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## Bilvavi Part 4 - Chapter 17 Ways to Develop Your Ratzon

### ***To Feel That We Are Missing Something***

We have already mentioned in the earlier chapters that without developing our true *ratzon*, we will lack motivation for carrying out any practical improvement in our avodah. The stronger we get our *ratzon* to be, the more energy for avodah we will have, and the converse is true as well: the weaker one's *ratzon* is, the less motivated he will be to do any avodah.

We can compare this to a spring. If it is a sturdy spring, the more we push on it, the more force it will spring out with. But if it weak, it doesn't have so much force.

Let us now continue and explain how we can awaken our *ratzon* and bring it to its revelation, so that our *ratzon* can reach its full strength.

A fundamental rule is that the more a person feels he is missing something, the more he will push himself to get it. If a person doesn't feel so strongly that he's missing something, he won't push himself that much to get what he's missing.

In order to awaken our *ratzon* within us, our avodah is thus to get to a situation in which we truly feel that we're missing something. When we actually feel that we are missing something, our *ratzon* can get strengthened, and it will then be that "nothing stands in the way of the will."

### ***Examine Your Past and Future***

How can a person bring himself to a situation in which he feels that there is something he's missing? For this, a person will have to make use of both his abilities of *shelo lishmah* and *lishmah*.

(We will focus more on how one can use his *lishmah*. This is a bit difficult, and if someone hasn't yet developed his inner world properly up until now, he won't be able to really understand his situation, and he will find it hard to agree with what we will say here. It will be too difficult of an avodah for him to work on.)

There are things we are missing so far from our past, as well as things we are missing that we need to gain in the future. A person should look at the today from the lens of the future. Even if today doesn't seem to a person that he's missing so much, from a perspective of the future, we are missing a lot! One can picture how he would like to look when he's very old. Would anyone want to be the way he is now when he's very old and near the end of his life?

Anyone who thinks about this will get immediately awakened to feel like he's missing a lot in his life.

This shouldn't be too hard for anyone to do. Even a very superficial person can understand this; it's not so hard to imagine one's future and hope to be very fulfilled in one's later years. Anyone can identify with the wish that he needs to improve his situation and fit into the mold he has formed for himself, the kind of person he would like to be by the time he leaves this world.

This is one part of the job: imagine your future and what you want to be like. Now you can see that in your present day, you still have a lot you're missing in terms of development.

But there is another aspect in what we are lacking, and this is harder for a person to work on. This is for a person to look at his *past* and then see what level he is at in comparison to where he should be holding now.

A person has an ego that will not feel comfortable thinking about this. People naturally don't like to think about their imperfections, because that would equate to a feeling of low self-worth - and the ego in a person wants to avoid this feeling.

The truth is, however, that thinking about one's low level in spirituality doesn't have to cause in you a feeling of low self-worth. But the fact of the matter is that people naturally assume that it will cause such a feeling, and therefore people naturally avoid thinking into such things. People run away from dealing with their imperfections, and they definitely do not want to live with such knowledge. (That is why this part of the job is harder to work on.)

These are the two aspects to what we are missing - either when we look from a perspective of our future (about how we would like to grow more and become more fulfilled), or by comparing our present moment to our past and seeing what we haven't gotten yet in our *ruchniyus*.

### ***The Pros and Cons of Reading Gedolim Biographies***

What can help a person realize how much he is missing in his *ruchniyus*? There are several ways.

One example is that a person can read a book about stories of *Gedolim*. When we read about their lives, we can compare what they were like at the same age we are at right now - and we see how much of a higher level they were on when they were our age.

Now, if a person is reading such a book and he sees how far he is from the level these *Gedolim* were at when they were his very age - if he searches for the truth, a fear grips him, and he thinks to himself: "Look at how much this *Gadol* did when he was my age. I'm a fully grown adult and I am on a way lower level than this *Gadol* was at my age."

However, although this can give a person a push to improve himself and try to attain those high levels he is reading about (and even this should only be attempted on condition that a person truly feels that he is ready to strive for such a level), there is a danger here as well. The danger is that a person will feel, "This *Gadol* was on such a high level when he was my age. Look at me - I'm on such a low level." When a person feels this way, he has no chance whatsoever to succeed. He will go lost.

On a deeper note, comparing is never a good thing. Why should a person compare himself - even to a *tzaddik*? We all have unique abilities, and a person is only tested in life according to **his** true capabilities. Chazal state that "Just as all faces are not equal, so are all opinions not equal." Each person has his unique natures and situations in life. Thus, whenever we compare ourselves with others, it's an incorrect attitude.

We must know that everything in Creation was created by Hashem for a good purpose. Chazal<sup>[1]</sup> say that “jealousy of Torah scholars increases wisdom”, and while this is true, often the way that the person is jealous is an incorrect attitude. We cannot judge anyone unless we are in his place, and as the Kotzker Rebbe said, we never get to another person’s place and thus we can never judge anyone. So although Chazal say that jealousy can be used in a constructive way, we must understand that jealousy is only meant to be used as a *tool* to bring us closer to Hashem; it can indeed give a person a push to strive for higher levels when he sees that his friend is higher than him. Jealousy is only constructive when it doesn’t shatter his feeling of self-worth.

So we must never compare ourselves to others. That is one danger we must avoid.

On the other hand, there is another way to look at it, and that is as follows. If one is reading a book about a *Gadol*, and he sees how great he was – he can think to himself: Who says that this *Gadol* had more energies than I do? Maybe he had much less spiritual resources than I do, and yet he *still* achieved his greatness!

In other words, we cannot make any definite comparisons between ourselves and the *Gedolim* we read about. But what we can do is wonder that *maybe* we have even more energy than those *Gedolim*, and this can give us a push to work on ourselves. After all, it’s possible for you to reach those levels!

This is something constructive we can do, and it is recommended as well.

The truth is that this advice comes from the Ramchal.<sup>[2]</sup> He writes there that a person should read stories of *Gedolim*, and this will awaken him to compare his deeds to theirs and thus work to improve himself.

Let’s say, for example, that a person reads about how a certain *tzaddik* was always close to Hashem his entire life, and that he never forgot about Hashem for even a moment. A person can think to himself upon reading this: For how much time of the day do I indeed remember Hashem? How much time did this *tzaddik* remember Hashem...?

Such stories, when we read about them, have to awaken in us a feeling that we are truly a *cheilek eloka mimaal*, a “portion of G-d above” – and thus we have an ability in us to always be connected to Hashem, 24\7. This can awaken in us an inner yearning – if that *gadol* was able to do such a thing, so can I!

### ***Having A Sense of Direction In Life***

When a person already comes in with the negative attitude that he can never become a *gadol*, he is dooming himself from ever attaining all of his aspirations. We have already explained this point earlier<sup>[3]</sup>: that the truth is that each individual Jew is capable of becoming a great person!

Although every person has his own unique soul, the *Rishonim* write that anyone can reach the level of Moshe Rabbeinu. In other words, any person can reach his soul root, and then he is connected to his Creator as a direct result. Understandably, the levels of *d’veykus* with Hashem that a person can have differ according to the level of each soul root, but the fact that we can all reach the essence of our soul is something anyone is capable of attaining.

If a person searches for the truth, and he reads stories of *Gedolim*, he should picture to himself the following.

The possuk says, “*The days of our years are seventy years, and if they are strong, eighty years.*”

Eventually, a person dies. A person can imagine the following (each person according to how much he can do this): His soul is leaving this world after death. He comes to the Heavenly Court. He is judged worthy to go to Gan Eden. He is being escorted to Gan Eden.

Now, he should continue to imagine: Who does he meet there? Who is together with him in Gan Eden? If you he sees someone he knows there who wasn't that close to Hashem – would he want to sit with him in Gan Eden? Of course not. Look around and see if there are any people sitting there whom you would like to be with in Gan Eden – people of high spiritual stature. One thing is for sure – you definitely don't want to sit in Gan Eden with people who aren't on a high spiritual level. It's demeaning to your stature.

In this physical world, a person's level can change, but in the world of eternal truth, the level of closeness to Hashem that a person reached stays the same, forever. It's permanent.

Now think to yourself: That permanent level of closeness to Hashem that you will have in the next world – wouldn't you give anything right now in your life to be on that level?

If a person wants to make sure that he will later be one day someone different than who is today, then the first thing he can do for this is to be clear *where he wants to go*. He can think to himself: Will thinking about Hashem just once a day help me? No, that's not enough. Such thoughts are supposed to spur me on to want to live with Hashem every moment. Anything less than this won't satisfy me."

Practically speaking, however, one should not immediately jump to trying to feel Hashem in his life every second. If someone tries to do this, he is greatly delusional. What we mean here is that a person should know what it is that he is searching for himself – what his goal is in life that he wants to get to.

When a person sets down this aspiration for himself – an aspiration to truly connect with Hashem – this must cover all areas of a person's life. We need to become connected to Hashem in our learning, in our *mitzvos*, in our *midos*, etc. If not, it is impossible to really connect with Hashem. A person should be clear with himself this one point: "If I don't reach my goal in life (closeness to Hashem), I have missed the purpose of my life."

Then, one should examine what he was like a year ago: "How close was I to Hashem a year ago, and where am I holding today?"

If you see that there has been a change in how close you are to Hashem, this is a sign that you have grown. If you see that you haven't changed at all yet, then you have to cry out to Hashem from the depths of your heart and say: "If I remain the way I am for another year, I am basically dead in my *ruchniyus*. Without being close to Hashem, life is death, because only a life of closeness to Hashem is considered a life."

A person should think about this for a long time: "If I'm not feeling closer to Hashem, it's like death. I don't want to be like the wicked, who are considered dead in their lifetime. I have to get out of this kind of life and instead enter a life which will bring me to the truth."

Again, let us repeat that we do not mean for one to immediately jump to actualizing these aspirations. The main thing at this point is for one to have the inner yearning every day, week after week. These words should keep ringing in your ears, day after day, night after night.

With the help of Hashem, after a person feels a change in himself, he should then examine the quality of how much he has changed. Usually, most people only experience a minimal kind of change. Only certain rare individuals are truly serving Hashem as they should and experience changes of high

quality.

A person should imagine to himself how he will look in thirty or forty years from now, and he should think to himself: "Even if by then I'm grown twice as much as I am now, it's still not enough; there's a lot more room to grow."

Or, you can go outside and see some old people walking by you, and then ask yourself: "Do I want to look like that when I'm so old - empty and unfulfilled from life - or do I want to look like how the *Gedolim* looked in their old age, who only grew wiser with the more they aged?"

Do we want to look fulfilled when we are old - or do we want to just go from Rosh Hashanah to Rosh Hashanah with all our various *kaballo*s we made from year to year, which never lasted...?

A person has to realize that if he keeps going the way he has been living his life until now, he has no chance of ever really growing (except if he is a rare individual). He's like a person who climbs a broken ladder - he will never get to the top. He should also realize that the way he is now will be the way he is in the next world, which is eternal, and it can never be changed at that point. The time to change is now. One has to decide on this world, now, what he wants from his life: "Where do I want to be in life when I'm old, to what am I aspiring for in the eternal life after this one? Do I want to be in a lower place in Gan Eden, or in a higher place? Do I aspire to learn in the *beis midrash* of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*....?"

There are no games in the next world. It is the truth. The Zohar states that the way we are on this world is the way we are on the next world - exactly! If a person on this world wasn't connected with his Creator, *chas v'shalom*, then even if he kept all the *mitzvos*, he will not have any *d'veykus* with Hashem in the next world.

The next world is like the "fruits" we enjoy from the "seeds" we planted on this world. We need to plant those "seeds" - with the more we grow, the more seeds we are planting for the next world to enjoy the produce.

Thus, a person has to come to the clear decision about life: What exactly am I aspiring for? It is not enough to think about this for just the half hour that a person learns *mussar* - "Yes, I know, it's true, that's what it says in *Mesillas Yesharim*, I know this..." even if at the end of a half-hour he comes to a decision about this. Such decisions will not last. The decision has to come from our *emunah* - that a person believes that he is able to actualize his decision. If a person doesn't believe that he has the abilities to reach this aspiration, he's fooling himself if he "decides" what he wants from himself in his life, because it will not work. One has to really believe that he *can* arrive at this.

If we tell a person, "Are you willing to put down a hundred dollars that you will aspire for this?" and he refuses, it's all because he doesn't believe in himself that he is able to reach this aspiration. Such a person probably won't even put down ten dollars over this. He doesn't believe himself, so even if he accepts upon himself that he will try to reach this aspiration, he's just lying to himself; he merely *wants*, but he doesn't *believe* that he can actually get there.

A person has to believe that he is able to actualize this great aspiration in life; not that he has to have blind trust, but that he is able to try; that even if he fails, he shouldn't give up, and keep persevering. One has to run after this goal as much as he can and not slacken off from it. The main thing is for a person to believe in himself that he *can* reach it.

(Of course, all of our energy comes from Hashem; we are merely explaining here what our soul has to feel when we make decisions about how we will live our life).

## **External Anchors That Help You Keep To Your Decision**

There is an amazing method which can help a person test himself to see if he has really decided that he will live his life with this sense of direction.

Every person has friends – some have more friends than others, but everyone has friends. A person should imagine that one of his friends is coming to him and telling him: “I couldn’t fall asleep last night. I am tossing and turning at night, because I feel like I’m not growing in life.”

Now imagine that your friend is telling you all of his areas that he’s trying to work on. You ask him, “Nu, what are you supposed to do? Lose sleep for the rest of your life over this?”

And he tells you – “No! I’m ready to give up everything to change. I will use all my energy to live a life for Hashem.”

The gain of this is because normally, a person doesn’t see his own faults, because he’s defensive of his ego. But if you see yourself from the outside, you get a more unbiased view of yourself, and you get to know about yourself better. By imagining yourself in a friend who’s talking to you and telling you that “he” wants to improve himself, you will be much more ready to help your “friend” change...

When doing this, ask yourself if your “friend” would agree with your various arguments. Would he believe how earnest you are in your desire to improve?

There is a story told of Rav Dessler zt”l that he tried to quit smoking many times. He resolved many times to quit, but he just couldn’t stop the smoking addiction. Once he resolved firmly that he is going to stop, cold turkey. He began to look for advice on how he could keep to his decision. He was a smart man – he knew that if it was so hard for him to quit until now, there would be no point in trying those same tactics anymore to quit. He knew that for this one, he’s going to need something extreme to get him to stop.

He did some thinking, and then he figured something out – and he was able to quit smoking! How did he do it?

He told people that he will not be seen with a cigarette if anyone comes to visit him in his office. Because he felt too ashamed in front of them to go back on his word, the fear of being seen as a liar overpowered his temptation for a cigarette.

Really, he was acting *lishmah*. But since he knew that there are external factors threatening his decision to stop smoking, he decided to use various external tools to avoid those chances.

This is an example of how to truly serve Hashem. A truthful person uses other factors to get him to keep to his decisions.

If someone isn’t truthful like this, then it is not recommended that he tell people about this, because he’s already feeling deep down, “The day might come that I can’t keep to my resolutions, and then I’ll be ashamed from everyone I’ve told that I’ll change.”

So if a person decides that he is going to change and work on a certain area to improve, he should create for himself a situation in which he will find it almost impossible to go back on his word. We do not mean for one to do extreme things for this. Don’t run away from people – instead be with people, and have for yourself factors which will make it very hard for you to go back on your decisions.

Each person needs different factors to help him stay to his decisions – what works for one person

doesn't always work for another. But the common denominator between all people is that all people need external factors in the environment to help them keep to their word.

For example, if a person knows that he is weak when it comes to certain areas in his *ruchniyus*, and he resolves to improve in these areas – he should inform a friend about it. It has to be someone he's embarrassed of if he fails, because if it's a friend whom he feels no shame in front of, it's pointless. Pick a friend whom you will find it very unpleasant for you if he finds out you're not keeping to your word.

If you see yourself failing in an area, you don't have to tell him all the details of how you failed. Just tell him – “I wasn't successful again with this area.”

Really, every person wants to do what's right, because he knows the truth. It is just that we have a body which gets in our way and sways us from what we know is right. In order to pacify our body, we need to create for ourselves a situation in which we will feel ashamed to give in to our body's demands. This shame can be, for example, if one will feel embarrassed in front of a certain person if that person finds out he didn't keep to his resolution.

Without making such resolutions to want to change, it is almost definite that a person will fail in keeping to his decisions (besides for rare individuals who are very strong when it comes to self-control).

### **Only Take On Normal Changes**

Caution is advised with this point. Make sure that you set for yourself normal limits that will help you succeed – don't place on yourself extreme limits. That will only hamper you from succeeding.

For example, if a person learns for 10 hours a day and he resolves to learn 18 hours a day, and he makes up that if he doesn't learn the 18 hours, he will give 1000 dollars to *tzedakah* – there's no chance he'll succeed in keeping to such a resolution! Any normal person understands this. It is totally unrealistic. Maybe you can have an aspiration that you will one day learn 18 hours a day, but don't attempt to carry this out (in today's generation, it is almost impossible to learn for so long, because we are much weaker today than in previous generations).

Not only are these unrealistic aspirations, but the external factors which one is trying to use here to help him keep to his changes is also abnormal. He will fail a few times, and then he'll give up altogether.

Any resolution one takes upon himself has to be realistic. For example, if someone learns 10 hours a day, it is unrealistic that he accept upon himself to learn for 14 hours a day. However, what he can do it take upon himself to add on another 15 minutes of learning a day, or another 30 minutes a day; and he can make up that if he doesn't keep to this resolution, that he will give every day some money to *tzedakah* (an amount that will he be annoyed to give).

Generally speaking, the way how one can know if his resolutions are real or not is by seeing if he can fall asleep at night. When people take on resolutions that are too hard for them, they can't fall asleep at night, and it's a sign that the commitment was too much for him.

When a person resolves to change and he's full of anxiety inside from this, it shows that his *ratzon* isn't strong enough yet. One should never take on resolutions like this that cause one to get anxious. What a person should do instead is to really decide that he wants to work on a certain area, and only after deciding that he indeed wants to work on it, can he then take on resolutions happily, to help him keep to his *ratzon*.

When a resolution to change isn't made happily, it shows that it's only a mental decision in a person's head to change – the person hasn't yet decided with his *heart* that he is resolving to change.

So each person has to see at what level his heart is at, and to firmly feel how much he's missing right now in his life – and that he wishes to fill what he lacks in his life. Then, resolutions must be made to try to get there.

The words we have said here are the true test for a person to see if he's really being *oived Hashem* or not. Someone who isn't being truthful with himself might try different things other than what we have said here, but he's scared of taking responsibility over his failures. He avoids pressuring himself whatsoever to really change. The truth of such a person's situation is that he doesn't really have a *ratzon* to improve. He just wants to be free from any sort of pressure.

But, Hashem created the world so that we can have a *kabalas ol malchus shomayim* – to accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven. It is a necessity for each individual to have the *ol*, a responsibility. The level of *ol* differs with each person, but we all need an *ol*. We all must take responsibility for ourselves.

Let us emphasize that all which we have said above can only help someone who has already awakened in himself a *ratzon*, and he thus seeks to help himself keep to his *ratzon* by creating for himself more motivating factors.

But if someone finds that his resolutions are only making him feel anxious inside, then he needs to go back to the previous stage and awaken his *ratzon*. He should ask himself: "Do I really want to serve Hashem, or not? Yes, I want to!" (Let's assume he's already passed this stage, though). Then he should ask himself: "How much I am willing to give to Hashem of my life, in order to really serve Him?"

When a person truly awakens his *ratzon* and he comes to realize that "We only have one desire, for our Father in Heaven" – he will surely merit true closeness with Hashem.

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[1] *Bava Basra 22a*

[2] *See sefer Derech Eitz Chaim*

[3] *see Chapter Eight: Aspirations for Greatness*

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**Source:** <http://www.bilvavi.net/english/bilvavi-part-4-chapter-17-ways-develop-your-ratzon>