

In Search of Greatness

The Lectures of Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld Volume 2

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CHAPTER ONE

Fuse Yourself with Wisdom

My students and other people often ask me questions that very daring and could raise an eyebrow or two, and I always try to answer them, no matter what they are. You might think it outrageous and scandalous to question some of the most basic and hallowed tenets of our faith, but that is not so. In Judaism, questions are encouraged. Practically any question, any seemingly atheistic question that can be raised, is found in the Gemara, the Midrash or even in the Tanach itself.

There are numerous places in the Gemara where the questions atheists and pagans asked the rabbis are faithfully recorded along with the rabbis' responses. The Gemara could just as easily have presented the concepts contained in the rabbis' answers without recording the questions that led to them, but the Gemara chose to record the questions as well.

The attitude of the Tannaim and Amoraim to questions is very interesting. They didn't shy away from questions. They didn't discourage

them. They didn't make believe that questions do not exist. That is what they taught us by recording the tough questions. So we don't suppress questions. On the contrary, we want people to speak up and express the questions that occupy their minds and trouble their souls. We want to bring the questions out into the open so that we can talk about them and resolve them as best as we can. In Judaism, an honest question deserves an answer.

Now this doesn't mean that we have answers for every question, but we ask them anyway. For instance, the Rambam (Shemonah Perakim ???) asks the famous question about *bechirah*, free will. How can we be said to have free choice if the Almighty, who sees the future, already knows what we will choose? Many of the commentators also ask this question, which jumps out at any intelligent person. The Rambam doesn't really give an answer to this question, but he does make some interesting observations about the impossibility of our finding a satisfactory answer because of our limitations as three-dimensional beings, which is really a topic for a different time. But even though we have no truly satisfying answer, the rabbis did not hesitate to discuss the question.

In Judaism, an honest question is always encouraged, no matter what, because Judaism is a religion of intellectual courage. Now let's turn to some of the questions facing us here today.

Avraham's Incredible Strength

You know, I once heard someone remark that if it were up to him he would not learn Chumash with little children. At that young age, they see the Chumash as simplistic Bible stories. And when they get older and a little more intellectually mature, they don't want to learn Chumash any more, because they think they know it already. They want to learn Gemara. So they are left with an understanding of Chumash that is juvenile and primitive. They think about the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve, and perhaps they think about apples. They think about Avraham as a white-

bearded old man they saw in a little picture book. They fail to mature in their understanding of what Chumash is all about.

Now, since Chumash is the source of our *emunah*, our faith, this is a severe handicap. So I suppose it makes sense to put off learning Chumash with children until they have reached a certain level of maturity. But of course, this is not going to happen, so we have to place a strong focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the Chumash and its messages to us.

So let us begin. We know that there are the avos, three patriarchs, Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. And the Gemara says (Berachos 16b), “*Ein korin avos ela lishloshah*, we cannot give anyone the title *av*, patriarch, [of the Jewish people] except for three.” No man, no matter how great he is, no matter how elevated his service of the Almighty, no matter how high his stature as a *tzaddik*, can be considered an *av* of the Jewish people. That title is reserved for Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the first of our forefathers. That’s it, and no one else.

We have to try and understand this in modern terms. What does it mean? Avraham was a *tzaddik*. A *tzaddik*! We use the word easily, but do we have any idea of what this word means? What is a *tzaddik*? Perhaps some of us have an inkling of some of the details, some of the contours of this concept of a *tzaddik*, but we have to try and bring it into sharp focus. It is a concept so ... subtle ... so elusive, and we have to try and grasp it.

We have to try and understand what made Avraham a *tzaddik*. Did he have extremely long *peyos*, earlocks? Did he pray all day? Is that what made him a big man? We have to search out the core of Avraham’s singular quality. We have to define it in a capsule. We have to find a formula for it. We have to conceptualize the essence of this man, this patriarch of the Jewish people, this great *tzaddik*. Who was he? What was he?

The Midrash explains (Bereishis Rabbah 42:8) why Avraham was called Avraham the Ivri, Avraham the Hebrew. The word Hebrew is the Anglicization of the word Ivri. What is an Ivri? So the Midrash says that the term Ivri comes from the word *ever*, which means a side. It is often used for

a riverbank. Every river has two sides, this riverbank and the opposite one. So Avraham was called Avraham the Ivri, the sider, or the one who stood on the side. What does that mean? So the Gemara says that Avraham stood on one side and the entire world stood on the other. He had ideas and beliefs, and the entire world was opposed to them.

So I was thinking to myself ... a man stands all alone ... what does this mean? I asked myself a question, Where does a person get the strength to do such a thing, to stand against the entire world? How does a person maintain a view, an attitude, a concept when he knows that everyone else is opposed? How can he remain strong in his beliefs when he's at odds with the whole world, when everyone else is saying that he's insane, he's crazy, demented, psychotic, delusional, hung up, strung out and who knows what else – and it doesn't move him! He doesn't budge an inch. Where does a person get so much strength? How are we supposed to understand this?

A Palace Ablaze with Light

There is a subtle thing at work here, a very, very subtle thing, and in order to grasp it we have to learn two Midrashim that try to define for us, using Midrash terminology, the secret of Avraham's strength. The Midrash develops the idea in two stages, with the second stage illuminating the first.

The Midrash begins (Bereishis Rabbah 39:1) by addressing the first words Hashem said to Avraham. “*Lech lecha!* Go! Leave your home, leave your friends, leave your attitudes. Leave. Just go.” That was Avraham's first contact with Hashem. What had happened here?

So the Midrash explains with a *mashal*, a parable. “It is analogous to a person who was going from place to place, and he saw a lighted *birah*, a palace. And he said, ‘Is it possible that this palace has no master?’ The *baal habirah*, the master of the palace, leaned out and said, ‘I am the *baal habirah*. I am the master of the palace.’ It is the same with Avraham. He used to say, ‘Is it possible that this world has no guide, no master?’ The Holy Blessed One leaned out over him and said, ‘I am the *baal haolam*. I

am the Master of the world.” These are the words of the Midrash. You can look it up inside.

And we think into the words of the Midrash, we begin to see the fine shades and nuances of its deceptively simple message. It is the first rung on the ladder of understanding. The Midrash is telling us about a man who is going from place to place. He has no place, no roots. He is lost and confused, a wanderer in a desolate desert, a seeker. Suddenly, he sees a palace ablaze with light, a huge castle in the middle of nowhere sparkling with dazzling light.

He stops and asks himself, “Is this a mirage? How did this palace get here in the middle of nowhere? Is it possible that this palace has no architect, no lord, no master?”

Immediately, the lord of the palace sticks his head out of the window and says, “This is no mirage. I am the architect of the palace. I am its lord. I am the *baal habirah*.”

So the Midrash is describing Avraham as a restless person, a person “going from place to place,” He sees no meaning in the chaos of the world. He tries to scrutinize his surroundings, he searches and tries to understand what this baffling world is all about, and he asks, “Is it possible that this complex, mysterious, beautiful, magnificent world has no Creator?” And by the force of this question, Hashem communicates with him, and entire course of his life is changed. Yes, the entire course of history is changed.

So what was so extraordinary about Avraham’s question? Many people, intelligent people, ask this question all the time. You go out and take a look at the beauties of nature. You look at the Grand Canyon. You look at a tree blossoming in the springtime. You study biology and physics and discovers the fantastic mysteries of the universe and the unbelievably intricate ways in which it works, and you can’t help feeling instinctively that everything points to a Creator.

It’s a natural thing to ask such a question, to feel the overwhelming presence of the Almighty. But there was a fundamental difference between

what everyone feels when faced with “the palace ablaze with light” of the natural world and what Avraham felt under the same circumstances.

This question took hold of Avraham and obsessed him. It completely seized him. Others can have this feeling, especially when they are standing in front of one of the wonders of the world like the Grand Canyon. So they think to themselves, Hey, someone must have created this thing. Then they finish their can of Coca Cola, throw the empty can into the canyon, get into their camper and drive. But for Avraham, the effect of the question was electrifying, all-consuming. It took over his life, and he couldn't get his mind off it.

So what does this mean? How do we understand a question dominating his life to the point where everything else was subordinated to it? This brings us to the second Midrash I mentioned before. There we'll find an analysis of what happened to Avraham.

Stronger than Ten Rulers

A few lines down, the Midrash is still addressing the *passuk* in which Hashem says to Avraham, “*Lech lecha! Go!*” The Midrash starts (Bereishis Rabbah 39:4) by bringing the *passuk* in Koheles (7:19), “*Hachachmah taoz lechacham mei'asarah shalitim asher hayu ba'ir ...* Wisdom gives more strength to the wise man than the ten rulers that were in the city.”

At this place in Koheles, Shlomo Hamelech describes the relationship between a wise man and wisdom. So we first have to ask ourselves, What is a wise man? Is it someone who knows a lot of facts, who collects facts and stores them in his head? Is it someone who has memorized the entire Encyclopedia Britannica? Is it someone who has memorized the entire Talmud? Is that the definition of a wise man? We have to find out what this term means. We have to pin down the definition. So what can we learn from the Midrash about this basic question?

Shlomo Hamelech tells us that *chachmah*, wisdom, gives the wise man enormous strength. The wise man in his relationship with wisdom becomes so strong, so powerful that he is stronger than the ten rulers that were in the city. Imagine ten rulers, ten generals with armies of fierce soldiers, and the wise man is stronger than they are. He is stronger than all of them.

The Hypnosis Experiment

So let's talk for a moment about the term *chachmah*, wisdom. There are two areas of *chachmah* that people often confuse – knowledge and understanding. Two simple English words, but people don't really know what they mean. They don't know what knowledge is, and they don't know what understanding is. What is knowledge? It sounds like a vague term. If you've memorized the Guinness Book of Records, is that also considered knowledge? If you know who holds the record for drinking the most water, is that knowledge? And what if you know who is the fattest men in the world? The tallest? Obviously not. So we have to define knowledge and we have to define understanding, and then we can begin to discern the outline and the contours of a wise man and his relationship to wisdom.

On the first passuk in the Torah, "*Bereishis bara Elokim ...*," Targum Yonasan ben Uziel renders it as "*bechuchmesa bara ...*," Hashem created the world with *chachmah*, with wisdom. The whole world, the vastness of the universe, the entire cosmos, everything in existence is rooted in wisdom. So if you want to identify a person's goal in this world, if you want to measure his greatness and his piety, you have to talk about his relationship to wisdom. But most people don't seem to know that.

Go out and ask all the people in New York City what life is all about, I guarantee you that most of them will say, "It's all about having a few bucks and getting a few kicks." Out of eight million people, seven and a half million will say that the meaning of life is money and pleasure. Without a question and without a doubt. They live with the externality of the cosmos, and it is all an exercise in futility. They live in despair and they die in

despair, and their entire lives amount to nothing. It's all meaningless. But in reality, there is a deeper meaning to life. Yes, wisdom gives strength to the wise man. Wisdom empowers him. It makes him powerful. It all depends, however, on his relationship to wisdom.

You know, there is such a thing called hypnosis. The people that know how to do these things can put a person into a deep state of hypnosis, a trance, and then they can suggest all sorts of things to him and the person under hypnosis accepts them.

The scientists did an experiment. They put a person under hypnosis, into a very deep trance, and they told him they were touching the smoldering tip of a lit cigarette to his hand, even though they were doing nothing of the sort. To their amazement, they found that a wound appeared on the hand of the subject at the exact spot where they said they had touch the burning cigarette. The suggestion was so powerful that the person felt as if his hand was being burned. The skin was perfectly fine and healthy, and still, a wound suddenly appeared. The hand became all red and puffed up. Amazing, isn't it? Since he was told under hypnosis that his hand was being burned, his mind became so convinced of it that it sent extra blood and antibodies and whatever else the body sends to a wounded spot. Such is the power of suggestion.

And yet ... and yet ... on the other hand, when the scientists tried a different suggestion under hypnosis, they got a different result. They told the person in the trance that he has to kill someone. But it didn't work. Unless the person was already a murderer from before, the suggestion, no matter how powerful it was, could not induce him to commit murder. So it seems that with suggestion, with pure suggestion, and without any physical heat, you can cause a wound, but you cannot induce a person to do something that is contrary to his ethical structure.

The difference is obvious. For the average individual who is not a psychopath or a sociopath, the repugnance of committing murder is so clear in his intellectual and emotional mind; it is a crystal clear reality more

powerful than any suggestion you can offer him in the deepest state of hypnosis. But when it comes to a cigarette touching his hand, he has no knowledge about whether there really is a cigarette there or not; after all, he's in a trance. So therefore, amazing and phenomenal as it is, if you have the proper skills as a hypnotist, you can tell him whatever you want to tell him, and if you tell him a cigarette is burning his hand, he will feel the pain and a wound will appear. But if you tell him to kill, the wrongness of murder is so imbedded in his intellect that no reality the hypnotist will create, no matter how powerful, can override the reality that already exists in his mind.

There is a relationship between knowledge and the knower that is like the relationship between an ordinary person and the wrongness of murder. It is a relationship in which the knower becomes so connected to the knowledge, so submerged in it and subservient to it that they become like one unit, one entity. He sees the knowledge. It's not just a fact in his head. He sees it as an overwhelming truth, and it becomes a greater reality to him than anything else.

So the Midrash tells us, you want to know what Avraham was? You want to know the secret of his greatness? You want to know his particular genius? You want to know how the whole chapter of the world known as Avraham started? The answer lies in the *passuk* in Koheles. "*Chachmah*, wisdom, gives more strength to the wise man than the ten rulers that were in the city."

Avraham's greatness was in his relationship to *chachmah*, which was so intense, so powerful, so ... honest ... that he became fused to it. When he perceived the great knowledge of the existence of a master of the Universe, he didn't just say, "Well, I know this now. It's a nice thing., a nice thought, quite inspiring actually. Someday, I'll think some more about it. Someday, I may even do something about it." That kind of lackadaisical attitude had no place in Avraham's scheme of things. That's not who Avraham was. "Wisdom gives strength ..." Avraham's knowledge consumed him, and he achieved understanding.

The Sages did not tell us about Avraham's religiosity or that he did this or that good deed or that he was a *tzaddik*, as the Torah tells us about Noach. That was not his defining characteristic. It was his relationship to *chachmah*. All of us have weaknesses, shortcomings, failures, distortions. We know perfectly well what they are, so why don't we do anything about them? Why don't we change? It's because our relationship to *chachmah* is tenuous and feeble. We may have the knowledge, but we have precious little understanding. We achieve understanding when our knowledge become so deep and pervasive that it defines our whole personality. IT energizes and directs us. That is where Avraham stood out; it was in the realm of his relationship to *chachmah*.

Understanding Transforms

You take a regular person up into the Swiss Alps and show him the grandeur and magnificence of Hashem's creation, and it takes his breath away. You show him how a baby is born, how the embryo progresses from stage to stage until a little human being is born. You teach him biology and show him all the miraculous processes that are constantly going on inside our bodies every minute of every day. It is beyond incredible. And what will your average person say? He'll probably acknowledge that it is really fascinating, but will he be transformed? Will he turn his life around and seek a new direction? Not likely.

But Avraham did. When he perceived the concept of the brilliantly illuminated palace in the desert, his life was never again the same, because he went from knowledge to understanding, which leads directly to transformation. That is where he got the strength to be Avraham the Ivri, the one who could stand on one side with his own views, opinions and attitudes while the entire world was on the other side with opposite views, opinions and attitudes, and he wouldn't concede to them. Nothing could budge him because he and his knowledge were one.

So now we understand the first Midrash in the light of the second. And now we can also understand the conclusion of the first Midrash in its fullest depth. Our Sages tell us that when a person achieves understanding that path will lead him to Hashem. If a person has that kind of power, Hashem lean out of His exalted window and say, “I am the Baal Haolam. I am the Master of the World.” This is the structure on which the nation of Yisrael can be built. This is solid ground.

Nine Years in a Shack

There was a very great man, a famous *rosh yeshivah* in Europe who passed away after the First World War. I want tell you about something he did – not because we should also do it, because we shouldn’t; it’s not for us – but because I want to make a point. This great man’s name was Rav Yosef Yozel Horowitz, who is known to us as the Alter of Novardok, the founder and dean of the famous Novardok Yeshivah, one of the wellsprings of the Mussar movement. This man locked himself in a small shack for nine years and never came out, not once. He had two small openings, one through which he was handed dairy dishes and one through which he was handed meat dishes. And that was the extent of his contact with the outside world for nine years.

At that time, he was already known as a remarkable person, so a delegation of rabbis came to him and asked him to come out of his isolation. You know, you never come to *shul*. You’re never together with the people. You don’t even come out on Rosh Hashanah. You blow your own *shofar* and don’t come to hear it in *shul* together with the rest of the people. You should put an end to this. It is improper. These were valid criticisms, and he felt he had to answer them.

So he began to cry. I want to go to *shul*, he told them. I want to be together with people. But right now I’m not a person. I’m working on making myself into a person. Believe me, the minute I feel I’m an *ish*

yashar, a straight person, I'll come out. But right now, I'm so distorted that I've got to straighten myself out before I'm good for anything.

So, he stayed isolated in that shack for nine years and he labored ... he labored ... and struggled to gain the strength to take control of his life, to become a straight man. After nine years, he came out, and over the rest of his life this great man was a pillar of blazing fire. He founded over eighty *yeshivos* in Russia, Poland and Lithuania. Yes, eighty! He was one of the towering giants of his time, and he had many great *talmidim*, who carried on his work on a grand scale long after he passed away.

What was he doing in his shack during those nine years? He was forging a relationship with *chachmah*, because he knew that a person falls into chaos and meaninglessness if he is not fused to *chachmah*. Now, I'm not saying that we ourselves should follow his example and lock ourselves away until we straighten out all the distortions and kinks in ourselves. That is definitely not a good idea for most people. But on our own scale, we must also pursue an intimate relationship with *chachmah*. And as it begins to form, we should always gauge the strength of that relationship honestly.

Situations, opportunities, questions come up all the time in life. Should I do this or should I do that? Should I take a chance to expose myself to a certain hazard because there will also be great benefits? Many times, there is no clear answer. Some people are strong as lions and might be allowed to take certain risks, while others are weak as flies and should stay far, far away from any hazard. This strength and this weakness are not our physical strength or even the strength of our character and personality – or its absence. The critical strength, the strength that is all important, is the strength of our relationship to *chachmah*.

How about Mishlei 7:4? Shouldn't it be worked in to the piece?

CHAPTER TWO

The Divine Teacher

There's in an expression that is better known to Jewish authors than to other people. It goes as follows, "*Sefer belo hakdamah keguf belo neshamah*. A *sefer*, or a book, without an introduction is like a body without a soul." An author has to give his readers a context. He has to tell them what his purpose and intentions are. And he has to give them the information and background that will enhance their perspective and help them appreciate what he is about to say. I don't know how accurate it is to say that without an introduction a book is like a soulless body, but I think it's beyond argument to say that an introduction is a good and useful thing.

Having said that, I want to give an introduction. I want to give you a little prior knowledge about the Rambam, specifically about his phenomenal masterwork called *Yad Hachzakah, The Strong Hand*. The *Yad Hachzakah* is essentially a code of law, the first comprehensive code of law the Jewish people had. We had the Mishneh, which gives us a skeleton outline of laws, and the Gemara, which fleshes out the laws in the form of discussions and debates, but did not have a full, organized presentation of final rulings on the practical applications of the laws. This is what the Rambam did in *Yad Hachzakah*. It is a multi-volume law book that covers just about everything we need to know. It is not a book of commentary on Tanach. It is not a book of philosophy. It is a book of law.

One of the sections of this vast compendium of the Law deals with

Hilchos Teshuvah, the Laws of Teshuvah. As the title indicates, the Rambam in this section discusses the legal aspects of *teshuvah*. There is more to teshuvah than a feeling and a mood. There are specific rules and regulations and laws that govern this spiritual structure called *teshuvah*. And this is what the Rambam write about. He does not give us Biblical commentary in the *Yad Hachzakah*.

But in the fifth article of the sixth chapter, the Rambam steps away from the established pattern of his great masterwork and tells us something that appears to be commentary. He explains a *passuk* as if he were Rashi or the Radak. Very unusual. But if you understand my introduction about the Rambam, you will know that the Rambam is telling us something practical, something that we need to know and integrate into our lives.

When I first discovered this particular passage in the Rambam, the first time when I really took a close look at the Rambam's words and penetrated to their intent and deeper meaning, I was stunned, astonished, amazed. It revolutionized my entire concept of what it means to be a human being and what it means to be a Jew. And that's what I want to talk about with you.

Let's take a look at this Rambam (Teshuvah 6:5).

The Ramban is addressing himself to *passuk* in Tehillim (25:8), "*Tov veyashar Hashem al ken yoreh chata'im badorech*. God is good and straight, therefore he teaches *chata'im* the way." The word *chata'im* is usually translated as sinners, but I don't want to translate it that way. That's not the inner meaning of the word. A *chet* is a failure. The word *chata'im* means people who experience failures in their lives. A *mitzvah* is a success, and a *chet* is a failure. So *chata'im* are people who fail and fail again, whose lives are steeped in countless failures.

So this *passuk* speaks for itself to anyone that has a sensitive ear. It begs for us to probe for the inner meaning. What does it mean? What is it saying to us? David Hamelech is speaking about the Almighty, and he says, "*Tov veyashar Hashem*. God is good and straight." God is good, and He is also *yashar*, straight equitable. He deals with people with equity, with true

symmetry. He is never extreme or unfair. His judgment is perfect.

What is the expression of His goodness and His straightness? Any of us would instinctively answer that He gives us life, He gives us health and sustenance. He even gives us comforts and luxuries beyond our sustenance. In fact, if we stopped to make a list it would be extremely long. But in this *passuk*, David Hamelech is not focused on all the blessings that come easily to mind. Rather, he is focused on a specific type of goodness. “*Al ken yoreh chata'im badorech*, therefore he teaches *chata'im* the way.” Therefore, he teaches the people who fail, the people who are mired in repeated failure, the way to free themselves from their failures and extricate themselves from their predicament. He teaches them how to find the way to navigate through life successfully.

That's the *passuk* in Tehillim.

So the Rambam asks, “*Umahu zeh ...* What does this *passuk* mean?” What is David Hamelech saying here? The first part of the *passuk*, which states that God is good and straight, is fairly easy to understand. We can think of many explanations and interpretations, but the second part of the *passuk*, “therefore he teaches *chata'im* the way,” is an enigma. Where do we find that Hashem is a teacher? Where do we see this in the human experience? Where do we see that we have *rav-talmid* relationship, a teacher-student relationship with God? Where is our point of contact with God in our lives?

This is a very good question.

So the Rambam gives two answers to this question.

Number one, He is a teacher in the sense that He has sent us *neviim*, prophets, over the course of Jewish history. He sent great people such as Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu and many others to speak to us and inspire us to mend our ways and turn away from the cycle of failures into which we had fallen. The prophets came to teach the people right from wrong, humility, kindness, sensitivity and the way back to Hashem. These prophets did not speak their own thoughts and ideas to the people. They were Hashem's

messengers, and they conveyed His words to the people. In effect, Hashem was speaking to the Jewish people and teaching us. We encountered Him in history as our Teacher.

That was answer number one. Then the Rambam gives us a second answer, “Ve’od ... there is another ...” There is a second way in which we encounter Hashem as our Teacher. What is this second way? Where is this other encounter? So the Rambam says, “*Shenasan bahem ko’ach lilmod ulehavin shemidah zu bechol adam shekol zman shehu nimshach bedarkei hachachmah vehatzedek mis’aveh lahem verodef osam, vehu mah she’amru Razal, ‘Haba litaheir mesayin oso,’ clomar, yimtza atzmo ne’ezar al hadavar.*”

Before I translate and explain these words of the Rambam, in which he is giving us a critical definition of human intelligence, I want to discuss it for a few moments. What is this thing called human intelligence?

We who live in the modern world have a distorted view of human intelligence. Where do we get our concept of human intelligence? Why, in school, of course. That’s where they gave us IQ tests. They measured our IQs and gave us the numbers; we all know our numbers. You think that’s human intelligence? The Rambam says it’s not.

According to the Rambam’s understanding of the *passuk*, Hashem is considered good and straight because “*shenasan bahem ko’ach lilmod ulehavin,*” because He instilled in human beings the power, the faculty, the ability to learn and understand.

The Rambam adds, “*Shemidah zu bechol adam,* because this characteristic is present in each and every person.” When Hashem created man, He imbued him with this *ko’ach*, this power. He imbedded it in his reality. Every person, says the Rambam, has the innate ability to learn and understand. Two things, to learn and understand. This means that every person has the innate ability not only to learn and accumulate facts and information but also to extract knowledge from those facts and information, to understand. So the first step is that every person is gifted with the ability

to learn, to understand, to discern.

So we all have this wonderful ability to learn and understand, but the choice of what to do with this wonderful tool is ours. We can use it for nonsense, if we so choose. A person could say, I must have this and this type of sports car. It costs such and such an amount of money, and I don't have it. But I want the car, so I'm prepared to slave for fifteen hours a day until I accumulate enough money to buy that sports car. I'll do it. I'll do anything in the world to get that car, because I just love it. There are people like that, believe me. We all now people like that. So is this person really using his mind? After all, he has to use his intellectual faculties to earn the money to buy the car. So is that called using his mind?

You know the secular world is really the opposite of *kedushah*, holiness. You'll laugh at me, but I sometimes think about the idea of breakfast in bed. They tell me that people eat breakfast in bed; it's a real treat. So I think to myself, What does that mean? You open your eyes in the morning and there's a tray of food and a pot of savory coffee on your bed, and you eat it without getting out of your bed? And I think to myself, this is a treat? This is sick! No washing your hands, no *berachos*, no *tefilah*. Before a person reconnects his neshamah to the holy root of his being, he's lost, completely lost. So how can he do anything first? If he eats breakfast in bed, he's like a cow that they feed first thing in the morning. You might say he's a sophisticated cow, but a cow nonetheless. And if a person is a cow, even a sophisticated one, is what he does called using his mind?

The Rambam says that it is not. Sure, you're using your mind in a manner of speaking, but it's only extrinsic. It's not called really using your mind. That is not why Hashem imbedded a mind in a human being, so when you use it for nonsense you are using an instrument designed for a different purpose. What is called using your mind according to the Rambam?

Let's continue with the words of the Rambam, mentioned before, in Hilchos Teshuvah. Listen to the words of the Rambam. "*Shekol zman shehu nimshach bedarkei hachachmah vehatzedek ...* , as long as he is drawn

along the paths of wisdom and righteousness ...” That is what the mind was designed to do. That is the knowledge it was meant to seek out. I want to know what’s what in this confusing, chaotic world. I want to know what’s right and what’s wrong. I want to know what righteousness is. I want to know what is good and what is evil. That is the knowledge that this fantastic instrument called the human mind was meant to seek out and explore.

Who seeks that kind of knowledge? How many people in the world really care about what is right and what is wrong? Go to all the geniuses attending the Ivy League colleges and give them a truth serum. Then ask them if the goal of their intellectual pursuits is to learn to differentiate right from wrong and good from evil. Ask them if they have a burning desire to understand true wisdom and righteousness. You’ll only get a brush off. Look I’m in medical school, what do you want from me? I want to be a doctor. The money is good. The social status is good. I can have a good life, and if I help some people along the way, hey, that’s great. People who really care about right and wrong, good and evil, they’re one in a million.

The Rambam is teaching us here the biology of the mind, of the intellect. Why did Hashem give human beings a mind? The Rambam tells us that when a person decides to investigate what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, it no small accomplishment, and you know what happens? “*Mis’aveh lahem verodef osam,*” says the Rambam. “He desires them and pursues them.” His mind becomes suffused with a passionate desire to learn this knowledge. He hungers for this knowledge and pursues it. The inner force of the mind is awakened, and you become consumed with a burning desire to know the answer, to understand the true reality of the world. You want to know. You have to know.

You know what happens next? Your mind has been inflamed and energized. It is bursting with excitement, with the desire to acquire the knowledge of the deepest truths of the universe. So the Rambam says, You know what happens? A miracle occurs. An amazing miracle.

The Gemara tells us (Yoma 38b), “*Ba litaheir mesayin oso.* If person

wants to purify himself, he is helped [by Heaven].” If a person seeks purity, if he wants to extricate himself from the vacuous, fatuous, nonsensical bonds with which society shackles us, if he wants to unfetter himself, to free himself, he is helped.

People in modern society are not free, make no mistake about it. We are manipulated from morning to night by the edifice of evil in which we live. There is not a hand, not a finger, not a single ligament in our bodies that is not tied up in knots of inanities, insanities and utter foolishness. Take a close look at all the institutions that dominate our lives, and you will see who controls us. But if a person wants to break away, if he really wants to be free to seek purity, wisdom and righteousness. If he says, I want to cast off the chains and bonds of darkness, I don’t want Hollywood or Haight-Ashbury or Greenwich Village or Yale University, I want holiness and wisdom and righteousness. I want to know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil, I want to know this with a passion, Heaven will help him. He will get his desire.

If he comes to purify himself, says the Rambam, “*yimtza atzmo ne’ezar al hadavar*. He will find himself helped in this matter.” You will find that at some point you will receive strength and powers from outside yourself, and you will be helped. You will find that your learning and your studies will be expedited, and you will achieve understanding miraculously, beyond anything you thought was within your capabilities. You will see through the clouds and the befuddlement that envelops society from every side. Your newly empowered mind will pierce the veils of ignorance and evil, and you will see the world in which we live for what it is. You will see its insanity, its pettiness, its asphyxiating stranglehold. You will no longer grope in the shadows. You will no longer fall. You will recognize the truth in its entirety, and you will be free.

This, says the Rambam, is the second way in which Hashem is our Teacher. Not only is Hashem the Teacher of Klal Yisrael as a whole by sending us instructions through His prophets, He is also our Teacher on an

individual basis, one person at a time. When you seek wisdom and righteousness, when your mind becomes impassioned to know the truth, Hashem touches your mind, this divine instrument that He implanted in each and every one of us, and you are transformed.

Think about it. It is a fantastic idea. It is within your power and capability to achieve direct with Hashem. You have this incredible device in your head called the human mind, and if you use it right, Hashem will contact your mind directly. He will touch it and transform you into an intellectual giant, and you will see the world with perfect clarity.

Modern society has so desanctified the human being and the human mind. They measure our IQs and fit us neatly into a box from which they say we cannot escape. They so you can only be this big or this small, and you cannot be bigger than you are. There's nothing you can do about it.

Absolutely not! says the Rambam. You can be big. You can be very big. There are no limits, no restrictions to what you can be. *Haba litaheir mesayin oso*. If person wants to purify himself, he is helped. A person has to look at his mind as the crown of his existence. It is not a repository for all kinds of waste and nonsense. It is not just a means to achieve material goals. It is a divine gift designed to perceive the great truths of the world. And if we use it that way, if ignite in ourselves the passion to find these truth, Hashem will touch our minds and bring us close to Him.

CHAPTER THREE

A Symphony of Thoughts

You think sometimes, you know, we *daven* every day, three times a day ... so what are we really doing when we're standing and *davening*? I know we're asking for this and that, but under the surface, what's the nature of the experience? What's the nature of the act?

In order to find an answer, in order to get a glimpse of the contours of this mysterious act we call *tefilah*; let's take a look at a Mishneh in Pirkei Avos (2:3). The Mishneh is amazing from the beginning till the end, so I'm going to begin by quoting the whole Mishneh and giving you a rough translation, and then we'll discuss it unit by unit.

The Mishneh says, "*Rabbi Shimon omer, 'Ukeshe'atah mispallel al taas tefilascha keva ela rachamim vesachanunim lifnei Hamakom Baruch Hu, shene'emar, 'Ki chanun verachum Hu.' Ve'al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha.*" These are the words of the Mishneh, an amazing Mishneh. I'm going to translate the words more or less, and then we'll talk about it.

Rabbi Shimon said that when you *daven* your *tefilah* should not be *keva*, something that you do by rote. It should not be as if there is something you have to do at an appointed time every day, something that has to be done, like a scheduled chore, a necessary task. That's not how you should *daven*. How then should you *daven*? With *rachamim vesachanunim*. You should plead for mercy. *Shene'emar*, because it says in the *passuk* in the prophecy of Yoel, "*Ki chanun verachum Hu*. Because He is kind and merciful."

And Rabbi Shimon goes on and says one more thing. *Ve'al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha*. Do not be a *rasha*, a villain, an evil person, *bifnei atzmecha*. Now the translation of the words *bifnei atzmecha* is not so simple – we'll get into it a little more deeply later – but for now let's translate it as “for yourself;” don't be a *rasha* for yourself.

So let's begin with the words that your *tefilah* should be *rachamim vesachanunim*. Look closely at the words. Rabbi Shimon is not saying that your *tefilah* should ask for *rachamim* but rather that your *tefilah* itself should actually be *rachamim vesachanunim*. Your *tefilah* is something you produce, something you create, so you should make sure that it has the character of *rachamim vesachanunim*. An interesting expression, isn't it? Your *tefilah* should actually be *rachamim vesachanunim*. What does that mean? How do you make your *tefilah* into *rachamim vesachanunim*?

Fine, let's go a little further. Why should your *tefilah* be *rachamim vesachanunim*? Says Rabbi Shimon, “*Shene'emar, 'Ki chanun verachum Hu.*” Because it says, or it is written, there is a *passuk* in Yoel that describes the Almighty as *chanun verachum*, kind and merciful.” That's why your *tefilah* has to be *rachamim vesachanunim*. Because the Almighty is described as *chanun verachum*.

Now if asked most people for an explanation of why your *tefilah* has to be *rachamim vesachanunim*, they would offer plenty of good reasons. If you want to get what you're asking for you have to plead, and so on and so forth. But I don't think anyone would tell you that it is because the Almighty is described as *chanun verachum*. What the connection? What's the flow? We're discussing the nature of *tefilah*, the character of *tefilah*, what form it should take, how should you daven, so we say it should be *rachamim vesachanunim*. What does that have to do with the Almighty being described as *chanun verachum*? If this is a virtue of the Almighty, what has it got to do with your *tefilah*?

So it seems pretty clear that when Rabbi Shimon says that your *tefilah* should be *rachamim vesachanunim*, he is not saying that you should beg

and plead. He is saying that your *tefilah* itself should have the character of *rachamim vesachanunim*. He is talking about the essence of the act of *tefilah*, the texture and tone of the act, its cadence, its timbre. It is like a type of music, this *rachamim vesachanunim*. It is a style and a form that we have to try and achieve. And the reason we have to aspire to this form of *tefilah* is because the Almighty is described as *chanun verachum*.

We still have to define the nature of this *rachamim vesachanunim* and its connection to the Almighty being described as *chanun verachum*, but we're getting somewhere. We're coming close to the essence of *tefilah*, the ingredients that go in to it. We're coming close to understanding what *tefilah* is all about.

Don't Condemn Yourself

Before we go on, let's talk a little about the last part of the Mishneh. *Ve'al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha*. Do not be a *rasha*, a villain, an evil person, *bifnei atzmecha* for yourself, by yourself, we'll see in a moment. What do these words mean?

The Bartenura brings a few explanations for this last statement. According to one explanation, the Tanna is saying, "Do not do something today that will cause you to look at yourself in the mirror tomorrow and see yourself as a *rasha*. Think ahead. Today you may want to do this thing or behave in this way, but tomorrow, when you cool down, you may consider yourself a *rasha*. So don't do anything that will condemn you as a *rasha* in your own eyes. *Al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha*. The literal translation of *bifnei atzmecha* is "in your face." When you look at yourself, make sure that you are not seeing a *rasha*. That's one explanation.

According to a second explanation – the Bartenura brings it in the name of the Rambam – the Tanna is saying, "Do not be a *rasha* in your own eyes. Do not consider yourself a *rasha* if you've stepped over the line. If you look at yourself a *rasha* you're not going to get anywhere. If you pass judgment on yourself, if you condemn yourself ... that's not going to do you any

good. So the Tanna says, Do not consider look at yourself as a *rasha*. You'll only loose hold on your *bechirah*, your free will, and fall into *yiush*, into the deep pit of despair, and then you haven't got a chance. You can't creep out.

These are two explanations that the Bartenura brings on that Mishneh. He also brings a third explanation that a person should be a *rasha* by separating himself from the community, by being a *poreish min hatzibbur*. According to this explanation, the Tanna is saying, "*Al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha*. "Don't be a *rasha* by being *bifnei atzmecha*, by yourself and doing your own thing when everyone is doing something else." You can look it up, it's in the Bartenura, a very interesting explanation, but I don't want to dwell on it right now.

The question that jumps out at you when you read the Mishneh regards the connection of the beginning to the end. The Tanna starts off by saying that you have to make your *tefilah* in the form of *rachamim vesachanunim*, and then he concludes by telling you not to consider yourself a *rasha*. What does one thing have to do with the other? Where is the connection?

The Bridge of Mercy

We're touching on a very deep concept here. We getting into the core of this act called *tefilah*, the inner chamber. The word *tefilah* is etymologically related to the word *pasil*. When discussing the laws of *tumah* that apply to *klei cheress*, earthenware jars, the Chumash, speaks about a *tzamid pasil*. What is a *tzamid pasil*? It's a tight-fitting cover of a jar. When the cover fits tightly onto the jar it is considered *pasil*, connected, attached. The arrangement of letters in Lashon Kodesh is sometimes fluid, so the word *pasil* and *tefilah* can be related and stem from the same root.

That is really the crux of *tefilah*. The word gives us an insight into the nature and the function of *tefilah*. It is process by which a person connects himself with the Almighty, so to speak.

But how can we connect to the Almighty? What is the Almighty? No one has the slightest insight into this question, not the greatest of the

greatest human beings, not *malachim* in Heaven, no creature above or below has even the slightest hint of who and what the Almighty is. No one has even the faintest intellectual grasp of the nature of His intrinsic being. It is simply impossible for the limited faculties of the human mind and human perception even to attempt such a thing. Absolutely impossible.

So how do we relate to the Almighty? Where is the point of connection where we can, so to speak, attach ourselves to Him? It is in His *midos*, his attributes by which He relates to the world, the entire cosmos. This can be understood on many levels, but at least it is within at least the tenuous grasp of the human mind. The Almighty relates to the world in a certain way, and we humans can perceive that relationship.

When the prophets, the aforementioned Yoel among them, want to describe the relationship of the Almighty to this world, his ... touch ... to the cosmos, they say that he is a *chanun verachum*. The Almighty relates to the cosmos with *rachmanus*, with mercy and compassion. All we know about the Almighty is that there is a sheaf, an emanation, a creative flow of *rachmanus* that reaches out from the unknowable, ineffable, inscrutable intrinsic being of the Almighty, that it reaches out and touches the cosmos and sustains it. This is what Yoel is telling us when he says, “*Ki chanun verachum Hu*, that the Almighty is *chanun verachum*.” This is not poetry, it is not metaphor, this is prophecy, hard fact delivered to us from the Almighty through His prophets, His messengers.

It follows, therefore, that if a person wants to connect with the Almighty, he must cross the bridge, that archway in the infinitum of existence that spans across the void from the Almighty in His intrinsic being to the cosmos that He sustains through his attribute of *chanun verachum*. Compassion, mercy, sympathy, pity, all the forms of *rachmanus* are the positive forces that create, sustain and give existence to everything in the cosmos. The divine energy flows across the bridge of mercy. That is the only point in our experience where we encounter the Almighty.

Think of a mother's womb. It is the place where the child is conceived,

where it grows and develops through nine months of progressive embryo stages, where it reaches its completion and is ready to go out into the world. The word in Lashon Kodesh for a womb is *rechem*, and it is etymologically related to *rachmanus*. The mother's womb, the *rechem*, provides all the needs of the child as it grown inside.

In the same way, the Almighty's *rachmanus* is the *rechem* of the world. The Almighty perceives the lack that exists in the material world, and He fills those voids. That is the meaning of *rachmanus*. If we see a poor man standing at the door, we take pity on him and give him some money or some food. What does that mean? What exactly has happened? With our sensitivity to the poor man, we have perceived his lack, his want, and we have filled the void. We have provided the *tikkun*, the remedy. That is what having *rachmanus* means.

Everything in the physical and material world needs something to sustain it. Everything in creation is lacking something, from the grossest forms of need to the most delicate, and the Almighty relates to that lack through His attribute of *rachmanus* and gives the entire cosmos whatever it needs to sustain it. The bedrock of creation is *rachum vechanun*.

Transplant Compatibility

In medicine, when an organ is transplanted from one body to another, there is always a problem of rejection. You attach an organ to a human body, they have to use special drugs to stop the body from rejecting it. But if a person loses a finger, for instance. He has an accident, and a finger is severed. What do they do? They wrap up the finger, take it to the hospital, and the doctors sew it back onto the hand from which it came. And everything is fine. The hand works. There's no rejection. There are no problems. Why? The answer is simple. Because it's that person's own finger. Because it is perfectly compatible. You can graft together things that are perfectly compatible. Otherwise, you will probably have rejection.

So if a person wants to connect to the Almighty, if he wants to graft

himself to the Almighty, so to speak, we have seen that he does it through his *tefilah*. Not because he is asking for something, that is just the superficial form of what he is doing. The heart of *tefilah*, however, its dynamic core, is a direct act of attachment to the Almighty, the yearning of the *neshamah*, the human soul, to connect with its divine source.

But in order for the attachment, the connection, the transplanted graft, so to speak, to take hold, to be effective, the graft has to be of the same type as the Almighty's attributes to which it is seeking reattachment. That is why your *tefilah* has to be *rachamim vesachanunim*. It must exhibit the same features, the same contours, the same harmonic balance, as the attributes to which it wants to connect. The posture, the style, the aura of the *tefilah* has to be *rachamim vesachanunim* so that it can connect to the Almighty who is *rachum vechanun*.

If you're just standing Shemoneh Esrei and saying words, there is no creativity and no connection. You have to bring it to life. You have to make it your own work of art, your own symphony, your own creative force in the spiritual world. Only when you've done that, when you've made your *tefilah* into *rachamim*, can you connect with the Almighty.

That is also why the Tanna immediately tells us, "*Ve'al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha.*" If you want to make your *tefilah* into *rachamim vesachanunim*, you cannot pass judgment on yourself, you cannot condemn yourself in your own eyes as a *rasha*. If you introduce evil into the equation with the Almighty, it will not produce the attachment you are seeking. Evil, *ra*, from its grossest manifestation to its most delicate spiritual corruption, is the antithesis of *rachmanus*. It is not a creative force, and so it is counterproductive to the cosmos. So if you see yourself as caught in the grips of *ra*, you will not be able to relate and attach to the Almighty's divine attribute of *rachmanus*.

And it's even more than that. When a person looks at himself as a *rasha*, it becomes real. A person's attitudes become entrenched in his head and take on a reality of their own even if they are based on an error. If a person

thinks he is evil he becomes evil in a certain sense, at least on the screen and tablet of his own mind. Following our train of thought, this evil self-image is a major interference to the creative act of *tefilah*, because once again, *ra* is the antithesis of creativity.

Not Like Brazen Dogs

In the pure form of *tefilah* to which we aspire, to which the Tanna is directing us, we do not ask for those benefits and blessings in order to fulfill our personal needs and desires. The Zohar mocks people that pray in this form by comparing them to dogs. These people stand on Yom Kippur, says the Zohar, and they call out “*Hav, hav!* Gimme, gimme!” The barking of a dog is rendered in Aramaic as *hav hav* (like our bow wow). So the Zohar sees these people as brazen dogs (Tikkun 6, p. 22a). Not once do they ask for the restoration of the Divine Presence from which they have been so long estranged.

No, that is not the way we *daven*. We are not screaming *hav hav*, gimme this, gimme that, gimme, gimme, gimme. When we ask for these things it is only to bring ourselves closer to the ideal form in which we were created. By correcting the flaws in ourselves and our lives, we want to diminish the distance between ourselves and our Creator, so that we can connect with him through our act of *tefilah*. We know the Almighty through His creative act of *rachmanus*, so we ourselves must maximize our own creativity. We need forgiveness to remove the countercreative blemishes of evil from ourselves. We need wisdom and knowledge; we need to be healed so that we can be whole. All the *berachos*, all the requests, they are all incidental

This is what the Tanna is telling us. It is a deep concept, but at the same time, it is the simple explanation of the Mishneh.

You walk into a *shul* where the Yiddishkeit is dehydrated, and you see everyone standing Shemoneh Esrei, and they all look exactly alike. It’s because they don’t really understand what *tefilah* is all about. They don’t know that *tefilah* has to be *rachamim vesachnunim*. But in those places

where you could encounter Jews with a profundity, you could immediately see individuality in the *tefilos*. This one is in this posture, this one like that.

There is a certain *gadol* that I've had the privilege of knowing, a *Chassidische rebbe*. You should see him stand Shemoneh Esrei; he's practically on the floor. You can see clearly that he's reaching out for a *chibur*, a connection, and you can sense the aura of creativity with which he is molding his *tefilah*.

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi writes in the *Kuzari* that the fruits of our labors, the *peiros* of the day, the highlights of our daily existence, are the three times a day that we *daven*. *Tefilah* is a *chibur*, a connection, and the three times a day that we even approach a connection with Almighty are the most transcendent, exalted moments in our lives. And you cannot think of yourself as a *rasha*, because then the whole thing won't work. You will not be able to muster the creative power to achieve *tefilah*, because even the perception of evil is the antithesis of creativity.

Be Kind to Yourself

So you may ask a question. How can the Tanna tell you not to consider yourself a *rasha*? What if you've sinned and you really are a *rasha*? How are you expected to approach *tefilah* if you are indeed a *rasha*?

It is all a mistake, a big mistake. You can't even ask such a question if you know the full depth of a person, if you know all the power and capabilities of the *neshamah* and deeply it is rooted.

Chazal compare a person to a tree. A tree has roots. Have you ever seen a tree ripped out with its roots by a construction site or someplace? The roots can run fifty, sixty, a hundred feet in all directions. When you pull out the tree and see its entirety, with the trunk, branches and all the roots, you realize that the majority of the tree is underground; you don't even see it.

A person is the same thing. You look at a person, and you think you see the whole person. But you're wrong. A person has roots. He has all sorts of hidden powers and faculties of the *neshamah* that bubble and percolate

beneath the surface. A person in his roots is pure *tov*, pure goodness. The *neshamah* is pure goodness; it is impervious to the stains of evil. But in the seventy years a person spends in this world, he can make mistakes and experience failures and shortcomings. Sometimes it's his fault, sometimes it's not. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances. Whatever the situation, it is very rare for a person to be a true *rasha*.

Al t'hei rasha bifnei atzmecha. You have to perceive yourself as a good person who may have had some failures, but your essence is *tov*, goodness. You have to have *rachmanus* on yourself. Be kind to yourself. Don't judge yourself so harshly. Don't condemn yourself. Do not think of yourself as a *rasha*. Only then will you be able to make your *tefilah* into *rachmanus*. Only then will you be able to express creatively your desire to connect with the Almighty.

So the first step to successful *tefilah* is to make it *rachamim*, to do it creatively and not by rote, and you have to have a positive image of yourself. You have to recognize the deep *tov* that is with you and never to think of yourself as a *rasha*. That will get you started. But it doesn't happen overnight. It needs work, hard work. You have to work on it. You start by saying the words slowly and letting them sink into your head, and slowly, inexorably, the words will sink down into your hearts as well.

And you also need *hachanah*, preparation. You have to prepare your body; there are all those *dinim* in Shulchan Aruch about how to do it. And you have to prepare your mind. You can't just walk into *shul* just on time for when the *tefilah* starts and expect to be in a state of mind that will bring you to a connection with the Almighty. You have to clear your mind of everything else, and you have to get your creative juices flowing. And after a while, you will discover that your *tefilah* become a symphony of thought with you as the composer, a master piece of *rachamim* that will transport you into direct contact with the One who is *chanun verachum*.