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[Home](#) > Getting to Know Your 70 Forces - 001 Nothingness Part 1 | Using The Power of Nothingness

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## Getting to Know Your 70 Forces - 001 Nothingness Part 1 | Using The Power of Nothingness

### **Introduction**

[In the soul, there are “forces” of the soul, and there are also “limbs” of the soul].

In the past, we have spoken about the [spiritual meaning of the] 248 limbs of man<sup>[1]</sup>, and we also have discussed the faculties of the soul, such as the four elements in the soul of earth, water, wind and fire.<sup>[2]</sup> Now we will speak about the “limbs” of our soul. Our 248 limbs are the limbs of our body, while the “limbs” of our soul are called the “70 forces of the soul”.<sup>[3]</sup> Our four elements are the roots of our soul abilities, but they are not the “limbs” of our soul.

We will try now to learn about these 70 forces of our soul, which are also referred to as the “limbs” of the soul.

### *How The 70 Forces of the Soul Differ In Animals and Human Beings*

The **Vilna Gaon (Yeshayahu 11:1)** brings from the *Zohar* that man is made up of 248 limbs in the body and 70 forces of the soul. He lists all the 70 forces of the soul, which are present both in man and animals.

Most of these forces apply to both humans and animals. One of the 70 forces, the power of speech (which has three applications - regular speech, intellectual speech and action-oriented speech)<sup>[4]</sup> is unique only to people. Animals can also communicate, but they cannot intellectualize and they cannot reflect into what the actions they do. In addition to this, the Vilna Gaon adds that the abilities of *hirhu*\passing thought and *sechok*\laughter apply only to humans. Additionally, the Vilna Gaon writes that the ability of intellectual speech and action-oriented speech are only found in humans.

### *The Three Higher Forces Above The 70 Forces of the Soul*

These two abilities of speech, intellectual speech and action-oriented speech, are like the “heads” that preside over the rest of the 70 forces of the soul, just as the 70 nations of the world are headed by the nations of Esav and Yishmael.

To be more specific, there are really 73 nations: there are 70 nations, plus Esav and Yishmael, and then there is a higher power that presides over the two root forces of the soul. It is called the “*sod ha’echad*” - the “secret of oneness” - the higher power that is actually *above* the soul, which can

unify all the 70 forces. The “*sod ha’echad*” is really the nation of Yisrael, the unifying power of the world.

### *The Root Forces In The Soul: Nothingness, Existence, and First Formation*

The first power of the 70 forces in the soul, the Vilna Gaon writes, is called “**heder kodem I’havayah**”- the “nothingness” that came before all [recognizable] existence. Before the Creation we see, there was an empty space which preceded it, and this empty space was created by Hashem, Who preceded all of existence.

The first three powers of the soul are the three roots of all the 70 forces, and the first of these three roots is the “nothingness”, (called “*heder*” in Hebrew) which came before the existence of Creation. After this came **havayah** (the beginning of existence we recognize) and after that came **tzurah rishonah** (the first actual formations in Creation). After that came the rest of the 70 forces in Creation [beginning with the four elements of fire, wind, water and earth, and so forth].

So the first force in our soul, according to the **Vilna Gaon**, is called the “nothingness that came before our existence”. The second force in our soul is our *havayah* \our existence, which is also called **hiyuli** \matter. The third force in our soul is called *tzurah rishonah* (first formation).

### **The Ramban’s Alternative Description of The Three Root Forces**

The **Ramban (Beraishis 1:1)** also describes these three primary forces in the soul, but he writes a different terminology for them: *efes*, *tohu*, and *vohu* - which are all terms that mean “nothingness.” “**Efes**” refers to the nothingness before existence; “**tohu**” refers to *hiyuli*, and “**vohu**” refers to *tzurah rishonah*.

The Ramban writes there that Hashem first created a total nothingness (*efes* \ *heder*), then He made an empty space (*tohu* / *hiyuli*) and then He formed it into an image (*vohu* \ *tzurah rishonah*). From there, He filled in the rest of Creation and completed its design.

These three forces are present both in humans and in animals.

### **Understanding The Concept of ‘Nothingness’**

The first ability of the 70 forces, nothingness (*heder*) doesn’t seem to be a power in the soul. If it is nothing, of what use is it? That’s what it seems. But the truth is that there is a power in Creation called nothingness, and it has its uses. The fact that it is listed as one of the 70 abilities shows that it must have some use.

The force of “nothingness” is when something remains in its dormant state, and it hasn’t yet been utilized to its potential. The second ability in the soul, *havayah* \recognizable existence, is when something begins to become utilized.

Here is a question: If nothing is an existing power in the soul, why is it called *heder*, nothingness? If it exists, why isn’t it called *havayah*, existence? It is because the *heder* (nothingness) is really part of the *havayah* (existence). The nothingness exists specifically so that it will be destroyed and become a *havayah*. That is the defining nature of *heder*, nothingness: it is nothing, because its very existence implies that it will be destroyed, where another creation will replace it.

Why must it be destroyed? Everything in Creation needs boundaries, or else it cannot exist. If something has no boundaries, it is self-destructive. The limits in each thing in Creation are what enable it to survive. Thus, *heder* is always destroyed to become *havayah*, because *havayah* without

*heder* would be a Creation with no limits to it. For this reason, *heder* preceded *havayah*, so that Creation could first be based on a limit [or else it would expand endlessly, and that would lead to destruction].

*Heder*\nothingness is thus the root power of Creation. It serves to place limits on Creation.

### **Analyzing This Concept Further**

Now, if *heder*\nothingness serves to limit Creation, why is it *heder*\nothingness? If it serves a purpose, it must be an existence unto itself, so why is it called nothingness?

The answer is that although *heder* is the root of all limits in Creation, it is not something new. When something is new, it begins to exist, but if it had to have been there beforehand in order to enable the survival of Creation, then by very definition, it has to become before anything existing.

But there is an even deeper understanding as well to this. We simply understand that the Creation is the *havayah* (existence) of Creation, but the deeper understanding of Creation is that all of Creation is really a limited existence of creation - which is *heder*, not *havayah*.

However, we can ask: doesn't *heder* itself contradict *havayah*? *Havayah* is the expansion of Creation, while *heder* places limits on Creation. If so, doesn't the very concept of *heder* contradict all *havayah*?

Herein lays the very novelty that is Creation! Creation is really a vast secret. The understanding is as follows. *Heder* is always anything that is above one's comprehension. It exists, but a person cannot comprehend it. Anything that exists, which I cannot comprehend with my mind, is called *heder*. It is nothingness, but it exists, just, I can't understand the nature of its existence, and for this reason it is referred to as nothingness.

To illustrate, one person comprehends a certain concept, but his friend won't understand that very concept. To the person who understands the concept, it is called *havayah*, and to the person who doesn't understand that concept, the concept is called *heder*.

So *heder* is when I know something exists, but I can't comprehend it. Thus, *heder*, which came before *havayah*, is only *heder* because that is how a person understands it. He knows it exists, but he can't comprehend it, and therefore he views it as some kind of nothingness.

### **Using The Power of "Heder": To Reflect On What Came Before Your Existence**

How does the power of *heder* apply to our soul? How is it a power in our soul? It is a power to be aware of what came before I exist. I am the beginning of my existence, but what came before my existence? This is where the ability of *heder* comes in: to be aware of what came before I existed.

In the depths of our soul, we have two differing abilities: *heder* and *havayah*. We comprehend the fact that our *havayah* came before anything else in our soul, but we don't comprehend how we were nothing to begin with.

If we just think about *heder* superficially, that there is a nothingness that came before we began to exist, then it will hamper our relationship with Hashem. Really, *heder* is a power in our soul we need to make use of to deepen our relationship with Hashem.

There is nothing 'negative' in Creation. Even a 'negative' concept has uses. We see this illustrated from the fact that there are 365 positive *mitzvos* and 248 negative commandments. The 248 negative commandments serve a different purpose than the positive *mitzvos*. By abstaining from evil, we gain

holiness. When we refrain from a sin, it appears as if we are not doing anything, because we are not fulfilling a positive *mitzvah*, but we know that this is not true; when we don't commit a sin, we gain holiness.

Another example that illustrates this concept is darkness. It seems that darkness is just the absence of light, but the Ramban says that darkness is a creation unto itself, and it is not merely an absence of light. It has its uses.<sup>[5]</sup> There is nothing in Creation which has no use. Everything has a use. Therefore, even *heder* nothingness has a use. The fact that I was once nothing before I existed is therefore a concept which has some useful application: to be aware that there is something which existed even before my existing, created state.

### *In Summary*

To summarize, *heder* is essentially when I am aware of a concept which I know exists, but I know that I don't comprehend it: to know that there are concepts which precede my existence.<sup>[6]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Refer to the 4 audio classes of **דע את גופך**.

<sup>[2]</sup> Refer to the Rav's **Getting To Know Your Soul** and the Rav's series of **Understanding Your Middos**.

<sup>[3]</sup> Editor's Note: "Soul" in this context refers to the "animal" level of the soul (*nefesh habehaimis*), not in the higher aspects of the soul such as "*ruach*" and "*neshamah*".

<sup>[4]</sup> See **70 Forces of the Soul #061: Conclusion** to learn about these three forces of speech.

<sup>[5]</sup> Editor's Note: In sefer *Da As Atzmecha (Getting To Know Your Self)*, the Rav brings from *Sefer HaMaspik L'Ovdei Hashem* (authored by Rav Avraham ben HaRambam) that the power of darkness can be used in a holy way when we use nighttime (or a dark room) to reflect deeply into our soul and be able to sense our inner self.

<sup>[6]</sup> Editor's Note: To know how to apply this concept, see *Getting To Know Your Happiness #08 Simchah and Sasson*, in the subsection entitled "Purim: Going Above Your Existence"