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Fire-of-Fire: Total Destruction

With *siyata d'shmaya*, in this lesson we will conclude the discussion on the element of earth and the trait of sadness. The last kind of sadness we will learn about is **fire-of-fire-of-earth**.

(Understandably, there is always a lot more to say about these matters, as is the way of Torah, which contains wisdom that is "longer than the land, and wider than the sea". In spite of this, we will try to cover as much as we can, with the help of Hashem.)

One of the aspects of the element of fire is that will destroy anything it comes into contact with. In some cases, a fire cannot overpower another element, such as if the water is stronger than fire, where the water will extinguish the fire. But generally, fire will destroy and overpower anything it touches.

In addition, not only does fire destroy, but it will also turn the object of its destruction into another fire, adding on to the size of the original fire. This is in contrast with the other elements. For example, if water causes destruction to something, it doesn't turn it into water. When wind breaks something, it doesn't turn it into wind. Earth can scatter something, but it cannot turn something into earth. Fire is the only element which can turn anything it touches into its own element, fire.

This particular aspect is **"fire"-of-fire**: when fire destroys something and turns it into another fire. That is the outline, and we will analyze the details of this concept and explain it, with *siyata d'shmaya*.

Fire - The Only Element Which Destroys, Nullifies, and Disappears

Every creation on this world has its *havayah*, its existence, which has been created anew from Hashem. Our Sages also revealed a rule that everything in Creation will always returns to its original element. On a more cosmic level, the earth was first created from nothing and it will eventually return to its original *havayah*, its original state of nothingness, after the current 6,000 year era^[1] [1]. In addition to the fact that each existing creation is created anew from Hashem, everything in Creation is also temporary, as it will eventually become nullified at the end of the year 6,000. This particular aspect of Creation - the fact that everything is a new *havayah*, and that it is all temporary and eventually nullified - is essentially the "fire" of Creation.

In addition, to the first two aspects of fire mentioned earlier (destruction, and replicating), there is also a third aspect of fire: a fire is a "new" creation which did not originally exist in the first six days of

Creation. The Sages state that the fire of *Gehinnom* was created on the second day of Creation^[2] [2], but this is not the “fire” which we know of in our world. The Sages state that fire began with Adam HaRishon, when he needed light and he struck together some sticks and rocks on *Motzei Shabbos*, and the first spark of fire emerged^[3] [3]. Therefore, the fire we have today is essentially a “new” creation of fire, which did not exist in the original six days of Creation.

For how long does a fire remain lit? On Chanukah, the *menorah* must be lit for at least 30 minutes, and the flame in the *Beis HaMikdash* had to be lit the entire day. For every moment that the flame continues to burn, can we say that the fire keeps being renewed? It is a new fire each moment, or is each moment a continuation of the original fire? Certainly, the fire that is burning 5 minutes later is getting its strength from the previous fire, so the fire is not new, it is a continuation. When one first lights a fire, it is new, but for every moment after that the fire remains lit, the fire is not a new fire, it is just a continuation of the first fire. It can be compared to the renewal of the moon each month. When the moon is renewed, it is not actually becoming a new moon, it is just being continued. In that sense, it is renewed, but in essence, it does not become a new creation.

The idea is that whenever fire continues fire, or whenever a fire enables another fire, the ‘new’ fire is not actually a new fire, but a continuation of the original fire. Even when a small spark becomes a fire, the fire is not new, it is just a continuation of the original spark.

Every fire starts out new, but as it continues, it is no longer new. Therefore, a fire has no past (its past is gone, because it has been replaced by a different fire) nor does it have a future (for it may be extinguished). When a fire goes out, it is no longer here. By very default, fire’s existence (*havayah*) undergoes an absence (*heda’er*).

(There are two different elements of fire: “higher fire”, which is Heavenly, and “lower fire”, which is the fire that we know of on This World. Higher fire is never extinguished, such as the fire of the Burning Bush. The Gemara says that there are six Heavenly fires which came to the Altar, and this fire doesn’t have the limited properties of fire on this world. “Lower” fire, which is the fire we have on this world, is no longer here once it is extinguished.)

This is in contrast with the elements of earth, water and wind which keep continuing to exist, and which always remain in some form. The earth can be razed and its dirt and dust will be scattered around, but its matter will always remain, and it will simply take on a different form. The same is true for the elements of water and wind – they never completely disappear, they simply take on a different form. The wind (air) never disappears, and water will evaporate into the air, but after it rains, the water returns to its previous form. The only element which totally disappears from the world is fire.

The Sadness of Mourning: The Feeling of an Empty Void

Now we shall see how this concept applies to the soul.

As mentioned in previous lessons, sadness is most profound when people express their grief at the death of another person, and with the sadness of the mourning period that follows. Nothing epitomizes sadness more than death and mourning. Simply speaking, this was because ever since Adam and Chavah sinned, mankind has to endure the curse of death, which causes the body to return to the earth, and earth is the element of sadness.

There is nothing sadder than death. Although the Torah uses the term *atzvus* (sadness) by the curse given to woman - “*I shall greatly increase your pains*”^[4] [4], which refers to the pains of pregnancy and childbirth – ultimately, this is sadness that leads to a great joy, for there is a birth of a child. In contrast, the sadness caused by death is the ultimate sadness.

Why is it that nothing causes more sadness than death? Death symbolizes the total removal of something, where the something is no longer here. This is similar to the idea of fire, which is no longer here once it is extinguished. The soul experiences this as sadness: when there is an absence of the *havayah* (existence) of something. In contrast to joy, where a person rejoices with whatever is here (*yeish*), sadness is when nothing is here (*ayin*).

When one is sad because something has been removed and it is no longer here, this sadness comes from the “fire-of-fire” (total destruction and extinguishing) of “earth” (sadness). [Hence, this is a sadness that comes from **fire-of-fire-of-earth**.]

Sadness vs. Joy

In line with the above, when we consider what the antithesis to *atzvus*/sadness is – which is *simchah* (joy) – we can discover that there are two factors that enable *simchah*.

1) Renewal. 2) “Being happy with one’s lot”, which, at the deepest level, is when one is happy with the very existence (*havayah*) of something.

Sadness lacks both of the above. When something can no longer be renewed, there is reason to be sad over it. And when something is no longer here, I cannot be happy with it anymore, because it is no longer here – it has no more *havayah* (existence).

The elements of earth, water and wind can remain independent from other factors in order to keep existing. Earth, water, and wind can each survive on their own. Fire, though, is dependent on certain factors in order for it to continue existing. Each continuous burning of the fire needs to be fueled by the fire that preceded it. The Hebrew word for “fire”, “*aish*”, is similar to the word “*ishah*”, woman, just as woman is dependent on man for satisfaction [in marriage], as a result of the curse given to Chavah, “*And to your husband shall be your desire.*”

This is the depth of the idea mentioned before that fire has no “past” or “future”. It has no “past”, because the current fire is a continuation of the first fire, so it is always a “new” fire each moment, cutting it off from its past. Fire also depends on certain factors in order to keep burning (it needs to remain lit), so its “future” is uncertain. It is bound to become extinguished. Fire doesn’t even have a total “present”, because since it is dependent on certain factors to remain aflame, its present is always uncertain.

Fire-of-Fire-of-Earth: The Feeling of Nothing But Emptiness

Based upon the above, we will now explain another deep aspect about fire, and how it is used in the soul.

The existence of the soul, its *havayah*, is not dependent on other factors. Each person is unique, because each person does not have to be like others. Each person has his own unique *havayah* (existence), and since each person’s *havayah* is unique, a person does not have to be like others.

The element of fire, though, is the antithesis to the concept of *havayah*, for as explained earlier, a fire will always turn other elements into itself. When a fire touches something and burns through it, it turns the object into fire, just like itself. This shows us that fire is not ‘satisfied’ with its own existence. It needs to get everything else around it to become like it, in order for it to be nourished. It wants to turn every other existing *havayah* into its own *havayah*. Either the fire turns everything else around it into another fire, or, it will destroy everything else around it simply so that there should be nothing else left other than itself.

This is the “perspective” in the soul that comes from fire: “Everyone else must be like me. If that cannot happen, then everyone else shouldn’t exist, so that there is only me!” First a fire will want to turn anything it touches into an addition of “itself” – fire – or, it will completely destroy whatever it touches, so that the object can become nullified to it, and in that way, nothing else is here except for the fire.

This particular aspect of fire is the **“fire”-of-fire**: the very strength of fire. In the soul, this can be experienced as a sadness that comes from “emptying out” everything that is around oneself, creating an “empty void” (*chahal*) and a sense of absence and nothingness. There is no worse sadness than a feeling that there is absolutely nothing in the world.

When a person is sad about the death of someone else and he mourns, he feels the void that is left over from the disappearance of the deceased person’s soul from the world. This is but a sliver of the sad feeling of emptiness that comes from **“fire-of-fire”-of-earth**. One feels pain and sadness at the death of another, he is sad because the deceased person isn’t here anymore, and this causes a person to feel a certain sense of emptiness, an absence of something, an empty void, which has left by the disappearance of the deceased’s soul from This World. With death, the life of the deceased person has come to a grinding halt, his physical existence has stopped, and there is now an empty void in his place.

When one feels this empty void, he feels a profound sadness. This is the deepest kind of sadness that one can experience. This sadness is not simply because there is a discontinuation of something or someone, but because of what results from the absence: the feeling of emptiness that it leaves over.

When one continues with this sadness, he goes deeper and deeper into the empty void. Slowly he will begin to feel a complete sense of emptiness, as if everything around him is nothing - as if there is nothing in existence except but this empty void (*chahal*). The sadness which had begun from a feeling of emptiness then becomes truly toxic, and the more that a person stays in this void, the more a person will view everything around him as empty and nothing. He will keep “emptying out” everything else around him, deeming it as entirely worthless, nothing, and empty.

The philosophers argued if darkness is a new creation, or if it is merely a void left over by the absence of light. This was also debated by the Sages (such as in the works of the Vilna Gaon). But when there is **“fire-of-fire”** in the soul that is left impaired, it causes a person to feel nothing but absence and a sense of emptiness. This causes the one’s soul to feel as if it exists in an empty void. The very perspective of the person becomes that of emptiness, for the person in his sadness will keep “emptying out” everything around him.

The pain that we experience over the death of others is essentially a sense of emptiness that we can feel on This World, but there is a much more painful kind of emptiness that exists. The suffering of *Gehinnom* (Hell) is called *heda’er* (absence of existence) by the Maharal. Whatever pain we feel on this world is a ‘branch’ of the ‘root’ of all pain, which is the suffering of the soul in Hell. The only reason why we do not feel the root pain (*Gehinnom*) on this world is because our soul is concealed by the physicality of the body. It is in *Gehinnom* where the soul truly feels the root of all pain, which is the absence, the *heda’er*, the “emptying out” of all reality, where the soul acutely feels an empty void.

We can relate to this from dreams, where we are able to feel the emotions of joy and sadness on a much sharper level than when we are awake. When we go to sleep, the soul separates from the body, so the barriers of the body aren’t present, enabling the soul to feel realities on a much sharper level.

What to Do With the Sad Feeling of Emptiness

Whenever people feel pained over the death of others, the *avodah* is to use the pain as a reminder to awaken ourselves to feel the “root” of all pain, which is essentially that the entire reality of This World is an empty void (*chalal*), since, on a deeper level, there is nothing in existence other than *Ain Od Milvado*, “There is nothing besides for Him”. This is the intended purpose of all the emptiness that we feel on this world: it is really because we are meant to uncover the emptiness of This World and thereby discover *Ain Od Milvado* (or, alternatively, to discover *Ain Od Milvado* and thereby discover the emptiness of This World).

As long as a person hasn’t touched upon the deep sadness that comes from feeling the utter emptiness of the entire reality on This World, any pain or sadness that he feels on this world is but a sliver of the “root” of all pain: the utter emptiness of This World. Even if a person feels the nothingness and emptiness of this world, if he doesn’t know of the painful sadness that comes from feeling how utterly empty This World is, he will not be able to feel the true emptiness, which is called *ayin*.

Only when one reaches the deep pain that comes from feeling the emptiness of our reality on This World – a clear example of this would be the mourning on the day of *Tisha B’Av*, where we are essentially mourning the destruction of the true reality, for the world currently lacks the revelation of *Ain Od Milvado* – only after one feels the sadness that comes from this feeling of emptiness can one uncover the “root” of all of this pain.

The *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed by fire, and it will be rebuilt by fire. The deeper meaning of this is that it represented the true reality, and the “fire” that destroyed it was the absence of the true reality which led to its destruction. It will be rebuilt by “fire”, by the very “destruction” of the current reality.

The Holy Use of “Emptiness” vs. the Evil Use of “Emptiness”

As it has been explained here, “**fire-of-fire**” (of earth) in the soul leads a person to the *chalal*, a feeling that everything in existence is an empty void. This feeling of emptiness can be used either for good or for evil.^[5] [5]

If a person reaches a feeling of deep emptiness as a result of the terrible sadness that comes from feeling that all of reality is an empty void, he might go so far into the sadness of this emptiness as to deny the *havayah* of all existing people in the world and all creations, denying even his own *havayah*, and even worse, to deny the reality that there is a Creator. This is the worst state possible for the soul, and it is the evil use of the power of feeling emptiness.

In contrast to the above, a person who experiences the utter emptiness of This World is able to conclude that that this is because there is only one true reality: “*Ain Od Milvado*”, there is nothing besides for Hashem. One can then choose to integrate himself (to be *miskalel*) with the Creator, by choosing to nullify his will to the Creator, as a result of feeling the empty void in Creation. This is the desired *tikkun* (rectification) for the soul. However, if one feels rather “forced” into acknowledging this and not because he is really choosing to nullify his will, this is the root of heresy.

There is one day of the year where we are meant to reach this level completely: on *Asarah B’Teves*, which is the root of the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*, a day which is considered to be sadder than even *Tisha B’Av*.^[6] [6] When we experience the sadness of thinking about the very root of destruction and we feel how much emptiness this has led the world to, we can then remind ourselves of the root of all this pain and emptiness, which is really because there is only one true reality, *Ain Od Milvado*. At the very depth of sadness and destruction and emptiness, we can uncover the root, and

turn it into the greatest joy: the realization that everything is *Ain Od Milvado*.

In the future, though, everyone will be on this level, for everyone at that time will want to give up his own *havayah*, in submission to the *havayah* of Hashem, and people will do so out of joy. When one is able to give his soul to Hashem with joy, as everyone will be able to do in the future, this is actually the deep use of the power of *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice), the total *bittul* (self-nullification) of all of Creation to the reality of *Ain Od Milvado*.

In contrast, when one is not able to give up his own reality for Hashem and he doesn't want to undergo *bittul*, this is the very depth of sadness, where one remains stuck in the emptiness of Creation, the **fire-of-fire-of-earth** that brings a person to the worst sadness. But when one is able to come to *bittul* as a result of feeling the emptiness in Creation, he uses the power of "emptiness" for holiness.

This is the meaning of "*All came from earth and all will return to earth*"^[7] [7], which implies the universal *bittul* of all of Creation in the future. There is also a verse, "*For with joy, they go out*"^[8] [8] – which is a hint to how all of Creations will willingly choose to "go out" of their own *havayah*, with joy, to become completely part of the *havayah* of the Creator, which is *Ain Od Milvado*: "There is nothing besides Him".

In Conclusion

With that, we have concluded, with *siyata d'shmaya*, our study of the element of earth and the trait of sadness. May we merit to leave behind all *atzvus/sadness*, and to enter into *simchah/joy*. Amen.

^[1] ^[9] see Sanhedrin 97a

^[2] ^[10] Pesachim 54a

^[3] ^[11] *ibid*

^[4] ^[12] Beraishis 3:16

^[5] ^[13] Editor's Note: The Rav explains more about this nature of "emptiness" in **Fixing Your Fire-Conceit_016_Self-Transcendance**

^[6] Editor's Note: As explained by the Beis Yosef (Orach Chaim 550) citing the Avudraham, [when Tisha B'Av falls on Shabbos, the fast is pushed off to Motzei Shabbos and Sunday, but] If the fast of Asarah B'Teves were to fall on Shabbos, it would be observed even on the Shabbos. (In actuality, Asarah B'Teves will never fall out on Shabbos, for the Sages designed the calendar in a way that Asarah B'Teves will never fall on Shabbos. But if not for this fact, the fast of Asarah B'Teves would fall out on Shabbos and we would be required to observe the fast even on the Shabbos. In this respect, Asarah B'Teves is considered more severe than Tisha B'Av. This is due to the beginning of all the main tragedies of the exile which began on this day.)

[\[7\]](#) ^[14] *Koheles 3:20*

[\[8\]](#) ^[15] *Yeshayah 55:12*

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