

**BILVAVI**

# **VIEWING OURSELVES AS**

**A NESHAMA**

**Drasha for women before Shavuot in Lawrence, LI**

**שיעורים בארה"ב אייר תשפ"ג**

**שיעורים בארה"ב אייר תשפ"ג 012 ההתמקדות בחג השבועות**

It is written, “*This is the gate of Hashem through which the righteous may enter.*” (Psalm 118:20)

Let us open up one gate by which we can get to Hashem.

### BASIC SELF-AWARENESS – KNOWING YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The simple perspective is that we each recognize we have a body and we have our internal emotions and soul-characteristics. We need to know what we can do and what we can't do, what we're strong in and what we're weak in. Every person has areas in which he is more successful. He is talented in some areas and less talented in other areas. A person has to know what he's good at and what he's not good at. Maybe he's good, or not good, at being organized, at singing or music, at being creative and artistic. One has to know this information on a general level.

Some feel they are successful in many different areas. Others feel they are not successful at almost anything. Many times, even those who feel successful in many areas are spending their energy on areas they're not as successful in. When one identifies very much with his faults and not with his qualities, it is very hard for him to do things, it is hard for him to be happy, and it is hard for him to succeed. And understandably, when people feel very unsuccessful, they will perform sluggishly. Let us explain what's going on behind all of this.

### THE LOWLY PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS OURSELVES

A person tends to look at himself like an animal. Just like a person knows that animals have can have positive attributes and negative attributes and he knows that animals can be successful or unsuccessful, so does he look at himself no less than being like an animal with either positive or negative attributes, etc. He looks at himself as being another kind of animal. If we think about this for a second, it is astounding, that a person is able to view himself no less than a well-behaved and well-performing animal, or as an animal that isn't succeeding. Should a person view himself in the same way that an animal views itself like an animal that is doing well and succeeding and it knows it's doing well?!

Each of us needs to understand that we can have a different way of how we can view ourselves. In the world, there are Jews and there are non-Jews. Before we consider the area of serving Hashem – which is a clear difference between Jews and non-Jews (*a Jew serves Hashem whereas a non-Jew doesn't*), before this difference, first let us think: Should a Jew view himself in the same way that a non-Jew views himself? Should a Jew view his qualities and weaknesses in the very same way and with the very same perspective and worldview that a non-Jew views himself with? Or is there is a whole different perspective we can have towards ourselves, which is much more fundamental...?

## OUR NESHAMAH - THE PERFECTION WITHIN US

Until this point we discussed one way of how to view ourselves, and now we will discuss a second way of how a Jew needs to view himself.

A Jew has a *neshamah* which is called “*a portion of G-d from above*”, a part of Hashem Himself. Does Hashem have any faults? Obviously, no. Our *neshamah* which is a portion of Hashem – does it have any deficiencies in it? No.

What then is our entire weakness? It is only when we don't identify ourselves as a *neshamah*!

Hashem is Perfect, and He breathed into us a *neshamah* which comes from His Perfection, so our *neshamah* is perfect. This is the beginning of how we can view ourselves properly. One has to be aware: “I am a creation of Hashem, and my Jewish soul is a portion of Hashem, and just as He is perfect so is my *neshamah* perfect.” Obviously we do have faults and we do have *avodah* to do, but first it must be very clear to us that we are a *neshamah* and that our *neshamah* is perfect.

Rav Wolbe said that when a person goes out into the street he should realize that he is carrying with a tower on his head – if he turns to the right

or to the left, the tower might fall down. He must walk around with seriousness. That is one way to live, but there is also another way. You can feel that within you is everything. That is the meaning of a wealthy person – someone who has a rich life, someone who has everything. When someone lives with his internal world, wherever he goes he has everything with him.

Firstly, let us say what the perspective is, and then absorb it. The perspective to be aware of is that we have in us a *neshamah*, a piece of Hashem, and that really means that Hashem is living within us, He is found right with us. That is the perspective to be aware of, and we can come to feel it more when we realize that we have perfection within us. We don't have to be thinking, “How many faults do I have? What am I worth? How am I faring compared to others?” Instead, we can realize that we have everything! This is the perspective to be aware of and feel all the time, and like this, most of our time is being focused on the perfection that is already within us. Like this we can be calmer, happier, and richer on the inside.

## A BALANCED PERSPECTIVE – HANDLING OUR IMPERFECTIONS

Now let us move on to the next step. Hashem created man's body from the earth and blew into Him a breath of life, a soul. The breath of life that comes from Hashem is perfect, and this is the perfection within us. But our body, taken from the earth, is full of weaknesses. The animal

soul (*nefesh habehaimis*) that animates our body is also full of many shortcomings. But how does a person regularly view himself? Am I a body, an animal soul? Or am I a soul, a portion of G-d from above?

For example, a person is living in a nice and organized house. One day the house burns down. Does he now feel “My house is gone, so I’m worthless” or does he feel “I am worth a lot, just, I need to fix up my house”? If my house is destroyed, does that mean that I am destroyed too? It just means that I have work to do, I have to fix it up, but I remain intact and whole. The inner perspective we must have is that we have a soul, and it is housed by our body and animal soul. The house which houses our soul is our body and animal soul.

When we become confused with problems, we mistakenly think that our body and animal soul is “Me” – that these problems and weaknesses are “Me”. People put a lot of focus on their body today, because they feel “My body is who I am.” But when a person lives with the right perspective, he knows that “I” am a *neshamah*, and that there’s also a house which his *neshamah* lives in – his body – which he knows he has to take of.

Chazal taught that a nice house is settling to the mind, but the nice house isn’t Me. We need to take care of our house and body, but we can know that’s not who we are. Who am I really? My *neshamah*. We are really like contractors for a house. We have a house that always needs to be cleaned and repaired, but we can know that’s not who I am, that’s just the work I have to do.

This is both truthful and practical. On one hand, who am I? Each and every person has to know that “I am a *neshamah*, which has everything in it - for Hashem is found within me.” At the same

time, we have a body and animal soul with all its many problems and issues and it is our lifelong task to repair those issues and to elevate them.

A person says “I have a problem.” What does he really mean when he says that? If one has a broken window does he say “I have a problem” or does he say “My window’s broken”? He knows that he has to fix the broken window, but he also knows that the problem isn’t with him.

Now let’s say a stronger example. If we say about someone “So-and-so just passed away”, what’s the real problem of being dead? Does he not exist anymore? He has simply changed location. He has left his body, his temporary home, and he has gone to his eternal home. So, due to the eternity of the Jewish soul, a Jew who dies is in fact not really dead or gone. He’s not ‘gone forever’, he has simply moved from one house to another. Chazal describe death as a transition from the body to the Gan Eden, switching the body for a Gan Eden existence, moving from one house to another. Until now he had a physical house, now he has a spiritual house.

Chazal teach that “Tzaddikim in their deaths are called alive” – why? If a person feels that his house, his body, his animal soul, is all “Me”, then what happens when he dies? He has nothing. That’s death. But if a person feels that his true existence is his *neshamah* which is a portion of Hashem, death for him is like switching apartments. The “tzaddikim” are really those who, in addition to keeping the mitzvos, they are living their lives with the awareness that their true existence is their *neshamah*, not their body.

With that awareness, they are alive even in their deaths.

If a person lives with this awareness, in one moment he can go free from all problems. There will still be problems of course, but he will go free from most of the problems that our world has.

One of the things that people look for, and rightfully so, is happiness. This is not a luxury, it is a necessity. If a person is superficial then he looks at his successes and that's how he is happy. If he has peace in his marriage, then he is happy, and if not, then he isn't. If he is having it easy in shidduchim then he is happy, and if it's going hard for him, then he's not happy. His joy is dependent on all these circumstances that have to work out for him. There are so many situations and periods of life that we go through, and during calmer times we are happier and during turbulent times – may G-d have mercy on us for what we feel like then. Do we really want to live like this?

### ..... PRACTICALLY SPEAKING .....

A person must repeat to himself hundreds and thousands of times: “Who am I? I am a *neshamah*, a portion of Hashem from above.” It's like going over a mantra again and again. And, you have to believe it when you say it, otherwise it doesn't do anything for you. Believe that you are a *neshamah*, and then say it many times to yourself: “Who am I? I am a *neshamah*.”

Think about it throughout the day: “I am a *neshamah*”, and don't only think about this

What, indeed, is the right way to live? There are always problems, challenges, and difficulties in life. But how can we be stable and firm to get by it all? What will give us that stability? It is when we identify ourselves as a *neshamah*. If we have a bit of sense, we realize that just because we don't have everything, just because some things are missing in our lives, that doesn't mean we have nothing.

It's all a question of how we identify ourselves. That is the root. If you ask any person “Who are you?”, there are all kinds of answers – there can be 20 different answers to this question and none of them are a true answer. We may get answers like, “Who am I? I am so-and-so's wife”, “So-and-so is my husband”, “I am so-and-so's father or mother”, or “I come from this family” or “I daven in this shul”, or “I live in this community”, or “I am part of this Chassidus”, etc. These are all superficial ways of identifying oneself.

when you wake up and when you are going to sleep: “I am a *neshamah*, a portion of Hashem, and Hashem is found with me.” These are the thoughts that a Jew has to be thinking about during the day. This is the basis, the starting point, of where to place our souls before we even start serving Hashem. When we want to serve Hashem, there's so much avodah to do – to know what areas of Torah to learn, how to have shalom bayis, fixing our middos, etc. But if we want to get to the first base, this is the basis

to build upon. From experience with people, I can tell you that this is not going to take a week or two. This takes a year or two of reviewing to yourself, “I am a *neshamah*.” The more you identify it and you feel it, then you can work on other areas of *avodas Hashem*. But make sure not to fall into the mistake of thinking, “I have so many problems and faults”. Rather, think that you are a *neshamah*, you are whole and perfect, and all these faults are not you, but in your body

and animal soul, and it’s our *avodah* on this world to fix it.

From experience with people I can tell you that people who work on this for a year or two, they go through a complete overhaul. They change totally. They find joy. Then they can start to serve Hashem on work on all areas of *avodah*, with joy: “Serve Hashem with joy”.

## Q&A

**QUESTION 1:** Should we first feel joy, and then working on feeling that we are a soul, that we are a “portion of G-d from above” – or, should we first feel that we are a soul?

**RAV’S ANSWER:** If you try to first feel joy that you are “a portion of G-d from above” is one way, in which you are starting from the joy, or, you can look at your good points (*especially your best quality*) and reach joy like this. That is one way, and it is how you work your way upwards by starting from below. But the way mentioned here in this class is to start from above. To start from a high place - to first feel you are soul, and that is how you find joy, and from there you can begin working on everything else you need to fix – working your way downwards. Either path is good.

**QUESTION 2:** But we are older already and it’s hard to get past all the negativity and bad stuff we’ve developed from all that we’ve accumulated from so many years.

**RAV’S ANSWER:** Raboseinu tell us 2 ways to serve Hashem. Either a person gets into the dirt and mud and tries to clean himself off from it, or, a person builds for himself a new, clean house. He has to make sure not to bring any dirty objects into the new house. It’s true that at an older age a

person feels like he has wasted and sabotaged most of his life, but there is a verse how older people can become joyful in old age. It’s easier to start again anew than to be busy all the time with all the dirt from the past. Certainly you need to face that dirt at some point and clear it up, but the main focus has to be on focusing on the positive and on what you can build now – and after that you can deal with the dirt of the past. If each of us were to be busy cleaning up all the dirt and garbage and faults in our life that’s from our past, an entire lifetime of 70 years wouldn’t be enough.

In summary, most of the time and most of our energy and focus has to be on building up the positive. Very little of our time and energy should be spend on focusing on fixing our faults and problems and mistakes. We need to deal with that bad stuff of course, and if we don’t, then we remain with it. But most of the time we need to be spending most of our energy on building up the positive: Focusing on our strengths and abilities and our good parts, and using them.

**QUESTION 3:** How can it be that we are able to identify ourselves as a “portion of G-d from above”, what does that mean exactly?

**RAV’S ANSWER:** This is a very, very deep

question, and much has been written about this subject. Briefly and clearly, the answer is that all of Creation is one unit – a means of revelation of Hashem so that all of Creation should recognize Him, and in the Shemoneh Esrei of Rosh HaShanah we declare how every creation will recognize Him as the Creator and King Who rules over all. The concept that we are a “portion of G-d from above” means that our entire existence is nothing but to know of the Creator, and in depth, there is nothing else. Everything else are merely parts of how we come to know the Creator. For example tikkun hamiddos, what does that have to do with knowing the Creator? Is it just a separate thing we have to do? But the whole source that we have to fix our middos is learned from the verse “This is my G-d and I will glorify Him” which the Sages said means “I and Him” - resemble Him. Just as He is compassionate so should you be compassionate.” We must recognize what the Creator’s compassion is, but if we do not have enough compassion ourselves then we cannot begin to recognize the Creator’s compassion. Thus being a “portion of G-d from above” means that our entire task on this world is to recognize the Creator. When we realize that all that we have in our life for all of eternity is to come to know G-d, and that everything we do is for the purpose of coming to recognize Him more completely – and to teach this to others, according to our capabilities – that is the depth of the concept of being a portion of G-d from above, to say it clearly and simply.

**QUESTION 4:** When I try to be happy at a family celebration how can I be happy when I know others who are suffering or in pain or going through a hard time? I can’t be happy when I’m supposed to be, because I keep hearing of others who are going through difficulty and suffering.

**RAV’S ANSWER:** The question is very clear, and there are 2 ways to answer this question, an external answer and an inner answer.

The external answer to this question is to know how time of the day we should be spending on joining in the joy of others and how much time of the day we should be spending on joining in the sorrow of others. Most people, if they would be spending most of the day joining in the sorrow of others, they would fall into depression from this, they wouldn’t be able to stay stable. Joining in others’ sorrow entails sadness and pain. They identify so much with pain and then they fall into sadness from there. It becomes turned from joining into the pain of others into walling in sadness and depression. This is why Rebbi Nachman of Bresslov told his chassidim, “I can make self-accounting a lot without falling into depression from this, but you should not make self-accounting, you would fall into depression from it. There is atzvus-sadness and there is merirus-bitterness which is not detrimental sadness but holy pain, as the Baal HaTanya explains. Practically speaking, most of the day every person should try to be in a state of joy, and only for a small part of the day should we join in the pain of others. Don’t be busy trying to hear the sad stories in others’ lives and don’t read the newspapers, which are filled with the problems of the world and of people. Just pick one small part of the day in which you join in the pain of the Shechinah and in the pain of Klal Yisrael.

There is also an internal answer to this question. There was a story with Rav Yitzchok Hutner, where one day a close talmid of his made a Bris, and on the same day one of his talmidim had a father who was niftar. So he had go to the Levayah and Bris right after each other. He went to the Bris and was happy, and then he went to the Levayah. A talmid said to him, “How is it that you can from a joyful Bris to a sad Levayah?” He answered, “I have a place in my heart where I can handle conflicting scenarios and emotions.” If a person can truly be happy with others and also join in the pain

of others without falling into sadness from this, this is the ideal situation and this is like the verse “Rejoice with trembling”.

Most of the time though people can't work out of the contradiction between joining in other's pain and joining in others' joy, and they fall into depression or sadness from joining in the pain of others, and this is actually not because they are really joining in the pain of others but because they are consumed with sadness afterwards. Joy and pain aren't a contradiction and they can co-exist together in one state – it is only joy and sadness which are a contradiction that can't co-exist together.

The Baal HaTanya says of a way how one can know this. A person makes a self-accounting and discovers faults in himself. He is bitter from it. Does that cause him to be sad or happy? If he becomes sad it means that his bitterness causes him to fall into sadness. But if from his bitterness he becomes happy (*that now he knows himself better and sees what he has to fix*), this causes him to do teshuvah and he is happy from that. If he goes

through the pain properly then it leads to good results, to doing teshuvah and being happy. If he truly joins in the pain of others, his hope for the Geulah increases. He becomes joyous from it and he can wait the Geulah happily. But if he cannot handle the emotions of joining in another's pain, he falls from the pain into sadness.

There is a verse, “From You I run to You.” When a person has pain, where does he run to in the end? To Hashem. If he reaches deep sadness in the soul he can't take it, so what should he do? He should run to Hashem and there he will find joy. This is the true, deep way to live life.

**QUESTION 5:** What are the barriers that prevent us from this? Our aveiros (*sins*)?

**RAV'S ANSWER:** There are 2 barriers that we have – our body, and our animal soul. Our body is totally material, our animal soul is a subtler form of materialism. One kind of barrier that gets in our way is body-desires – when we overdo materialism. Another barrier is our animal soul – our unfixed character traits.

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