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## Mesillas Yesharim - Sanctifying Marital Relations

ח"ג - עמ' תקמו - תקנו

The **Mesillas Yesharim** [in *Chapter 13: The Trait of Perishus\Abstinence*] writes: **“Although the act [of marital relations] is permitted, it can still make a person drown in this lust, and from that he will also come to commit sins.”**

The concept of *Perishus* (abstinence) includes two parts: It is to abstain from sin, and it also includes abstaining even from acts which are permitted. Even when certain actions are permissible, they can lead one to commit a sin. For this reason, the Sages enacted that a Torah scholar must immerse in a *mikveh* the day after he has marital relations, so that he won't indulge in marital relations with his wife as if he's a hen. Since he knows that he will have to go to the *mikveh* the next day if he has relations, he won't do it as much.

Someone asked Reb Pinchos Koritzer zt"l: What does immersing in a *mikveh* help? How does it detach a person from physicality? Reb Pinchos answered: “You have nothing to worry about. The *mikveh* will purify you.” The explanation behind this is that although having marital relations attaches a person to materialism – for women represent the material world – still, as soon as a person exits the *mikveh*, he is purified, because the *mikveh* has the power to lead a person away from being pulled too much after materialism.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* continues: **“As the Sages say, “Man has a small organ. If he satisfies it, it will be hungry; if he starves it, he will be satisfied [Sanhedrin 107a].”** The simple meaning of this is that a Torah scholar should not engage in marital relations so much, as the Sages find it unbecoming for a Torah scholar to resemble a hen, who indulges in marital relations. But there is more depth to the matter.

Dovid *HaMelech* declared that he was born out of his parents' desire for each other [*Tehillim 51:7*]. In other words, even Yishai, the father of Dovid *HaMelech* – who was one of the four people who did not sin – was still influenced to some degree by the evil Snake, who introduced desire into the world.

In marital relations, there are three factors involved: 1) The aspect of giving, in that the husband gives pleasure to the wife, through the act of marital intimacy. In this way, one resembles Yosef *HaTzaddik*, who represents the trait of *Yesod* [“Foundation”, to guard one's personal holiness], for he was the one who provided for the land of Egypt, always giving to the land. Therefore, if a person engages in marital intimacy not for the sake of giving pleasure to his wife, but for the sake of his own personal pleasure, he goes from being a giver to becoming a taker.

Yet, there is always some personal motives involved when one engages in marital relations, and for this reason, Dovid *HaMelech* declared that even his father Yishai, who was pure from sin, did not entirely engage in marital relations for the sake of giving pleasure. If he would have done it only for the sake of giving pleasure, it would be considered *lishmah* (for the sake of Heaven) and Dovid *HaMelech* would not mention it. There is always some pleasure involved in the act, and therefore the act always contains some element of taking pleasure.

So far we have mentioned that marital intimacy involves giving pleasure, as well as some element of taking pleasure, due to the inevitable pleasure that one has in it. There is a third aspect as well in the act: The connection between the spouses which it engenders.

These are the three possible motivations that exist in marital relations – The will to give, the desire to take, and the motivation to achieve a connection.

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When one exercises his *perishus* \abstinence by avoiding sin, this is the initial level, which is *zehirus* (watchfulness). The next step is for a person to take extra measures so that he won't come to sin, and this is called "*Perishus*" \abstinence. Finally, the highest level of abstinence is when a person avoids physicality, because he is disgusted by physicality. This is a higher level than *Perishus*.

To give a deeper explanation, there is a kind of *perishus* which we practice through our thoughts, but there is also a *Perishus* we can utilize through our very soul. So besides for being willing in our thoughts to abstain from indulgence in permissible desires, there is another depth to the matter: that we should detach from pleasure itself. This is how we utilize *Perishus* in our soul. When the Sages said that one should "starve" the male organ from marital relations, they did not just mean it on the simple level, that one should refrain from the act. They meant it on a deeper level as well, that one should refrain from his need for pleasure sometimes.

However, the question is: There is a mitzvah of the Torah upon every married man to engage in marital relations with his wife. If so, what did Chazal mean that one should "starve" the male organ from marital relations?

The simple answer to this is that the Torah only obligates one to engage in marital relations in the situations that require him to do so [ex. on the night of her immersion, or if he is going out to travel, or if it Friday night] but if it's not one of these situations, one should refrain from marital relations. But the deeper answer is that even when one is obligated to engage in marital relations, he must feel as he if he "starving" himself in the sense that he's not doing it to receive pleasure, but rather, because he wants to give pleasure. As the Gemara says elsewhere concerning the Sage Rabbi Eliezer, [*Nedarim 20b*], that he would engage in marital relations "as if a demon forced him to". The ***Mesillas Yesharim*** indeed brings this practice of Rabbi Eliezer in the next paragraph, which alludes to the deep answer we are presenting. And when one "starves" his male organ in this way, he comes to be "satisfied."

When a person still longs to receive pleasure from the act, he is like someone who seemingly satisfies his male organ, while in reality, his male organ will be left unsatisfied. The more a person seeks to take pleasure from the act, the hungrier his male organ will become, no matter how much he seemingly 'satisfies' it through the act of marital intimacy. But when he "starves" his male organ, as the Sages say to do – in other words, if he does it for the sake of giving pleasure, and not for the sake of taking pleasure – he removes himself from taking mode, and he will gain in that his male organ will feel that it has been satisfied.

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On a deeper note, there is a pleasure even in giving pleasure, and therefore, one must learn as well to abstain even from the pleasure of giving pleasure. There is a rule that “The cow wishes to nurse is young calf even more than the young calf wishes to nurse.” Giving is a more pleasurable feeling than the feeling one has when he takes pleasure. This is a pleasure which is also never satisfied, because a person always wish to give pleasure to others, with even an greater desire than the one who wishes to receive the pleasure! So just as there is an avodah for one to abstain from the pleasure in taking, so is there is an avodah to abstain from the pleasure of giving. This is the true level of *Perishus*.

This is what it really means to “starve” the male organ. Not only must a person restrain himself from taking pleasure, but he must also learn to refrain from the act even if he’s doing it so he can give pleasure. This is because giving involves pleasure as well, and it is very difficult for one to detach from his pleasure in giving to others; thus, there is an avodah for one to detach even from an act that is about giving pleasure.

These are two areas in which we must learn to abstain from – to abstain from acts of taking pleasure, as well as to abstain even from acts that involve *giving* pleasure.

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What we still need to understand, however, is: Why is it that starving the male organ causes one to have his intimate needs satisfied? It is understandable that “satisfying” it too much leaves a person feeling “starved”, because indulging in marital relations is a recipe for being left unsatisfied [as we explained above]. But why is it that “starving” the male organ is what satisfies it?

The answer lies in the secret of Shabbos. Hashem created the world in six days, and then on Shabbos, He rested. Shabbos is a time in which we rest from labor, in which we are supposed to view all our labor as being done. On Shabbos, although we are not going to work, we lack nothing. Shabbos is a concept in which we are complete, and we do not need anything else to complete our existence.

In the same vein, Hashem wants us to feel satisfied inside ourselves, that we are not lacking for anything. When we “starve” the male organ, it is not simply that we must overcome our lust. That is true, but there is more depth to the matter. It is about feeling satisfied inside ourselves. It is to realize that our hunger for physical desires is not really a hunger, but rather that it is something which cloaks our essence, and in our essence, we are satisfied.

Thus, even if a person starves himself from marital relations, he shouldn’t feel that he’s “starving” himself at all. He shouldn’t feel deprived at this. If he feels that he’s depriving himself, he will never come to be satisfied. As an example, there are people who fast all day, but when it comes the end of the day, they feel like they’re starving. Such people miss the whole point; they feel like they are ‘depriving’ themselves. They will always feel hungry when they abstain from food, because they still feel that they need the food in order to feel satisfied.

If a person reveals the secret of Shabbos [secret is called *sod* in Hebrew, which is similar to the word *Yesod*\Foundation\the feeling of satisfaction that one has upon guarding his holiness], he has left the attitude that his hunger must be “satisfied”, because he does not feel deprived at all abstaining from the physical pleasure.

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This is the deeper definition of *Perishus*. Until now we explained the basic level of *Perishus*, which is for one to avoid actual sin or to detach from materialistic pursuit. On a deeper level, a person detaches from materialism because he doesn't feel deprived at all with not having materialism. He has *Perishus*, because he feels complete.

Usually, we understand that the concept of *Perishus* is for one to abstain from physical desires in the sense that he has to overcome his bodily drives and instead listen to his soul. But the depth of *Perishus*, the inner kind of *Perishus*, is for a person to feel that *he doesn't need the physicality*. He doesn't feel that he is being "starved" in any way. He feels completely satisfied, and from his inner satisfaction he feels with himself, he comes to have *Perishus* as a result.

The ***Mesillas Yesharim*** continues: **"Furthermore, even concerning a time that one is obligated to engage in marital relations, it was said the Sage Rabbi Eliezer would only a reveal his body just a *tefach's* worth in the front, and he was covered for two *tefachim* worth in back of him. He resembled someone who looks like he is being forced by a demon to do it, so that he wouldn't have to enjoy the act even as he was enjoying it."**

Our Rabbis dealt extensively with this subject. It is a matter that is in need of understanding. Earlier, we mentioned how even Yishai, the father of Dovid HaMelech, who was one of the four people that never sinned, still had a desire for marital relations. Dovid HaMelech said that he was born out of his parents' desire for each other. So how can it be that the Sage Rabbi Eliezer was more pious than Yishai? Yishai never sinned once in his life, yet he still had a desire for marital relations. Rabbi Eliezer was clearly not as perfected as Yishai, yet he did not have enjoyment from marital intimacy. How are we to understand this?

The answer lies in understanding what it means that he revealed "a *tefach's* worth" in front his body, yet he was covered in back by "two *tefachim*." It is hinting to us something deeper.

In man, there are three general forces. The highest part of man is his *neshamah* (G-dly soul). The lowest part of man is the "animalistic" part of his soul, which is called his *nefesh hebehaimis*. In between these two levels of the soul, there is also a middle layer, which serves as a bridge between the higher and lower levels of the soul. The middle of the layer, when accessed, either connects a person to his *neshamah*, or it brings him down into the *nefesh habehaimis*.

Man's soul comes from Heaven, and his body was created from earth. Man can connect to the completely spiritual through his *neshamah*, and draw forth spiritual pleasure from there. Or, he can descend into the pleasures of the body, deriving pleasure that is animalistic in its nature.

When Rabbi Eliezer revealed one *tefach's* worth of space in front of him during marital relations, the intent is that part of him enjoyed the act. This is the inevitable result of being human, for we see that even Yishai, who never sinned in his life, also had a degree of enjoyment in the act. The physical aspect of the intimacy gave him a degree of pleasure - but as for the higher parts of himself - his *neshamah* and his middle layer of his soul - those other two parts of himself did not enjoy the act at all. We will explain this more.

Our *neshamah* is G-dly in its essence. It does not enjoy physical pleasure. Our physical body, though, needs animalistic kinds of pleasures to sustain itself. As for the middle level of our soul, man has the choice if he will use it or not to connect to spiritual pleasure through it. When Rabbi Eliezer covered himself for the amount of two *tefachim* behind his body, the meaning of this is that he "covered" it and did not reveal it - he covered it from physical enjoyment [choosing to use it to connect to spirituality instead].

Thus, it is true that all people have enjoyment from marital relations, as we see that even Yishai did. But that is only with regards to the physical aspect of ourselves. The physical body in us is the part of us which sins, and therefore it also has animalistic pleasures.

But the higher part of man, the *neshamah*, does not enjoy the physical part of the act. It instead is enjoying the fact that there is *Shechinah* between a man and woman, when they merit it.

The rest of Rabbi Eliezer did not enjoy the act at all, and it was rather like being forced by a demon to do it. This was with regards to the middle layer of his soul.

Thus, the fact that Rabbi Eliezer revealed one *tefach* in front and two *tefachim* behind him reflected how only the lowest part of himself, his body *nefesh hebeheimis*, enjoyed the physical aspect of it. But as for the other "two *tefachim*", he left them "covered" - - his *neshamah*, and his middle layer of the soul - did not enjoy the physical aspect.

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Hashem knows what's really going on in a person's heart, where he's really deriving his satisfaction from in the act. Hashem knows if a person's enjoyment in physical intimacy is coming only *partially* from his body (while his soul remains connected to spiritual enjoyment at the same time), or if a person is getting his *entire* enjoyment from the physical aspect of it.

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