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The Abilities of The Heart

With the help of Hashem, we will learn here about the study of our [spiritual] heart, the *lev*.

Man has 248 limbs and 345 sinews, as our Sages state. The *Mishnah*^[1] lists all of these limbs, but it does not list the heart. However, although the heart isn't counted as one of the 248 limbs, it is considered to be the root of all the limbs. The Sages state that the heart is called the "king"; the *Talmud Yerushalmi* states that all the limbs are dependent on the heart.

The [spiritual] heart is a complex matter. The Sages^[2] list all of the abilities of the heart; there are really more than the list found there, but this list is the list that the Sages give, and we will begin to study our heart based on this list that our Sages gave. Even this list of our Sages can be further analyzed in all its many details.

Shlomo HaMelech said: *"I spoke with my heart."* What does it mean to speak with one's heart? It is also written, *"Haman spoke in his heart."* What does this mean?

The Sages (in *Koheles Rabbah*) list the abilities of the heart. The first on the list is that the heart sees, as it is written, *"My heart has seen much wisdom."* The heart listens, for it is written, *"And You gave to Your servant a heart that listens."* The heart speaks, for it is written, *"I spoke with my heart."* The heart walks, for it is written, *"To him, his heart walks."* The heart also can fall, stand, be joyous, scream, comfort, be pained, strengthen, distance, fear, break, feel conceited, rebel, meditate, reflect, whisper, think, desire, stray, lust, be satiated, be stolen, be humbled, makes effort, trembles, awakens." We have only mentioned here just half of the list.

From here we see that the heart has many details. These are not just details, but each of these reveals a whole new aspect about the heart. This list is taken from *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana*, which is a brief list. But in *Oisiyos D'Rebbi Akiva*^[3], it is brought that the heart is parallel to the 248 limbs, meaning, whatever is in the 248 limbs is inside the heart. Thus, the heart is a microcosm of the entire body.

The simple understanding about our heart is that our heart is the seat of our desires and emotions, etc. But from the words of the Sages, we see that the heart is much deeper than that; that there are many details to the heart.

We will delve into the root abilities. There are always roots and branches to everything; we have seen the branches, and now we will analyze the roots.

What is the root of the heart? Where is it?

The Heart Is The Source of Vitality

We mentioned from the words of our Sages that the heart has the ability to become awakened, as it is written, *"I am asleep, but my heart is awake."* What does this mean? Simply this means that the "heart of the nation *Yisrael* is Hashem" (as it is written, *"The rock of my heart and portion is G-d"*), thus, even when a person sleeps, Hashem never sleeps. This is the simple meaning behind the concept of our Sages.

But in the words of the Arizal and the Vilna Gaon, the understanding is as follows: When a person goes to sleep, his life leaves all of his limbs, and only his heart remains alive. All of the other limbs lose their vitality (not completely, though, because that would make the person dead; there is still some vitality that remains) when a person is asleep. How does the vitality return? The soul goes to Heaven during sleep and undergoes an accounting. But how does the person remain alive while he is asleep? *"I am asleep but my heart is awake"* - the entire body, when it goes to sleep, its vitality all gathers into the heart.

Why does it get sent into the heart when a person goes to sleep?

First of all, the power of imagination is in the heart, and when a person sleeps and his heart is awake, his imagination gets awakened, and that is why sleep is the time of dreams and imagination.

But the main understanding, as it pertains to us, is as follows. Shlomo HaMelech said, *"From all that you guard, guard your heart, for from it, comes life."* The heart must be guarded carefully - *"for from it, comes life"*. As our Rabbis explained, the blood flows from the heart into the rest of the body, so the heart is the source of vitality. This is true, but there is a deeper understanding as to why the heart is the source of vitality. A person's vitality flows from it. It is the *source of life* in the person - therefore, it cannot cease.

Sleep is termed by the Sages as "a sixtieth of death"; if the heart would sleep, a person would lose all his vitality when he sleeps, and even when he wakes up, he would be considered dead while asleep and alive when he wakes up. But since our heart is never asleep, being that it is the source of constant vitality, therefore, a person is always connected to life even as he sleeps. Thus, the heart is always "awake" - meaning, it constantly connects a person to life.

Herein we can see what the secret to a true life is. True life is *when vitality is uninterrupted*. When a person draws forth vitality constantly, that can be called a real, vitality-filled life. If there is interruption of vitality, it is 'death', and this is not true life.

The ultimate form of a real life is described in the possuk, *"And you shall cleave to Hashem your G-d, today"* - when one has a constant connection with Hashem, that is true life.

Even a dead person has some degree of life, for the *Nefesh HaChaim* says that if something loses its vitality, it cannot exist. Something cannot exist if it has no vitality. How much vitality each thing has? It depends. Even the non-living has some life to it; there are *levels* to vitality. If something has no vitality, it cannot exist. Death is not a total removal of vitality; if it would be, a person wouldn't be able to be revived in the future.

There is always some connection that a person bears to "life". This is true both with regards to death

in general, as well as with regards to sleep. Sleep is a “sixtieth of death”, and the heart is awake even as one is asleep; so too, even when a person dies, his heart remains forever existent.

The Heart - The Source of A Constant Vitality

Thus, the heart introduces to us a novel concept. It is called the “source of life”, meaning, it connects a person constantly to a life-giving source. Even a person whose heart has been hardened still has some vitality. If he wouldn't, he would stop existing. This is because the heart allows for a constant connection to life.

Now we can understand why the heart is the microcosm of man. Our life itself must flow from a source that is all-inclusive. Where does a person derive his connection to life from? From the heart. That is why the depth of why the Sages say that all of the 248 limbs are parallel to the heart.

The Essence of The Heart: Wisdom of The Heart

After we have understood this first basic point, we need to understand a second point, which is necessary to better understand the first point.

Superficially, we think that the heart is the emotions. If so, the “source of life” that is the heart is our emotions. But this cannot be the truth, for emotions are not the source of our life.

What is the root of the heart? What defines the heart? There are many expressions, and we will say the one that is relevant to us.

Chazal tell us that Hashem created the world through His *Chochmah*\wisdom, as *Targum* states. The question is: What is the root of life - the *lev*\heart, or *chochmah*\wisdom? Where does life come from?

The Mishnah in *Avos* states that the world stands on three things - Torah, *avodah*, and *chessed*. Let's focus here on Torah and *avodah* (*chessed* is a different discussion).

Torah is called “*mochin*”, the mind; in Torah learning, we use our mental abilities of *chochmah*, *binah*, and *daas* (wisdom, understanding, and knowledge). “*Avodah*” is referring to the heart, for “*avodah* of the heart” is called *tefillah*, prayer. (It sounds like “*avodah*” is our feelings. But that is only the superficial understanding).

So is the root of Creation our mind, or our emotions? From where do we mainly derive vitality from?

The Torah is the blueprint of the world, but on the other hand, the source of life is the heart. So what is the root of our vitality? Our mind - or our heart?

One of the abilities of the heart is that the heart thinks. “*There are many thoughts in the heart of man.*” The heart is thus not just the emotions, for that cannot be called the “beginning” of Creation. The root of Creation is *chochmah*, wisdom. So what is our ‘heart’?

Our heart can feel emotions, but that is not the essence of the heart. The heart is described as the “source of life” - that is its essence. It is deeper than emotions. The heart is called *lev*, which has the numerical value in Hebrew of 32, representing the “32 pathways of *Chochmah*\wisdom”. When one returns his nature to this, he reaches his “*lev*”. (These 32 pathways of *chochmah* were used by Hashem to create the world).

In other words, when *Chochmah*\wisdom is found in the person, he has a “*lev*”, and if he does not have *chochmah*, he has no “*lev*”. The *lev* includes everything not because it can love and because

love is an all-inclusive power, but because the essence of the heart includes *all of Creation* within it.

The Heart - The Power To Recognize and Reveal The Beginning

The heart of man is thus the revelation of the “beginning” of Creation manifest in man. This is the meaning of the verse, “*For from it, comes life*”.

When Hashem first created the world, in the first six days, it was the source of life. When these “beginnings” are revealed in man, this is called “*lev*”.

A *lev basar*, a “soft heart”, is when one has a *lev* that feels the source of life, while a *lev arel*, a “blocked heart” is when one does not realize the beginning of Creation manifest in him.

The depth of the concept that Hashem is “the heart of Yisrael” is that just as at the beginning of Creation it was clear that Hashem created it, so too does the heart have the power to recognize this beginning. The *lev*, as we explained, is the revelation of the beginning of Creation, within man. There is *hester panim* (concealment of Hashem’s Presence) of course, but in the first six days, it was clear that Hashem created all. That is the power of the heart: to recognize its *raishis*, its beginning. A true *lev* is when one feels the root of Creation in himself.

This is what it means “*The rock of my heart and portion is G-d.*” Hashem is called the heart of Yisrael, not the heart of the other nations. The other nations are called *areilei lev* (blocked hearts), while the Jewish people have a *lev basar*, a soft heart of flesh. That is the simple understanding, and it is true. But the deeper meaning is because “*Yisrael Li Rosh*” (“Yisrael, to Me, is the head”) – we have the power to truly recognize the *raishis* (the beginning). Hashem is called the *raishis* and the *acharis*, the beginning and end, of all. One who recognizes the *raishis* will recognize the reality of Hashem.

Amalek is the evil kind of “*raishis*” – they are called “the first” of the nations. When one recognizes *raishis*, he recognizes what it was like by the original six days of the Creation, *Beraishis*, the beginning of Creation, in which it was clearly recognized that Hashem created all.

It is written of the nation of Yisrael, “*Yisrael, Li Rosh*” (“Yisrael, to Me, is the head.”) It is also written, “*A wise person’s eyes are in his head*” – a person who sees the beginning of each thing is called a *chochom*, a wise person. “*Yisrael Li Rosh*” describes the essence of a Jew: the power to recognize the *raishis*, Hashem. Our *raishis* is: “*Ani Rishon* – “I (Hashem) am the first.”

Yisrael are the “*raishis*”, and they reveal who the true *raishis* is: “I am the first.” Hashem is the heart of Yisrael because the heart reveals beginnings, and it can reveal how Hashem is the true *raishis*. It does not just mean that Hashem dwells in the heart, which is also true. Here we see that Hashem is the “heart of Yisrael”, which means that *the heart itself reveals Hashem’s existence to a person*.

Does that mean that the heart is Hashem? Isn’t this heresy?! Rather, it means that when the Sages told us that “Hashem is the heart of Yisrael”, it revealed to us what the *depth of the heart* is. We are not coming here to explain that our purpose is to become connected in closeness with Hashem. The concept that “Hashem is the heart of Yisrael” means that *the heart reveals to us a beginning*.

To illustrate the concept, when a person does not understand something based upon its beginning, he has not gotten to the “heart” of the matter.

The Heart Connects All Knowledge To Its Beginning Point

Here is an example. Chazal, when they describe the heart, describe it as a middle point. Chazal say that the heart is in the middle of the body. This is not literal, because we know that the heart is not

actually in the middle of the body. Rather, it means that just as the world was created from the middle point, and thus the middle point is called the “heart” of the world, so is the heart considered the middle point, because the beginning point is called the “heart”.

When a matter is understood as existing, it is called the *rosh*, the “head”. When it is understood within oneself, it is called the *lev*\heart.

A person has both a mind and heart, which are called the two kings in man. The mind understands what the beginning of something is. Thus it is called *rosh*, the head, for it analyzes what the *rosh**raishis* of everything is. But it doesn’t connect this knowledge with the *raishis*.

“*Rosh*” is when there is *raishis*, but it’s just in the *rosh*. The *rosh* is above a person – we have an *avodah* to internalize our knowledge into the heart, not just the knowledge, but the very *rosh*\head must be returned to the heart.

The *rosh* understands *raishis*. But the body doesn’t always follow the knowledge of the head. We can see many people who know a lot, but they don’t act upon their knowledge. Why? It is because the person is not connected to the *raishis* of the information.

One who is immersed in knowledge of Torah is called *roshe v’rube b’Torah* – “his head and most of his body are immersed in learning Torah” - but a person still might not be **connected** to this knowledge. If a person hasn’t worked on himself, usually, he is not connected to the knowledge of his learning.

What is the “*lev*”? The “*lev*” is not just another kind of knowledge that the mind doesn’t know about. The “*lev*” is essentially accessed when the *lev* connects to the “*raishis*” of the knowledge that the “*rosh*” (head\mind) knows about! This is the meaning of “*Yisrael Li Rosh*”, “Yisrael to Me is the head.”

To illustrate, everyone “knows” that Hashem is the *raishis* of Creation, and that Hashem created the world with His *chochmah*. But is a person *connected* to that *chochmah*...?

The nations are called *areilei lev* (those with “blocked hearts”) while the nation of Yisrael is called *mulei lev* (circumcised hearts), because the nation of Yisrael has the unique power to connect their entire existence to Hashem.

This is the depth behind the “*lev*”.

The *lev* is a novel concept. Earlier we explained that the *lev* introduces to us a novel concept that it can recognize the *raishis* of things, a connection to *raishis*. Now we have seen an additional novel concept that the *lev* introduces. The “*lev*” implies that since one is connected to *raishis*, one is connected only to Hashem and to Torah, which are both called the “*raishis*”.

The Difference Between The Mind and The Heart

Chochmah (the power of wisdom) exists both in our intellect and heart. The brain is the seat of our *chochmah*, for it is the source of our mental abilities, but we also find that there is *chochmah* in our heart, such as in the expression, “*chacham lev*” (wise of heart). What is the difference between the *chochmah* found in the *seichel* (intellect) and the *chochmah* of the *lev* (heart)?

It is written, “*My heart has seen much wisdom*” - the heart can “see” wisdom, which the brain cannot. The brain understands, but the heart sees it in a palpable way. Still, what is the essential difference between the wisdom of the mind and wisdom of the heart?

The *seiche*\mind can “see” the *raishis*, but it does not connect its knowledge to the *raishis*. The *lev*

sees how all knowledge reveals its *raishis*.

A person's knowledge begins in his mind, not in his heart, so the heart does not seem to be *raishis*. But the heart can reveal *raishis* even when it seems where there is no *raishis* to the knowledge.

The *chochmah* of the *lev* reveals *raishis* in everything. The Torah begins with the letter *beis* and ends with the letter *lamed*, forming the word *lev*, to show us that the end of the Torah reveals its Beginning - to see even its end as the Beginning.

It is written, "*I am the first, and I am the last, and besides for me there is no other G-d.*" Simply this means that Hashem is first and last - what about the middle? "I am the first and I am the last" - in other words, even when "I am the last", that reveals how "I am the first", and that reveals how "besides for me, there is no other G-d". This reveals how Hashem is the *raishis* all along, in the beginning, middle and end.

One who sees *chochmah* in everything sees the *raishis* of everything, how everything is *raishis*. One who does not see the *chochmah* in everything doesn't see how everything is *raishis*.

"Hashem and the Torah and Yisrael are one". Hashem is "first" and "last". The Torah is the "first", and its end reveals the "beginning" as well. *Yisrael* was once called Yaakov, the "heel", the end of the body, but he became Yisrael: "*Yisrael Li Rosh*" - the *raishis*\beginning.

The Power of Raishis - Returning To The Original Recognition of Hashem

This is the depth behind the "*lev*".

It is written, "*From all that you guard, guard your heart, for from it, comes life.*" The Ramchal (*Mesillas Yesharim*: 26) writes that our intention in our avodah is "*matzpunei hisdabkus ha'amiti*" (the hidden, true connection). There are many levels to this of course, but what does it mean? It means that a person doesn't veer from seeing the *raishis*.

In the first day of Creation, there was no separation yet; it represents *raishis*. There is a statement, "We have only one heart to our Father in Heaven." What does it mean that we have one heart? Of course we have one heart! It means that we have the power to return to the first day of creation, to the *raishis* of Creation.

These words are just an introduction to the *lev*. The details of the *lev* are many, as Chazal have listed. But the root of the *lev*, as we have explained here, is that the *lev* reveals how all is really *raishis*. This is the meaning of "*My heart has seen much wisdom*" - the heart can reveal how all is *raishis*.

Temporary Feelings Vs. Lasting Feelings

If we have understood this, we can complete it with the following. What is the difficulty that our heart presents - and how do we heal it?

There are times when our heart is open and we have [spiritual] feelings, and there are times when our heart is closed from having [spiritual] feelings. Most people, even when their hearts are open, only experience this opening temporarily. The heart is usually closed, and even when we open it, it is usually only for a short while. How do we improve this?

The truth is that even when a person's heart is open, and he has feelings, it is still not the true feelings of the heart.

The heart is always “awake”, as we mentioned earlier; and when a person sleeps, there is imagination, which stems from the heart. But the heart also has in it the “50 Gates of Understanding”, and our Sages speak of “a heart that understands” (*lev meivin*). Thus, the *possuk* tell us to guard the heart the most, because the source of life in the heart is at the innermost gate of understanding deep inside the heart.

It is written, “*With daas, rooms are filled*”, and the Sages say that this refers to rooms within our heart, (*chadrei halev*).^[4] There are “rooms in the heart”, and the innermost chamber of the heart is the source of a person’s life.

Our emotions, which are only the outer layers of our heart, are sometimes opened and sometimes closed. Since there are 50 “gates” in our heart, the outer layers of our heart, our emotions, are like “gates”. They are like a *shaar* (gate) of the *Beis HaMikdash*, which only opened on Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh.

But there is one *shaar* that is never closed: The Gemara says that the *Shaarei Dimah*, the Gate of Tears, is never closed.^[5] Thus, if a person reaches the innermost place in his heart, the “Gate of Tears”, the *shaar* that never closes – the *possuk* says that he must guard it very well, for it is the source of our life.

The inner place in the heart is never closed from a person [once he reaches it]. One whose feelings come from there has constantly alive feelings. Feelings from the inner place in the heart are the true source of life to a person that is described as the “heart.” Our outer emotions cannot provide constant vitality, because sometimes they are closed from a person. Our emotions are usually coming from imagination, and even if they are closer to reality, they are not constant kinds of feelings.^[6]

In order to reach our “*lev*”, one must reach his inner chamber of the heart, which never closes.

If a person has to pass through 50 gates, does he get there at 22 gates...? True, the further he penetrates, the closer he is to the light of the 50th chamber, and the light will shine more and more for him with the closer he gets to it. But the 50th chamber of the heart is the only place where one reaches the *chochmah* of his *lev*.

It is there that the true “*lev*” is found. Before that is just the “*Shaarei halev*”, the gateways towards the heart, but it is not yet the “*lev*” itself. The *lev* itself is only in the innermost chamber of the *lev*.

To Always See The Beginning of A Matter

When Chazal describe the “*lev*”, it is essentially referring to our ability to reveal the *raishis* (Beginning) of each thing, and this is called “*lev*”.

The heart sees, listens, speaks, etc. What does this mean? If a person connects to the *raishis* (beginning) of the sense of sight, this is an example of “*lev*”, and if he does not connect to the *raishis* of sight, he has not gotten to the “*lev*” behind sight (he hasn’t gotten to the “heart” of the matter). If a person connects to the *raishis* of listening, this is the “*lev*”.

Of course, one must now what the “*lev*” behind all these abilities is, and in the coming chapters we will go through them. But the common denominator between all of these abilities is that we must seek to know the “*raishis*” of every matter: to see the “*raishis*” of each ability in the heart.

This is what lays behind Yisrael, the *lev*, and the purpose of Creation, which is to recognize the Creator, Who said, “*I am the first.*” The tool that we have to get there is the “*lev*”.

May we merit from the Creator to explore level after level in the heart, how the heart sees, listens, speaks, thinks, etc. with this root understanding that the “lev” is all about seeing the beginning of each thing. This is referring to the *chochmah* (wisdom) that is in our *lev*, and it extends into one’s emotions and actions [*mitzvos*] as well. When one performs an action together with his “lev”, his action reveals the “*raishis*” in the action.

May we merit to feel and recognize how to connect to the “*raishis*” of everything, and to reveal it within ourselves and in the whole world.

[1] Ohalos 1:8

[2] Koheles Rabbah: 1

[3] Osiyos D’Rebbi Akiva, 30

[4] Statement of the Chazon Ish

[5] Yoma 9b

[6] See Getting To Know Your Feelings, Part 1: Chapter 8 (Imagination) and Part 2: Chapters 1-2.

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