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Greatness - A Gift that Comes After Much Effort

Reb Chatzkel Levenstein zt"l, the great Mashgiach, once said that the true aspiration of a yeshiva student, of anyone who seeks to grow, is to strive to become a great person. Usually, though, one is far from aspiring for this. Why?

A person naturally thinks to himself, "In every generation, there can be *Gedolim* (great leaders), but I am definitely not one of them. Some people are born very special, and they have special inborn abilities, and they are destined for greatness. But me? I was born with a very difficult nature, and I have a certain past. I grew up in a certain home that holds me back from greatness. My situation in life doesn't allow me to become a *Gadol* (Torah leader)..."

Almost everyone thinks this way, and naturally, people lose their aspirations to become a *gadol*. Not only do people lose their hope to become elevated spiritually, but they say that they cannot grow beyond a certain limit.

That is how people naturally think, but Reb Chatzkel came and said that this is a mistaken notion. Each person as an individual has to realize that he can sprout into a great tree - he can become one of the *gedolei hador*.

Let us try to remove some of the mistaken notions that people have which prevent them from aspiring for greatness.

When any of us sees a *gadol*, naturally we compare ourselves to the *gadol*. For example, a person sees a *gadol*, and he thinks about how much of a *masmid* (diligent) the *gadol* is, and then he thinks, "I can never learn for so many hours like he does. I don't have the *kochos* (abilities). Intense *hasmadah* (diligence) just isn't me. I can't understand how it is humanly possible to learn like him. Maybe for a few days I can learn diligently, but to learn like that my whole life, this I cannot do. I need some rest and some other activities in my life." A person cannot understand how a person is able to live a life that is totally dedicated to Hashem.

However, Chazal^[1] tell us that Hashem says to the Jewish people, "My son, open for me an opening of repentance that is the size of a needle, and I will open for you an opening the size of a hallway." Chazal here have revealed an awesome fundamental point: It is really **not humanly possible** to live totally for Hashem! A person shouldn't think that it is not only him and others who cannot do it. Even the greatest people in the world cannot do it on their own.

What does a *gadol* have, then, that others don't have? He has made for himself a small "opening", and from that opening, he has merited to receive the Heavenly gift known as "an opening the size of a hallway."

A person gives up from the start that he will ever achieve greatness, because he is focused on the levels reached by a *gadol*, and he says to himself, "This, I will never reach."

What a person must realize is that all of this success came to the *gadol* not because of his own efforts, but because he merited it as a gift from Hashem. It's all a kindness from Hashem that he merited it; it's not humanly possible to achieve such greatness. With this outlook, a person is able to aspire that he too can live a life to be dedicated only for Hashem.

If a person doesn't believe in himself that he can become a *gadol*, this is not because he doesn't believe in his abilities. It is because he doesn't believe that Hashem is the one who gives out such a gift to a person.

Our entire Avodah is to try our hardest, each to his own level. Beyond that point is all a gift from Hashem. The amount of spiritual success one merits does not depend at all on his efforts. You can have a person who tried very little but merited a large dose of spiritual growth, and you can also have a person who tried very hard but only received a minimal gift for his efforts. This is because each person has a certain job to fulfill, and he gets the gift from Heaven when he fulfills that job; it doesn't depend on how much effort he put in, but rather on if he fulfilled his mission upon him or not.

Maybe a person will ask that this is unfair. But the answer to this is as Chazal say, "I toiled, and I found" - that even when a person tries, his success did not come because of his efforts, and he instead merely "found" success. Of course, a person receives reward for all his efforts, but beyond that is what Hashem gives as a gift to a person, and the gift cannot be rationalized or complained about; no one can say, "Why did so and so get that heavenly gift, while I didn't?"

If any of the *gedolim* would have received their spiritual attainment according to the level of effort they put in, they wouldn't have become *gedolim*! The righteous humble themselves before Hashem, even as Hashem gives them honor.^[2] A *gadol* realizes that all of his closeness to Hashem and all his many qualities are all heavenly gifts which he did not get on his own.

Hashem gives each person a certain mission, according to his abilities. When a person completes the task given to him, Hashem gives him spiritual success as a gift. On a deeper note, a person who has exerted all his abilities has removed his "I", and his inner self is revealed - the G-dly spark within him, which is unlimited, for it is a part of Hashem, Who is Infinite (*Ein Sof*).

Thus, in order for one to become a *gadol*, he doesn't need to possess astounding abilities of the soul. He just needs to give up his self, and when he does that, he will become connected to the *midas harachamim* (trait of mercy) of Hashem, and he will then receive endless gifts.

The Chazon Ish writes in a letter that at first, a person has to work very hard to succeed spiritually, but after that, "a new gate is opened to him, which his mind delights in endlessly." How can a person merit this? This is when a person merits Hashem's help, Who bestows him with heavenly radiance - beyond his normal human comprehension. That is where true understanding starts.

If a person doesn't aspire to become a great person, it will be very difficult for him to grow at all spiritually. Even his already present goals in life will ebb away.

One should therefore decide that he will become a *gadol*! This is not for one to get carried away with himself, because that is called being a *baal gaavah* (haughty person). Rather, it is for a person to

believe that Hashem is entirely kind and compassionate, and when a person tries his hardest, Hashem bestows upon Him according to his endless goodness.

Hashem can give a person unlimited attainment. If our success would depend on our own efforts alone, then our growth would be very limited. But our success doesn't come from us, it comes from Hashem - Who is unlimited in what He can give us!

The aspiration to become great has to fill one's entire being. His entire mind and heart should be about this.

We see, *l'havdil*, that when someone wants to become a politician, he already had a desire to become the president since he was little. Anyone who didn't have such an ambition when he was younger usually doesn't end up becoming a politician. This is a desire for falsity, but it when it comes to Avodas Hashem, the desire for greatness is a true one only when a person recognizes that greatness only comes from Hashem, not from one's individual strengths.

If a person is truthful with himself, he can see that can't do anything on his own. If he is even more truthful, he can see also that Hashem is capable of anything, and He can give to us as much as He wants.

We Must Be Patient In Our Avodas Hashem

However, there is a problem going on especially in our generation which hampers people from attaining greatness.

In order for a person to reach greatness, he needs to try very hard for years, and he needs to be very patient with this.

Imagine a farmer who comes to his field on the first day of the planting season and he is disappointed that the crops haven't grown yet. This is unrealistic, as it takes several months of planting and plowing in order for anything to grow. An impatient person wants to see immediate results in his Avodas Hashem, but this is impossible. He wouldn't be able to be a farmer either, because he has no idea how to be patient!

As the generations grow closer to Moshiach, patience when it comes to our spiritual growth gets weaker. There is actually a deep reason for this. Since Moshiach is closer, the soul inside feels that there is very little time left to work on spiritual growth, and this is why people get impatient. However, although this feeling is correct, it has to be used correctly, in its proper place. Let us explain.

The Mishnah in Avos (2:15) states, "The day is short and the labor is long; the workers are lazy, and the reward is great, and the owner is knocking."

When the day is short, what does the worker do? He might act quicker as a result, and he will finish his work quickly as a result. This is wonderful. But another kind of worker will think that since there is very little time in the day, he might as well just give up.

This is the nature of our generation: There isn't enough time to work so hard in Avodas Hashem, and therefore, people immediately want to see it all finished. But in Avodas Hashem, we need patience. Chazal^[3] say, "Today is for action, and tomorrow is for reward." If somebody wants to live "tomorrow" already today, he is really saying that he doesn't want to be involved in his current Avodas Hashem. Living like this, a person will never get the true reward.

There are only a few rare individuals in every generation who have merited to taste true spiritual

pleasure on this world without having to work hard for it. Most people, naturally, have to work hard on this world to grow spiritually, and only in the next world will we enjoy spiritual bliss.

However, a person naturally wants to see results from his Avodas Hashem right away. If he doesn't see enjoyment out of it, he at least wants to see some growth right away. But this is impossible! We need great patience for any point that we work on. We have to wait many months until we merit to enter the true world of Avodas Hashem.

When a person hears an important matter and he understands it intellectually, he might immediately wish to internalize it in his heart. But the heart is initially a 'heart of stone'! That is the way Hashem made it, and in order to transform our heart of stone into a soft heart of flesh, we need to work very hard.

Realizing That It's All From Hashem

To what does this apply? In the previous chapters, we advised to do *hisbodedus* (solitude) and *hisbonenus* (reflection) once a week, for a few hours at a time. There are people who try this for one week, and when it "doesn't go" for them, they immediately give up and say, "This isn't for me. These are lofty matters, and they are meant only for others to work on. It's good advice, but it can only work for very special people in the generation."

But according to what we have said in this chapter, we know that this is incorrect. When a person declares "This isn't for me", he's basically saying that he doesn't have the ability for it, and that he simply can't do it. He is wrong, because although it is humanly impossible to sit for so many hours and reflect, anyone can still do it, **if we turn to Hashem** to help us do it! A person should sit and say, "*Ribono shel olam*, I don't have any energy for this, even for a minute. But I know that You can give me the strength to do it. Can you just give me help for one minute to do this?"

When people don't believe that they can sit so long and do *hisbonenus*, it really stems from a lack of simple belief in Hashem, who gives us strength every moment. A person who feels that he simply can't do it should know that this is the key to enable him to have the strength, because now he can ask Hashem, "*Ribono shel olam*, my strength and motivation is weak. If You don't give me the energy for this, I have nothing on my own to give me the energy."

When a person realizes that whatever he can attain is anyway only a gift from Heaven, he will then be opened up the gates of sustenance from Heaven.

The truth is that it's erroneous to begin with for a person to ever give up on matters of Avodas Hashem and say, "I can't do this." When a person feels that he can't become great, then by the same logic he shouldn't be able to get back to his house. A person believes, though, that he can get back to his house, and he doesn't doubt his abilities. But if you think about it, this is denying Hashem! If a person believes that it was Hashem who enables him to get back to his house, so can he believe that it is Hashem who can bring you to whatever it is that you want to achieve.

When people feel "I can't do it" in *ruchniyus* (spiritual matters), it is not because they can't do it - it is all coming from the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination), who tricks a person that things are up to his energy or not. The truth, however, is that we cannot do anything on our own. The greater a person becomes, the more he realizes how pathetic it is to be a human, and he's not doing this to be humble; it is rather a simple recognition that everything is from Hashem, and Hashem can give us anything.

That is the first reason why a person cannot say about these matters that "it's not for me."

Only A Stubborn Person Is Successful

A second reason why “It’s not for me” is erroneous is because the Vilna Gaon said that only a stubborn person is successful. If someone isn’t persistent in matters of Avodas Hashem, he will never be successful.

This is a fundamental which applies to all areas of life. Imagine if a father sends his child to yeshiva, and on the first day the child comes back and says, “This is not for me!” The father, upon hearing this, will probably consider another school for his child – perhaps a school that is a bit different, which will cater more to his child’s needs. This is, however, an incorrect approach to take. All children go to school, so why should this child be any different? Just because he had one bad day in school is enough to conclude that this school is not for him, and that he needs to learn in a less regular kind of school?!

It’s a dangerous way to live life, both with oneself and toward others. People use their human abilities as a barometer: “If everyone can do it, then I can do it too. But if everyone can’t do it, then I can’t either do it.” A person who thinks like this acts like a sheep following the rest of the flock, and he just does what everyone else is doing. If one’s aspirations are limited to what everyone else is aspiring to, then there will be no aspirations.

What we first need to do is to know that we all have a unique personality, and we should not base our achievement on how others think. No two people are exactly the same. We all have our individual strengths; why should someone else’s goals be the same as your goals?

The main difficulty that people struggle with is that they try very hard but aren’t seeing success. A person then concludes, “This isn’t for me.” Why does a person come to such a conclusion? Because he tried once, twice, or maybe three times, and he wasn’t successful...

This is the main point which holds back people from achieving. With the attitude of “This isn’t for me”, a person has no hope. Of course, he will still be able to learn Torah and do mitzvos, but he will never get to an inner kind of life, to a life of a pure soul. If a person doesn’t stubbornly work hard to grow, he won’t get to anything.

The real reason why people aren’t growing (it is at least one of the reasons) is because people don’t have patience in Avodas Hashem.

When a person opens up a business, usually he will not make any money the first two years. It is just an investment. Only after some time will he begin to see profit. If people are willing to make investments when it comes to worldly matters, even though they won’t see profit right away, why can’t they be the same when it comes to Avodas Hashem? Why do people give up so fast on growing?

Maybe one will answer that when it comes to material matters, everyone knows that this is the way it works: the first two years of your business you don’t make any profit, and only after that do you see success. But if you ask any person who truly serves Hashem if they felt anything after a day or two, or even after a month or two, you will see that it indeed took a lot of time until they saw success; but they believed all along that their “Boss” will pay His “workers”, and they knew that none of their efforts are ever being wasted.

At first, we are “*planters with tears.*” When Hashem wills to give us success after we make the effort, it is then that “*With rejoicing we harvest.*” We must be aware that Avodas Hashem takes hard work – on all areas. We might have to try even a hundred times at just one point, and maybe at the 101st time we will merit heavenly assistance.

May Hashem help us that we should not be of those who do not appreciate their value, those who do not realize that it is up to Hashem to help us receive any success. Rather, may each of us truly aspire

for greatness - to give a *nachas ruach* (satisfaction) to our Creator.

[1] *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5: 2

[2] *Chullin* 89a

[3] *Eruvin* 22a

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