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Fear and Love of Hashem

We have explained that in a general sense, there are four stages: 1) remembering that there is a Creator; 2) recognizing with the inner senses that Hashem is nearby; 3) faith in Divine Providence; 4) *tefillah* for each detail of life.

Tefillah is built on the principle that a person must feel that the Creator is nearby. However, there is no absolute order, and each person is different: some people must first remember that there is a Creator and that there is Divine Providence. Then, they pray to the Creator, and this helps them feel Hashem's Presence. With others, the order is different.

The next stage of *avodah* is *ahavah* (love) and *yirah* (fear). Here, too, there are two approaches that our teachers followed as to which of these comes first.

It says in the *pasuk* (*Tehillim* 34:15), "Turn from evil and do good." This *pasuk* places "turn from evil" before "do good." Seemingly, one turns away from evil because of *yirah* and does good because of *ahavah*. Likewise, the Ramban writes in his commentary to the Torah (*Shemos* 20:7), "The aspect of *zachor* (remember the Shabbos) relates to the positive commandments. It is an outgrowth of *ahavah*, and relates to the attribute of compassion. One performs the command of his master because he loves him, and then his master will be compassionate to him. *Shamor* (guard the Shabbos) relates to the negative commandments and the attribute of justice. It comes from the sense of *yirah*, because one who is careful not to do anything bad in the eyes of his master fears him."

Thus, the *pasuk* places *yirah* before *ahavah*, and so, the way of many of our great leaders was that *yirah* should precede *ahavah*.

On the other hand, as known, the Ba'al Shem Tov explained the phrase "turn from evil and do good" as follows: "How does one turn from evil? By doing good! The advice for turning from evil is to first do good. In other words, *yirah* can be attained through *ahavah*."

These are the two paths we have found. We will start here with *yirah*, but we must emphasize that this order does not necessarily determine that such must be the order of one's *avodah*. Everyone should learn all the material, and then see which path - *yirah* before *ahavah*, or *ahavah* before *yirah* - is more appropriate and close to his soul, and act accordingly.

In fact, this *avodah* of feeling one's own soul and seeing its propensity is not at all simple. Everyone must pray and beseech Hashem to guide him in the path of truth, and to give him the *da'as* to do not

what is easiest, but what is truly most appropriate for him.

Five Levels of *Yirah*

In a general sense, it may be said that there are five levels of *yirah*, and they are all described in the *Mesillas Yesharim*.

The first three levels: fear of punishment, fear because of one's own honor, and fear because of the drive for perfection, are placed by the Ramchal in the beginning of a person's *avodah*, and they are explained in his chapter on watchfulness (according to the order of the *Beraisa* of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair). The next two levels are placed in the second to last chapter, in the level before the highest one. They are fear of sin and fear of Hashem's greatness.

The simple and well-known kind of fear (not that it is attained by all, but it is known by all) is fear of punishment, whether of punishment in this world or in the next. In other words, one might fear lest Hashem punish him in this world through various forms of suffering, and there is a fear that one might after death suffer terrible punishments such as *gehinnom* and *kaf hakela* (a kind of terrible turmoil for the soul). Both kinds of fear are needed. There is a fear that considers the garment, the body, which is suffering in this world, and there is a fear without the garment, which is that of the suffering of the higher world.

This is the first stage of *yirah*, of which the *Mesillas Yesharim* writes that it is "only fit for the ignorant and simpleminded women, but it is not the *yirah* of the wise and intelligent." But we know the word of Rav Yisrael Salanter, who said that if only we would be at the level of those simpleminded people who did attain that level of fear!

Later, we will explain why it is difficult for a person to attain this level. In any case, this is the first level of *yirah* - fear of punishment.

The second level is fear due to honor. The *Mesillas Yesharim* writes that the inner force of the soul that pushes it to all its actions is honor. If not for honor, a person would not attain anything. The main force that pushes a person is honor - not only external honor so that people will see, but inner honor, so that a person will not inwardly feel that he is lowly. Sometimes, this is conscious, and sometimes, it is in the subconscious. But the essence of the soul is honor, as it says (*Tehillim* 30:13), "so that the honor (soul) will sing before You."

The second level of *yirah* is that one fears that when he leaves the world and reaches Gan Eden, he will receive a low level of honor. Of this, *Chazal* said (*Bava Basra* 75) as an illustration, "Each person will be singled by the canopy of the other."

This is a deep comment, but the simplest point is that one is not prepared to be lowly in *Gad Eden*! Thus, one fears sin and an imperfection in his service of Hashem because he is concerned about his spot in the next world in relation to other *tzaddikim*. This is the second level.

The third level, explained by the *Mesillas Yesharim* in the chapter dealing with watchfulness, is fear due to perfection. This level is for those of sound wisdom, who seek true perfection, namely, *deveikus* (attachment) to Hashem. Perfection is closeness to Hashem, and the word "*aveirah*" (sin) is similar to the phrase "*me'ever lanahar*" (across the river), because it transfers a person from alignment with Hashem to being on the other side. Naturally, one will fear sin, because sin *chas veshalom* creates a barrier between one and his Creator.

In summary, the first three stages of fear are: 1) fear of punishment, whether in this world or the next; 2) fear that one might not attain the proper honor in *Gan Eden*; 3) the soul's fear that it might not attain *deveikus* to the Creator.

These three levels are defined in *Mesillas Yescharim* as *avodah* for oneself. One does not fear because of Hashem - because one worries about His honor, or because he wants to please his Creator - but because he himself may be lacking, either through suffering, honor, or an absence of closeness to Hashem. The common denominator is that the person places himself in the center.

Above these three levels are two higher levels: fear because of Hashem's greatness, and fear of sin.

Fear due to His greatness is explained by the *Mesillas Yescharim* to mean that a person is cognizant of Hashem's greatness and highness, and is concerned and fearful that he might not be behaving properly before Him. This concern is only present when he is engaged in some form of *avodas Hashem*, such as learning Torah or performing other *mitzvos*, but while engaged in mundane matters, such as sleeping, eating, and such, he is calm.

The highest level of fear is fear of sin. This is where a person feels at all times that Hashem is right nearby, and he always fears that he might not be acting properly.

If so, the distinguishing point between fear of His greatness and fear of sin is that fear of greatness only applies while one is engaged in *avodah*. Only then does he think of Hashem and feel His presence. This engenders fear. But at other times, he does not connect to the Creator and does not feel His presence nearby, so he does not fear Him then.

On the other hand, when one fears sin, he senses that Hashem is present at all times, and he naturally fears Him even if not engaged at the moment in *avodah*.

Essentially, fear of sin is related to *deveikus*. *Deveikus* is a state in which one is attached to Hashem each moment, and this state causes one to always be fearful, lest he is not acting properly before Hashem. But if one does not possess complete *deveikus*, his fear of sin cannot be complete.

In conclusion, in the first three levels of fear, one fears for himself, but in the two higher levels, he is so concerned about Hashem's honor that he does not want to belittle it in any way. The difference is that fear due to Hashem's greatness is only present during worship of Hashem, but fear of sin applies at all times.

We will now return and define the levels of fear in depth.

The Difficulty with Attaining Fear of Punishment

The lowest level of fear, fear of punishment, seems easy to attain, but the deep truth of the matter is that it cannot be easily attained. We will explain why this is so.

A person is a combination of body and soul. The body hears things of this world, sees things of this world, and feels things of this world. The *neshamah* is a Divine entity from Above, and it sees, feels, and smells the spiritual world.

If *gehinnom* would be in this world, the organs of the body would be able to sense it, and the body would naturally fear the punishments of *gehinnom*, just as it fears the fire of this world. But since *gehinnom* is in the spiritual world, and is not seen or sensed with the bodily organs, it can only be

sensed by the *neshamah*. The *neshamah* senses the spiritual and the body senses the material.

Fear of punishment, then, comes from the senses of the *neshamah*, but here is the root of the problem. If one is already in touch with his *neshamah*, he can generally already use a higher form of fear. For example, the Ramchal has said that wise people fear because they seek Hashem, and they feel lacking without that closeness.

But as long as one is only with his body, not his soul, the only way he can attain the fear of punishment is through the power of his mind. This is referred to in the literature as "the faculty of envisioning." By envisioning the spiritual world as if it is material, one can attain fear.

The problem is that in our times, the minds are generally weak, and the vast majority of people are not adept at envisioning, so people in our times (unless they have powerful minds) find it most difficult to attain fear of punishment.

Therefore, our great teachers had various different approaches. Some simply stopped speaking about fear of punishment, since they knew how hard it is to attain with the tools at our disposal, but some felt that to the contrary, the main thing is fear of punishment, and we may not ignore it, and that as long as one has not attained fear of punishment, he may not move on.

There is a tremendous danger involved in skipping over the fear of punishment. In this way, the person advances, and can attain love and closeness to Hashem (often, this is a delusion), but he will not have something strong enough to prevent him from sins! We will explain.

We have mentioned the three lower levels of fear found in the *Mesillas Yesharim*: fear of punishment, fear due to honor, and fear due to the perfection of closeness with Hashem. Let us consider: who is it that wants honor, and who is it that wants to cleave to Hashem? The desire to cleave to Hashem comes from the *neshamah*, and so does the desire for honor, because "honor" is the essence of the soul, as it says (*Tehillim* 30:13), "so that honor will sing to You." But sometimes, this force is channeled through the body, and then one yearns for honor of this world. The root of it, though, is the soul that seeks the glory of Hashem.

On the other hand, fear of punishment is simple language that even the body understands! One does not need to be on a high level in order to flee from a burning fire! Everyone flees from the fire (except for a lunatic)! Honor does not always motivate one's heart, and each person is affected differently, but the fear of fire moves everyone, in every time and situation.

If so, when one is particularly uninspired, the only force that can stop him from sinning is the fear of punishment, the fear of the judgment of *gehinnom*!

We see this even in worldly matters. Sometimes, a person is exhausted, and doesn't have the strength to do anything. Even if told that he can now profit greatly, he will say, "I have no strength!" He may be told that if he does a particular action, he will gain much honor, and again he will say that he is tired and can't do it just then. But if told that a fire has spread and he must escape, he will not say that he's tired and has no strength. He will simply get up and escape!

Why is this true in spiritual matters? Because when a person has *da'as* and vitality, his power to seek honor is more alert, but when more overcome by physicality, the one thing that can motivate him to do a positive act or avoid a sin is fear of punishment - to flee from the fire!

When one has mental clarity, he will seek Hashem because of honor, but when weak, only fear of punishment can prevent his deterioration. Therefore, if one skips over this step, he loses that which could protect him from sin, and he is in great danger!

On the other hand, those who emphasized fear of punishment so as to avoid the aforementioned danger have an opposite problem: since it is most difficult to attain fear of punishment, they had to toil for a long time to attain it, and did not progress. People have worked with this for a year, two years, ten, twenty, and even thirty years, and still remained with one thing: fear of punishment!

It turns out, then, that both methods are risky, and we need to know how to safely navigate through them.

The Possibilities of Avodah through Fear of Punishment

There is a certain cure for this problem, but it is not a perfect cure. It is meant only for one whose mind is very weak and cannot work on fear of punishment through the simple power of envisioning. This method is to read and study the works *Reishis Chochmah*, *Maseches Gehinnom*, and *Maseches Chibut Hakever* (these two are also found in *Reishis Chochmah*), and consider the suffering in this world, as well.

We will try to describe the depth of fear of punishment in its true form, and each person should try to benefit from these words to the extent of his ability.

Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein zt"l made a very deep comment related to this. When delving into the depth of it, we can learn how to reach closeness to Hashem through fear of punishment.

The root of the problem of those who have worked only with fear of punishment is that they sometimes forget Hashem, *chas veshalom*, and focus always on their own fears of the punishment. This is where they begin their *avodah*, and this is where they end it, *chas veshalom*.

The *mashgiach* zt"l (Rabbi Levenstein) explained how fear of punishment should be a means of serving Hashem, not the self. This is the essence of his idea: Before a person begins to work on fear of punishment and focus on *gehinnom*, he must first ask himself, "Who created *gehinnom*?" (The answer is obvious, but we have already explained at length in the previous chapters that contemplation must come in the form of question and answer.) The answer is, "Hashem! He created *gehinnom* at the time of the creation of the world!"

He should continue: "Who burns the wicked in *gehinnom*?" The true and clear answer is that the fire is from Hashem, as it is from His constant will! This is the healthy way of looking at *gehinnom*. Before considering the awesome punishments, one must consider the simple truth that even in *gehinnom* itself, it is the Creator Who is punishing. If one fears *gehinnom* as a separate entity, he is separate from Hashem, *chas veshalom*.

The true form of fear of punishment is to recognize that Hashem is the One Who would punish me! After that, one should understand that the tool He uses for punishing is *gehinnom* (and others), but the fear comes from the fact that Hashem will punish.

One fears punishment not because he remembers the punishment itself, but from an inner recognition of He Who has given the warning and will collect His debt when the time comes! When a person remembers this, even while thinking of punishment, he is not separate from the Creator.

If so, before working on envisioning the punishment, one should speak to the Creator and say to Him, "Master of the World, I have read in the words of *Chazal* that there is *gehinnom*. Who created this *gehinnom*? You did! Who maintains it each moment? You, Hashem! Master of the World, You said that if a Jew sins, You Yourself will punish him. I am afraid of Your punishment." In this way, one

connects to the Creator while contemplating His punishments.

Without the ability to effectively use the power of visualization, if one wants to attain fear of punishment, he must first read on the sayings of *Chazal* who spoke about it. In addition to that, he should pray to Hashem and say to Him, "Master of the World, why did You create *gehinnom*? So that I would be afraid! What should I fear, *gehinnom*, or You? I should fear You, Hashem! But I don't feel afraid. I know intellectually that there is *gehinnom*, and I know that You created it and punish the wicked with it, but the feeling of fear is weak. Please help me fear Your punishment, both of this world and of the next." In this way, he should elaborate and ask Hashem to grant him this quality of fear.

There is a deep point in this matter: how fearful must one be? If one already has fear, he may feel a need to attain a higher level of fear, so that he will not fear, and so on. In other words, he does fear, but he fears the fact that he does not fear enough, and he should ask Hashem to enable him to fear enough to avoid sin.

If one does not feel much fear of *gehinnom* - and most people lack this simple faith - he should turn to Hashem and say to Him, "Master of the World, had You not told us through the *sefarim* that we must work on fear of punishment, I would not have done so. Why, then, am I working on it? Because I know that it is Your will, and it is the proper way. I ask You, then, to help me attain fear of punishment because You want me to fear Your punishments, and when people fear Your punishments, it gives You honor."

What is this like? A father says to his son, "If you don't do what I say, you may not come on the trip." The son says back, "So I won't come! I don't care about it at all!" Besides the lack of interest in the trip - which doesn't make a difference to the father - the son's words display a lack respect for this father's warning.

It is Hashem's honor that *gehinnom* should cause us to tremble, while recalling Who created it and punishes there. When one does not feel fear of *gehinnom*, he should ask Hashem to help him fear His punishment.

This is the first aspect of fear, called "fear of punishment." May Hashem enable us all to attain it, and to build thereon love of Hashem, closeness to Hashem, and attachment (*deveikus*) to Him.

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