of the purity which stems from the inside and which penetrates into the outside, this is like the holy *Aron* which was pure both on the outside and inside. Such a soul will cling to purity, both in the external sense and in the inner sense.

In Conclusion

This is the meaning of “Torah scholars are called builders.” The Torah scholars build the world, and the perfection of man, step after step, activating the potential of the soul, from within. Through this, a person merits “*A pure heart G-d created me with.*”