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Two Reasons for Sin

These are days of rachamim and selichos (compassion and forgiveness). Selichos, s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu.^[1] O G-d of mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement! There are sins committed b'mezid (intentionally) or b'shogeg (mistakenly) or Heaven forbid there is a chet l'hachis (a sin done to rebel against G-d).

What brings a person to sin? In general, there are two roots of *chet*. The first source is desire. A person will try to fulfill his desires because they are constantly burning inside of him. No matter where he finds himself, he will still be driven to do this.

The second source of sin is completely different. Chazal say,^[2] "Doing nothing brings boredom, which turns into madness, and madness." brings you to sin. This second root of sin stems from a void in the *nefesh*^[3] (soul) of the person, and not as a response to desire.

Every person has a left and a right void in his heart. Chazal explain^[4] that the right void is the place of the *yetzer tov* (good inclination), and the left void of the heart contains the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). When the good inclination is active, the void is full. But if, G-d forbid, the good inclination disappears, it becomes deeply embedded in the inner recess of the heart and forms a void. This is a new source of *chet*.

It is not the force of the *yetzer hara* that attracts a person in the form of desire to sin. When a person has nothing to do he becomes susceptible to the void.^[5] He is like "an empty pit that has no water, but it has snakes and scorpions".^[6] When he is empty it causes "snakes and scorpions" to inhabit his own pit.

Chazal [rhetorically] asked the snake: "What pleasure do you get for speaking *loshon hara* or for biting a person?"^[7] Does the snake bite you because he wants to? No! So why does he do it? There is no water in the pit but it has snakes and scorpions in it. He bites you because of the emptiness. The empty pit implies that he has a void in himself which is the reason that he bites.

Chazal say that bnei Yisrael only allowed themselves to sin with the Ha'egel Ha'zahav (Golden Calf) because they wanted to act promiscuously.^[8] The underlying reason for committing this particular sin was because they were overcome by desire and they thought this would be a way to fulfill that desire. Why did Adam *Harishon* eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge? It was good for the eyes and it had the appearance of knowledge. This is a sin of desire. But who caused the sin of

Adam *Harishon*? The snake!

What pleasure does a person have from speaking *loshon hara*? He does not speak *loshon hara* because of desire. The source of the sin of *loshon hara* comes from the void in the right side of heart. When a person has an empty space inside of him, it creates a new reason for sin. Within the vacuum of the empty space, desire takes over and he sins as a result.

But desire is not the cause of the sin. At the root of it is the empty void. "There is no water in the pit but it has snakes and scorpions in it."[\[9\]](#) This is the root of the sin.

Asking Hashem for forgiveness- *s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu* - can be compared to cleaning a dirty house, except that there is no point in cleaning a house if the source of the mess hasn't been dealt with. For example, if there is a pipe with a hole somewhere inside the house and the water is still dripping all over the place, it's not going to help to just mop up the water. Before we do anything else, we need to fix the hole in the pipe.

When we ask Hashem for forgiveness - *s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu* we have to understand the root of the sin in our *nefesh*. If we do not understand the source of the sin, then we cannot fix it.

Feeling Empty

Let's try to understand the empty void in our soul. Chazal say, "The *nefesh* will not be full."[\[10\]](#) This can be compared to "a farm boy that marries a princess. Anything that he brings her will not be enough to satisfy her since she is the daughter of the King."[\[11\]](#)

There is no human being in the world who does not feel the void in their *nefesh*. The question is how much of the void he feels and what he does when he feels empty.

A person comes home at night, feeling the void in his soul, and he starts to eat. It relaxes him a little bit. He is not eating because he is hungry or because he has a desire for tasty food. He is eating because he feels empty, and he is trying to fill the void with desire.

Why did Hashem give us the power to feel empty? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? I will surprise you by saying that feeling empty is a very good thing. If a person never feels empty what will motivate him to learn Torah and perform *mitzvos*?

There are people who feel they are complete, and don't feel a void within themselves at all. They are completely lacking motivation to move forward in their lives. The only thing that will bring a person to elevate himself is when he feels that he is lacking something - when he feels the void.

Each person can choose for himself how to fill this void. Someone wakes up in the morning and feels empty. Even though the world seems, ostensibly, to be full of things, in reality the Creation is completely empty. Hashem created an enormous world- very big and full of creatures with no purpose. Everything is empty of meaning.

But if this is the case, then why don't people feel that the world has no meaning? The answer is because they have strong desires. They are drawn to the desires of this world and think there is actually "something" to it. Someone who is lacking strong desires can see that Hashem created a world that is completely empty of meaning. Shlomo Hamelech said:[\[12\]](#) "Hevel Havalim" (Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"). The world is empty of meaning - there is almost no fulfillment in this world.

When a person is busy with making a living and interacting with his family, or even when he is learning Torah and doing *mitzvos* he feels fulfilled. The goal of life is how to fill the empty void in the

proper way when you feel the emptiness threatening to overtake you. The fulfillment can be found in the world, but it is often hidden in a very deep place.

The emptiness we experience is actually a reminder that we are not fulfilled and we need to keep working to elevate ourselves. Most of what we do and accomplish is in a certain sense imaginary. We wake up in the morning, go to work, go to school, and imagine that we are finding fulfillment there, but this is actually an illusion. If we took a moment and thought deeply about it and came to the understanding that our work is basically meaningless, our lives would revert to feeling utterly devoid almost instantaneously. But this would be a positive thing, because it might lead to the beginning of the desire to elevate ourselves.

Most people never reach the necessary level of “emptiness” that would motivate them to move forward in their lives. Someone who feels an empty void within him is standing at an intersection. All the gedolei Yisrael were able to elevate themselves from this feeling of emptiness within Creation. They were looking to fill the depths of their emptiness. It came from the feeling that the Creation had no meaning and in reality the world is empty. As a result, they searched for meaning.

Even one who enjoys fulfilling his desires knows deep inside himself that this is not the purpose of life. He feels that he cannot find fulfillment in his life and he completely disregards the concept of the World to Come or the concept of his reward and punishment.

The person who thinks that his desires can bring fulfillment to his life thinks so because his desires are so overpowering that he mistakenly believes that once he fulfills his desires his life will be fulfilled as well. Young people often think that “the action” is “outside.” They “go out” and all they see is the emptiness, the desolation, the lies, the cheating, and the utter selfishness. They see that there is almost no one who cares about anyone, and they end up feeling really lonely in this world.

Busyness Keeps Us Busy

Most people never arrive at this point of disillusionment for a simple reason: they are too busy! Like it says regarding the status of bnei Yisrael in Mitzrayim^[13], “Tikbad es haavodah al anashim v’yaasu ba.” (“Let the work weigh heavier upon the men and let them engage in it.”)

When we are children we spend our time playing, and when we mature we have a routine of work and study. There is no time slotted in for contemplating life, for better or for worse. But if a person puts it all on hold and starts thinking about his life, then he can see what is really happening.

Once he has reached this point of contemplation, a person will be faced with two options. If he feels the emptiness of Creation, he has the option to decide to fulfill this emptiness. The same depth of his emptiness will be the same measure of his fulfillment. The other option is for the person to say, “This is the Creation and there is nothing here!” Like Acher, chas veshalom, said^[14] “If I do not have the World to Come, I will enjoy this one.” But in the end, Acher had no enjoyment of This World at all.

When Hashem created the world, He created its emptiness along with it. As we say in the blessing, “Borei nefashos rabos vacheshronan al kol ma shabarasa l’hachayos ba’hem, nefesh kol chai,” the Creation is incomplete!

The beginning of one’s own individual elevation is when he realizes that everything is empty. Anyone who has experienced the feeling that everything is meaningless has the *kli* (the tool) to grow. He must use this tool! Someone who does not feel the emptiness of Creation does not have any force that is pushing him from the inside. A person earns this feeling of emptiness– with the emphasis on “earning.”

Emptiness in its intrinsic nature draws a person to remain within it. It is the inclination of a person in this state of emptiness to say, "This is life - There is no meaning in life!" Even if he understands with his intellect that there is a purpose in life - in his heart he feels the world is empty.

The Routine of Going through the Motions

Does a person who keeps Torah and *mitzvos* really feel that it is fulfilling? He puts on tallis and tefillin in the morning. He holds the lulav or recites *birkas hamazon*. He fulfills as many of the 613 *mitzvos* that he can according to his level. Does he feel that these actions fulfill him? Or is he just a *kof b'alma*- a monkey mimicking those around him?

When he was four they told him to say *birkas hamazon*- so he repeated it, word for word after his rebbi. When he grows up he continues to say it exactly the same way. When he was a youngster his father took him to shul with a *pekeleh* (bag of sweets) on Shabbos Kodesh. They tell him to say "Amein" and "Yehei Sh'mei Rabba" and he says it like the good and obedient child he is. When he is a bit bigger he will get a candy for his efforts. Does he feel alive? Does he feel enjoyment when he says Amein and Yehei Sh'mei Rabba? No! He only feels enjoyment from sucking the candy! A man grows daily - what type of impression is engraved on his *neshamah* (soul)?

When he was 4 or 5 did he feel anything? Now he is 40 or 50, and he still feels nothing! One of the wonders of the universe is how most people remain *frum*. How can you fulfill *mitzvos* for decades without feeling anything? It is heavenly protection that a person stays *frum*.

If this is the way that a person is taught to "believe," then if he ever encounters an experience that shakes him up, he'll need a lot of strength to continue to do things that give him no *chiyus*! If he has very strong *emunah* (which is not common in all generations and especially not in our days) he still continues to be *frum* even though he feels nothing! Nothing! Nothing! But, since such *emunah* is so rare, when he doesn't feel anything he, of course, doesn't do anything.

The problem is not that he is not doing anything at the moment- this is the result of the problem, which is bad enough in and of itself. But the root of the problem is that there was no *Yiddishkeit* before. He never left *Yiddishkeit* because he was never "there" in the first place. To really "live *Yiddishkeit*" is to feel *chiyus* from the holy Torah and from fulfilling *mitzvos*.

A person goes to the shteibel, and they zip through *Mincha* in a few minutes. Day after day, week after week, year after year he sees that no one, not him and not anyone else around him, seems to be deriving any *chiyus* from it. So he looks at *Yiddishkeit* and he does not understand what it is supposed to be. All he sees are *kof b'alma*- people going through the motions.

Behavior that is perceived as being based on monkeys mimicking one another can be dissolved in seconds. Many people do not understand how someone can be *frum* one day and no longer *frum* the next. The answer is that yesterday he was also not *frum*! He never had a firm foundation in *Yiddishkeit*, and that is why it was so easy to toss off.

Real Yiddishkeit

When a person undergoes a life altering event, it can be dealt with and overcome if he is getting *chiyus* from the Torah and his observance of *mitzvos*. His connection with Torah and *mitzvos* will not falter or weaken. The stronger the connection that he feels with his inner *chiyus*, the stronger is his connection with Torah and *mitzvos*. But if he doesn't feel any *chiyus* from it, then all his *Yiddishkeit* is external. Torah and *mitzvos* that are not based on an understanding of an internal connection to Hashem can cause one to stop leading a life that really was not based on true *Yiddishkeit*.

What is missing?

In Eretz Hakodesh there is an organization called Lev L'Achim. They used to work with *bocherim* who were frum and left the "fold." At a certain point they decided to work with the boys in yeshivas *before* they went "off." But neither way is correct! What we need to do is to teach people how to gain *chiyus* from the Torah and fulfilling the *mitzvos*. The change that needs to take place and the way to look at this subject is not to treat the end result but rather to treat it at its *shoresh* (foundation).

The root of this reality must be clear. This is the way the world was created. This is the reality. When actions are done by rote we feel empty, making it much harder to believe that Torah and *mitzvos* will fulfill us. We should live Torah and *mitzvos* not only to fulfill our "obligation" of learning Torah and performing *mitzvos*; not because we need to educate our kids, but because we need to feel that this is the truth. Then a true *Yiddishkeit* will be built within us.

The change that must come is one that will alter our understanding of *Yiddishkeit*. If I go to a shul to *daven*, was there one word I uttered that I felt *chiyus*? If yes, we have a beginning.

The reality of Torah and *mitzvos* should be our reality, and there should be *chiyus*, life, in our reality. When we teach our children we will teach them not only to do but also to feel from a very young age – to feel that this is our way of life. Then their *Yiddishkeit* will have a different shape and what we are fighting today will not exist. Of course, there are always tribulations but they will not be of the same magnitude. For example, like the Ramchal^[15] says when a person walks in the dark on the riverbank, he is closer to danger than to safety. This way does not bring you to failure.

The way we educate our kids now is the source of the failure to keep them connected to Torah and *mitzvos*. And the one who does not fall is barely alive for seventy years. The change must be to go back to the actions of our forefathers, *maaseh avos siman l'banim*. The G-d of Avraham – his love was alive! The G-d of Yitzhak – his *yirah* was burning! This is the action of the father that are signs for the children. When a person lives with Torah and *mitzvos*, his prayers bring love and burning *yirah*, and that is what we will see in the hearts of people. If a child enters a shul and feels that the 30 people who are *davening* there feel *chiyus* from their *davening*, the child will look at things differently.

It is simple and it is clear. Real *Yiddishkeit* is hidden. From time to time, we can see a drop emerging. Because we do not see real *Yiddishkeit* on a constant basis, we are just "doing" it, each one according to his level, and it is very easy to leave everything.

May Hashem help us all not only to look at the branches but to see the roots, everyone according to his own level. We should be able to have one word from which we will derive *chiyus*, one word of *tefillah* that we will get life from. Anyone who will feel one time in his life *chiyus* from Torah and *tefillah* – even only once in his life – it is promised that he will never be disconnected from them.

^[1] In the tefillah of Yom Kippur

^[2] Kesubos 59b

^[3] [Editor's Note: As is known from the *sefarim hakedoshim*, the *nefesh* is the lowest level of the soul within man and is the "partner of the body." The *neshamah*, the divine soul, is located primarily in the brain.]

[4] Brochos 61a

[5] See the authors explanation in Mesillas Yescharim Volume 3, page 119

[6] Shabbos 22a

[7] Taanis 8a

[8] Sanhedrin 63b

[9] Shabbos 22a

[10] Koheles 6:7

[11] Koheles Rabbah 6:7

[12] Koheles 1:2

[13] Shemos 5:9

[14] Chagiga 15a

[15] Mesilas Yescharim 2

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