

## SECTION 4: *CHESHBON HANEFESH*

### INTRODUCTION

Although seemingly an unrelated concept, the idea of making a *cheshbon hanefesh* is an integral part of davening, for two reasons.

First of all, the main goal of davening is to be inspired to fulfill Hashem's will through keeping the Torah and mitzvos properly, which is accomplished by developing a love and fear of Hashem. The Zohar compares love and fear to the wings of a bird. Just as wings enable a bird to fly, so do love and fear of Hashem elevate our Torah and mitzvos and enhance their affect on us and the world. Since real davening means to know Hashem and develop a love and fear of Him, it thus follows that an important part of davening is to ensure that we fulfill His will properly.

It is therefore important to translate every inspiration you have into something practical, and to be constantly aware of exactly where you are holding and what you must still accomplish in your *avodas Hashem*. For this to happen, you must frequently make a *cheshbon hanefesh*.

A *cheshbon hanefesh* is also known as a *cheshbon tzedek*, an honest account, since it isn't always easy to overcome our self-love and honestly come to terms with the fact that we have made a mistake and need to change. This is why it's important to make this a regular habit, so we can overcome our ego bit by bit through commitment and *kabalas ol* to serve Hashem even if it requires change.

A second reason why making a *cheshbon hanefesh* is necessary for davening is because achieving an awareness of Hashem means you are searching for Him and trying to find Him in your personal life. In order to truly recognize that you need to find Hashem in your life, you must realize that your true identity is your *neshamah*, and you must know what you can be and where you are presently—all parts of the *cheshbon hanefesh* process, as explained in this section.

## CHAPTER 1. KNOWING WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE ARE GOING

Chassidus and Kabbalah view *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* as a special time for making a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of your spiritual standing.

To be able to make a proper *cheshbon hanefesh*, you must first set up a personal *seder*, a program of spiritual growth, through which you conduct your day. This *seder* should encompass every aspect of *avodas Hashem*, such as learning Torah, davening, acting with *ahavas yisroel*, doing everything *lesheim shamayim*, and so on.

However, before embarking on this spiritual journey, a person must be aware of three underlying principles.

The first principle is the idea of *bechirah chafshis*, free will.

The Alter Rebbe explains in *Tanya* (Chap. 14) that every person has the ability to be a *beinoni* at any given moment. Whenever a person is overcome with a desire to indulge in a *taavah*, whether permissible or, *chas veshalom*, forbidden, he can always stay in control by telling himself: “I don’t want to be separated from Hashem for even a single moment. What I truly desire is to connect to Hashem through His Torah and mitzvos, since a hidden, intrinsic love for Hashem is found within my heart. How can I go against His will if this will weaken my connection with Hashem?!” Thoughts such as these can help him overcome his desire and even lead him to perform a mitzvah instead.

Later in *Tanya* (Chap. 17), the Alter Rebbe explains how aiming to fulfill all of the Torah and mitzvos is a very accessible goal. Everyone has a brain and can think about any idea he so desires. Thus, if a person will focus his mind on his love for Hashem, he will automatically be able to control himself, since the nature of the mind is to control the heart.

We can derive two things from this. First, we learn the basic idea that our intellect controls our emotions. We have the power to overcome our negative desires and act based on our inner conviction to do what’s right. Second, if we would recognize that we possess a hidden love for Hashem and an inherent desire to serve Him and not be separated from Him, it would give us the power and motivating strength to serve Hashem even when it’s difficult.

Thus, the first principle is to recognize that we have *bechirah chafshis* to choose what we want to do, and together with that we have *moach shalit al haleiv*—the ability for the mind to control the heart, a critical element in the nature of a person. Every human being has the ability to choose how to lead his life and how to respond to any situation he is placed in. We aren’t forced to conduct ourselves in a certain way, not by our environment, our family background, or even our past deeds. At every moment, we are given the chance to realize what we should be doing and act according to our value system, based on our recognition that Hashem is our King and that we do

what He desires, and not as dictated by the world around us, our environment, or our past. We can think and realize what we are here for and act based on our conviction to fulfill our mission and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The second principle is that we have to know who we are and what we really care about. In other words, there are two questions we have to ask ourselves: Who am I, and what am I here for.

Who am I—a Yid, a *cheilek eloka mima'al mamash*. My *neshamah* is invested within a *nefesh hasichlis*, a *nefesh habahamis*, and a body, in order that they too may be connected to Hashem. In truth, I really love Hashem and don't want to be separated from Him at any cost, and the only thing I really care about is Hashem.

What am I here for? To serve Hashem. To make a *dirah bitachtonim*, a dwelling place for Hashem in this world, by learning Torah, doing mitzvos, davening, and performing all of my physical actions *lesheim shamayim*. When a person will truly understand this, he will come to the realization that every aspect of his life is part of this mission. Hence, anything that does not directly benefit this goal—and especially if it clearly opposes it—has no place in his life. With this focus, he can then choose to subordinate any feelings or distractions and act based on his desire to follow this mission, no matter what's going on around him.

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<sup>1</sup>. See *Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah*, Chapter 5, where he explains that free choice is one of the foundations of Torah and mitzvos, and that the only way someone can do *teshuvah* is if he realizes he has free will.

## CHAPTER 2. MAKING A SEDER

Once we know who we are and what we are here for, the third principle comes into place: to figure out how to achieve all this in actuality. (This doesn't mean to say that planning how to serve Hashem in practicality must wait until you have fully appreciated and are totally dedicated to Him. Rather, the intention here is that you must realize that all this is true if you want your *hachlatos* and plan to succeed. Furthermore, if you want them to continue to succeed, it is important to constantly remind yourself that this is what you really care about and that you can really achieve it.)

To accomplish this, it is very helpful (if not essential) to create an actual *seder* of how you will implement this recognition. Write down your plans on paper and categorize them according to the different categories in your *avodas Hashem*.

For example, standard categories would consist of (but are not be limited to) Torah, *tefillah*, *ahavas yisroel*, *hiskrashus*, *kiyum mitzvos behiddur*, and doing everything *lesheim shamayim*. In each section, specify in detail what it includes and what Hashem wants from you. Torah, for instance, is comprised of Chassidus and *nigleh*, with each one encompassing many areas. In *tefillah*, as well, there are many components, such as understanding the *pirush hamilos* and thinking Chassidus. When setting up a program for spiritual growth, you must organize each area with all its details to ensure that you know what you must accomplish and where you are headed.

Without question, it is vital to have a *mashpia* with whom you can consult regarding these issues, as a guide to establishing an appropriate *seder*. However, your *mashpia* cannot create your *seder* for you. It is up to you to organize all the details, as otherwise it is impossible to be completely aware of everything you need to do and to figure out how to wisely use your time.

Once you've taken the time to consider exactly what Hashem wants from you, you should arrange a schedule that will incorporate all of these things without leaving out anything important. With the help of your *mashpia* as well as close friends, you will be able to decide what should be implemented right away and what should be set aside for a later stage.

Once a person has reached this point—he realizes that his mind can control his heart, he knows his goal in life, and he creates a *seder* in *avodas Hashem*—he can then keep track of his achievements and plan ahead to decide what should be worked on next. This is what should be done at *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* every night. This is the time to reflect on these two things: if you are keeping to your *seder* and what you need to continue doing.

To this end, in addition to writing down a general *seder* in *avodas Hashem*, you should keep a daily (or weekly) planner where you can schedule when you will do each thing and arrange that you have enough time for all of them.

### **Long Term and Short Term Goals**

When making a *seder*, it is helpful to know that there are two types of goals: those that are long term and those that are short term.

Long term goals take an extended period of time and require much effort to accomplish. For example, learning the entire Talmud Bavli can take seven and a half years when keeping to a one-*daf*-per-day ratio. This can sometimes take more than an hour a day (if one learns it slowly and properly). In the same vein, to learn the entire *Hemshech Ayin Beis* can take three to four years if you spend the proper amount of time studying it. Going through the entire davening with *kavanah* can take years to accomplish as well. For these goals, you need to plan in advance how much time you will need to spend each day, week, and so on in order to achieve them.

Short term goals are ones that only take a few weeks or months, and you can see the end result from where you are now. Examples of such resolutions are basic proper davening, learning *chitas* and Rambam, and so on. These are more urgent tasks that must be worked on first.

The reason we need to differentiate between these two types of goals is so that we will have the foresight how to place them in our schedule. We need to consider those goals that must be accomplished immediately, together with those we want to accomplish over a lengthier course of time. This will ensure that we will strategically plan out how to accomplish all the things that are truly important to us. When you have written your *seder* in *avodas Hashem* and have included both your long term and short term goals, it's much easier to figure out how to put them in your schedule and make sure that nothing is left out.

## CHAPTER 3. MAKING A *CHESHBON HANEFESH*

Once you have a *seder*, you can see by *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* if you are keeping up to it. This is the time to think about the past day and consider if you kept up to your *seder* and acted properly.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the daily *cheshbon hanefesh*, there is also a *cheshbon hanefesh* we conduct on Erev Shabbos or Erev Rosh Chodesh, when we think about the entire previous week or month. Special occasions, like the month of Elul, a personal birthday, Yud Shevat, Gimmel Tammuz, and similar dates are a time to look a little bit deeper into ourselves, to consider whether we are really the way Hashem and the Rebbe want us to be.<sup>3</sup>

Once you become accustomed to having a routine *cheshbon hanefesh* for your external actions, you can incorporate a deeper kind of contemplation. This *pniyimus 'dike cheshbon hanefesh* is to see if you have the proper feelings for what you are doing, for example, to see if you have genuine *ahavas yisroel*, appropriate concentration when davening, proper intentions when eating and sleeping, and so on.

You don't need to examine all of your feelings every day. Rather, the idea is that you should be aware of yourself and your standing in *avodas Hashem*. You need to consider not only your actions but also the attitude behind them, and resolve how to advance in the proper direction with your actions as well as with your feelings and outlook.

We are only expected to think about this for a few minutes every day, but if we do this continuously we will notice steady changes in our lives.

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<sup>2</sup>. I heard from Rabbi Moshe Feller that he once asked the Rebbe what to do if he is too tired to say *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* with a *cheshbon hanefesh* before going to sleep. The Rebbe answered that in such a situation, he should do so right after *Maariv*.

Alternatively, if you did not manage to make a *cheshbon hanefesh* before going to sleep, you should at least do so the next morning as a preparation for davening. The Alter Rebbe explains (in the second letter printed at the end of *Siddur Tehillas Hashem*) that before davening a person should make a *cheshbon hanefesh* accompanied by *teshuvah*, and he should then remove any trace of sadness from his heart by focusing on the joy of seeing the glory of Hashem as it is accessible to us during davening. This is not the usual *seder* for our generation, since it's difficult for us to change our feelings from one extreme to the other in succession, but it could work from time to time (for example, when one wasn't able to make a *cheshbon hanefesh* at night).

<sup>3</sup>. ראה תורה מנחם ח"א ע' 175. היום יומן י"א ניסן.

The Frierdiker Rebbe related<sup>4</sup> that a certain chossid of the Rebbe Maharash was once told by the Rebbe to fast for six hundred days. The chossid couldn't understand how such an undertaking is possible. The Rebbe Maharash explained that he didn't mean it to be taken literally. Not eating isn't called fasting; it's called dieting! Rather, he intended that this person should spend fifteen minutes every day thinking about his spiritual level for a total of six hundred days. The chossid followed the Rebbe's instructions. When he returned afterward to the Rebbe, not only had his external actions changed for the better, but his entire personality and essence were transformed.

The Frierdiker Rebbe concluded that we can learn from this how important it is to designate time daily to think about ourselves. Whether you spend fifteen minutes a day or just a few minutes (if fifteen is too difficult), it's very important to think about improving yourself on a daily basis, until you will see significant changes, with Hashem's help.

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<sup>4</sup>. *Lekutei Diburim*, Vol. 4, p. 136 (English); pp. 1211–1212 (Hebrew).

## CHAPTER 4. MAKING HACHLATOS

When a person makes a *cheshbon hanefesh* and sees that there is an area that requires improvement, he makes a *hachlatah*, a firm resolution to either add in the positive or refrain from the negative.

It may be helpful to keep the following points in mind when deciding on a *hachlatah*:

1. Choose something that is high on your priority list. For example, if someone isn't learning *chitas* or Rambam and he is also not davening with a minyan, he should begin by resolving to daven with a minyan. (See above, Chapter 2, "Making a *Seder*," that you should create your personal *seder* in serving Hashem with specific priorities of what will be worked on immediately and what will be set aside for a later time.)
2. Decide on something you know you can *realistically* accomplish, considering your current situation. For example, someone who is too busy to learn Rambam or has difficulty grasping it should first make a *hachlatah* to learn one *perek* a day (or *Sefer Hamitzvos*). Once he has kept his *hachlatah* for a few months, he can consider starting to learn three *perakim* a day. If he were to immediately begin by learning three *perakim* a day, even if he manages to accomplish this for a short period of time, he will "crash" soon after and won't be able to continue. (This is merely an example to bring out the idea, although for some it might be feasible to "jump" into learning three *perakim* right away.)
3. Resolve to follow your *hachlatah* for a *short and specific amount of time*. For example, if you resolve to start waking up early, or to learn a specific amount of material every day, try it out for one or two weeks, and during that time push yourself to keep the *hachlatah*. If it works well, you can extend it for another few weeks. Generally, you should never make a *hachlatah* to do something forever. With the end of your goal in sight, you can tell yourself, "It's only for a short period of time. I can definitely do it."
4. Commit yourself to *one hachlatah* at a time. If you challenge yourself with many *hachlatos*, then you will lose the willpower and concentration necessary to keep them all. Only if you accept one *hachlatah* at a time and concentrate your efforts on it can you hope for it to succeed. (You may decide to choose one *hachlatah* that you will

keep no matter what, and another one that you will fulfill when you are able to, but there can only be one *main hachlatah* that you will keep regardless of the circumstances.)<sup>5</sup>

5. Daven to Hashem to help you persevere with your decision. During davening (in *Shema Koleinu*,<sup>6</sup> before the second *Yihiyu Leratzon*,<sup>7</sup> or by *Krias Shema Al Hamitah*), ask Hashem to give you the strength to continue and not be held back by anything, especially by your past habits. Also, when you write to the Rebbe,<sup>8</sup> ask the Rebbe to daven to Hashem on your behalf.

6. Tell a friend about your *hachlatah*. The Rebbe said that at birthday *farbrengens* one should make a public *hachlatah*, since such a *hachlatah* has more potential to succeed. Similarly, any *hachlatah* disclosed to a close friend is more likely to succeed because he will encourage you to keep it. (See below, Chapter 5, “Writing a *Duch*,” for more on this subject.)

R. Yitzchak Meir Gurary once came to the Rebbe with a dilemma probably familiar to many. He would become inspired by *farbrengens* and accept positive *hachlatos*, but his enthusiasm wouldn’t last and he wouldn’t end up keeping his *hachlatos*. The Rebbe explained that the general reason a *hachlatah* doesn’t last is either because the inspiration isn’t immediately expressed with something tangible, or because the *hachlatah* was simply too big to stick to. One has to make sure both that his inspiration is immediately channeled into a concrete decision, and that his decision is small and manageable—*מעט אגרשנו*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>. See *Sefer Hasichos* 5703, pp. 228–229, where the Frierdiker Rebbe says (quoting the Rebbe Rashab) that if you want to help another person rectify his misdoings, you should only advise him to change one thing at a time. This is for two reasons: (1) You can’t restrict all of his desires; you can only limit some of them while allowing others. (2) Through advising him to change one step at a time, he will realize that you truly care about him and aren’t simply trying to undermine his desires and offend him.

Obviously, the first reason also applies to a person working on improving his own character.

For more on how to change and make *hachlatos* and a *cheshbon hanefesh*, it is recommended to learn *Klalei Hachinuch Veha’hadrachah* from the Frierdiker Rebbe (printed at the end of *Sefer Hasichos* 5703, and also translated into English as *The Principles of Education and Guidance*).

<sup>6</sup>. See Section 1, Chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup>. See *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>. See Chapter 5, “Writing a *Duch*.”

<sup>9</sup>. *Derher Magazine*, Iyar 5775, p. 64.

## CHAPTER 5. WRITING A DUCH

In addition to the *cheshbon hanefesh* you should conduct as part of your routine, it is very helpful to write a *din v'cheshbon* to the Rebbe on a regular basis. The reason for this is because a person needs to feel a sense of responsibility to enable him to accomplish as much as he can. If a person's accomplishments are based on what he himself feels is acceptable, they will always be limited. However, when a person writes to the Rebbe, realizing that the Rebbe wants to hear a good report, he will fulfill much more, since he realizes that the Rebbe won't be satisfied with the bare minimum or with mediocre accomplishments. Since he wants to give the Rebbe *nachas*, he will push himself to achieve his utmost.

This also relates to the idea of *knei lecha chaver*—acquire for yourself a friend, meaning that you must work hard to find a true friend. A true friend is someone with whom you can discuss your standing in *avodas Hashem* and gain insight and motivation on how to improve. Also, it is very important to have someone who can help evaluate where you are holding and monitor your improvements, or simply give you reminders to work on those areas you know need improvement but have a hard time actually implementing.

Needless to say, this is also the idea of having a *mashpia*, someone who is on a higher level who can help guide you and elevate you. There is a common factor between writing to the Rebbe, speaking with friends, and consulting with a *mashpia*: since a person loves himself and has a natural tendency to overlook his shortcomings, he can't evaluate his situation with complete accuracy and objectivity. Only by "leaving" himself and presenting his situation to an outside person can he reach an honest evaluation and achieve true improvement.

## CHAPTER 6. TESHUVAH

*Teshuvah* is an important part of *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* (and vice versa—*Krias Shema Al Hamitah* is an important part of *teshuvah*).

As explained above, *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* is a time to think about your conduct throughout the day and acknowledge that you need to improve. When making this calculation, there are two ideas to consider: (1) Which areas have I worked on but still need improvement? (2) In which aspects did I go wrong?

The first idea, as explained above at length, requires having a *seder* so you can monitor and improve your positive conduct. You should evaluate your actions, consider if or why you aren't keeping up to your *seder*, and resolve to correct your behavior. The second element of "What did I do wrong" is the idea of *teshuvah*.

If you know you have done something wrong, you must at the very least fulfill the most basic element of *teshuvah*. This consists of two parts. Firstly, you must honestly regret your misbehavior, that is, you must think and realize that you should not have done this act and should never do it again. Secondly, you must resolve never to repeat the misdeed again, and you must do whatever necessary to ensure the fulfillment of that decision. You must try to determine what caused it to happen and what you can do to make sure it doesn't repeat itself.

In addition to these two primary components of *teshuvah*, there are two additional aspects that are important as well: (1) To verbally confess your wrongdoing to Hashem, and to verbally express that you regret what you did and will try your utmost not to stumble again. (2) To ask Hashem for forgiveness.<sup>10</sup>

What happens if you did all the above and then messed up again (as happens to most of us most of the time)?

In such a case, you should simply repeat the process, as if you were doing it for the first time. As explained in *Tanya*,<sup>11</sup> it is difficult for a human being to repeatedly forgive another person for the same offense he committed over and over again. However, since Hashem and his attributes are infinite, He forgives us the thousandth time with the same compassion as the first time, as long as the person continues to do genuine *teshuvah*. Hashem knows we have a *yetzer hara*, that we struggle to overcome it, and that sometimes we don't win the battle. But that

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<sup>10</sup>. ראה אה"ת פ"א.

<sup>11</sup>. ראה אה"ת שם.

doesn't mean we intend to keep repeating our mistakes. We continue to fight, and Hashem accepts that as long as we try to do *teshuvah* as best as we can.

### **Faith and Joy in *Teshuvah***

An integral idea in *teshuvah* is that you must never give up, and you must have complete faith that Hashem will help you do *teshuvah* and you will definitely succeed. Once you do *teshuvah* as the Torah prescribes, you should continue keeping your *seder* and not feel bad about what happened. On the contrary, you should be joyful that Hashem believes in you and trusts you to overcome your challenges and continue to go forward, and you should be happy with the belief that Hashem will surely help you succeed.

The Rebbe explains in a *maamar*<sup>12</sup> that nowadays, the primary way of doing *teshuvah* is with joy. The idea of *tracht gut vet zayn gut* doesn't only apply to physical challenges; it equally applies—and even more so—to spiritual matters. The way we should do *teshuvah* is by thinking positively and trusting that Hashem will help us grow and overcome our challenges.

Thus, even though *teshuvah* is something that must be done, and without it you won't be able to *daven* and serve Hashem properly, it should not lower your spirits. On the contrary, it should bring you tremendous joy and inspire you with the motivation never to give up, because you realize that Hashem is always ready to give you another chance.

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12. ד"ה מרגלא בפומי' דרבא תשמ"ו.

## CHAPTER 7. THE PROPER APPROACH TO MAKING A *CHESHBON TZEDEK*

In a *sichah* of *Shabbos Parshas Noach*, 5752,<sup>13</sup> the Rebbe explains how one should approach making a *cheshbon tzedek*.<sup>14</sup> The following is a free translation of a portion of the *sichah*, followed by a summary.

Although there is a principle that one can assume that every Jew is good and proper, this is limited to how one should view others; with regard to oneself one cannot rely on this assumption.<sup>15</sup> Rather, he must periodically examine his spiritual status through conducting a *cheshbon tzedek* of all of his thoughts, words, and actions. He should then resolve to fix and complete whatever is needed, and more important—he should actually fix and complete them. . . .

When a person makes a *cheshbon tzedek*, he is primarily focused on how to actually improve the details of his conduct, one detail at a time. Because of this, he may feel limited to these details and lack excitement and enthusiasm. It is therefore important to also adopt another approach to *teshuvah*, so that he will feel excited and accomplished.

*[The Rebbe will explain another approach to teshuvah and why both are needed:]*

Instead of focusing on all of the details that need improvement, he should elevate himself to a higher level where he is completely focused on learning Torah, davening, and other spiritual matters, and as a result, all of his previous problems will automatically disappear. Just like a small amount of light dispels a large amount of darkness, the light of his increased involvement and excitement in spirituality will automatically dispel the negative matters that must be fixed. The greater his involvement and excitement in positive matters, the more the negative matters will fade away.

The problem with this approach is that one isn't focused on correcting all of the details of his conduct, since he is concentrating on increasing in learning Torah and other positive things.

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<sup>13</sup>. *Sefer Hasichos* 5752, Vol. 1, pp. 62–64.

<sup>14</sup>. Lit., an honest account (of oneself). In general, this term is synonymous with the term *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of one's soul.

<sup>15</sup>. See *Pirkei Avos*, Chapter 2, Mishna 4: “Do not trust yourself until the day you die.”

The true and best way is to adopt a combination of these two approaches. One should make a detailed *cheshbon tzedek* of all of his thoughts, words, and actions, and he should infuse into this *cheshbon tzedek* a recognition that through these detailed actions he will be elevated to a completely higher level. In other words, he feels within each detail that requires improvement how this brings him closer to the higher and more exciting level of closeness to Hashem he is striving to reach. (This is in direct contrast to viewing it as a list of chores weighing him down. Instead, each detail is seen as an essential component to fulfilling his desire to come close to Hashem in a much greater way.)<sup>16</sup> Through this, he will have the proper (and incomparably more) enthusiasm and excitement in his self-refinement.

Besides for the effectiveness in terms of actual improvement, there is an additional benefit to this combined approach.

When someone sees that there are many areas that need improvement, he might feel discouraged and become depressed. However, that will only happen if he is focusing on the magnitude of these negative areas. But if his focus lies on the idea that through correcting these aspects he will reach a deeper level of closeness to Hashem, he won't feel depressed at all; he will be joyful and excited that he is uniting with Hashem.

On a deeper level, not only does one become closer to Hashem through improving his conduct, but the entire purpose of his previous situation was to enable him to connect more deeply to Hashem through *teshuvah*.

When a Yid does *teshuvah*, he fully reveals his deepest connection to Hashem. This is expressed by the burning desire to come close to Hashem that wells up within him despite his low level, demonstrating that his connection to Hashem is beyond any limitations, even the limitations of his spiritual shortcomings. The revelation of this deep connection is so significant that

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<sup>16</sup>. The following incident was printed in the weekly *Here's My Story* publication (Tishrei or Cheshvan 5775):

Someone once asked the Rebbe, "Why does Hashem want us to be careful with so many minute details, for example, to have separate spoons for meat and milk?"

"It's not for Him, it's for us," the Rebbe answered. "This is the path Hashem gave us through which we can become close to Him."

In other words, all the details each one of us must work on are the path Hashem lovingly gave us to come closer to Him.

Hashem allows negative things to happen so that a person will achieve this revelation. Thus, a Yid can feel that the only reason there are details that need improvement to begin with is to reveal the depth of connection experienced through *teshuvah*.

By considering these two ideas (first, how every detail will bring him to a completely higher level of closeness to Hashem, and second, how these aspects are only there to bring him to the deepest experience of *teshuvah*), a person will be able to work on fixing these areas with great happiness and enjoyment.

In summary, there are two classic approaches to *teshuvah*:<sup>17</sup>

1. To examine every detail of your thoughts, speech, and actions and make a detailed plan of how to fix whatever needs correction.
2. To devote yourself completely to learning and *davening*, thereby elevating yourself to a higher level. When you are in such a position, you won't want to be involved in the wrong things to begin with.

Each of these approaches has an advantage and a disadvantage, as follows:

1. In the first approach, one is actually focused on fixing all the aspects that need improvement. However, since he is completely caught up in the details and is only thinking about how to accomplish what must get done, his excitement is very limited.<sup>18</sup> In addition, since he notices that he has many faults that need improvement, he might become sad or depressed about his situation.

2. The advantage of the second approach is that one is excited and lively about everything he does and has a positive frame of mind. The problem is that since he isn't focusing on the details that need correction, he can't completely fix them.

The Rebbe explains that the correct path is to combine these two approaches. You should narrow in on all the details that need improvement, but then infuse into your plan of improvement the awareness that each detail is imperative for you to reach a higher level of closeness to Hashem. In other words, you should realize that the way to become completely absorbed into a higher level of reality is not only by focusing on learning and *davening*, but also through working on the details of your conduct that need improvement. Each small detail is not

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<sup>17</sup>. See *Hayom Yom*, 28 Menachem Av, where these two approaches are brought and explained.

<sup>18</sup>. This is similar to the general problem of a person who is very meticulous to keep all the details of *Halacha* but is lacking the inner spirit behind his actions, causing them to be done with a cold exactness.

merely a detail for itself but part of something tremendous—the ability to come closer to Hashem on a whole new level.

When you begin to look at it this way, you won't feel limited by the things you have to work on; instead, you will feel free to fulfill the yearning of your *neshamah* to come closer to Hashem by working on yourself. Additionally, you won't have any reason to feel despondent, since rather than looking at them as problems, you will view them as opportunities for infinite growth and closeness to Hashem.<sup>19</sup>

On a deeper level, you should realize that the underlying reason there are areas that need improvement is to give you the great merit of *teshuvah*, enabling you to reach a level of closeness to Hashem even a tzaddik can't attain.

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<sup>19</sup>. Someone once complained to the Rebbe that his doctor told him he had a certain illness and needs to take medicine to cure it, and this piece of news had lowered his spirits. The Rebbe explained to him that this was actually a reason to be happy. Beforehand, he hadn't been aware of his sickness; the fact that his doctor had showed him how to get better only improved his situation.

Similarly, discovering things that need improvement and planning to fix them is not a disheartening realization but a positive one.

## CHAPTER 8. THINKING CHASSIDUS BEFORE GOING TO SLEEP

The Baal Shem Tov explains that the first thought a person has in the morning affects his entire day.<sup>20</sup> Chassidim add that the same applies to the first words a person speaks and the first action he performs.<sup>21</sup> For this reason, the first words a person says are *Modeh Ani*, his first thought is that he is in the presence of Hashem, and his first action is to wash *negel vasser*.

This idea is likewise applicable to the final things a person does before going to bed. Therefore, the last action of a Yid is to place *negel vasser* at his bedside, his last words are to say *Hamapil*, and his final thoughts should be to think over an idea in Chassidus. These thoughts will affect the way you sleep so that it should be how Hashem wants, and they will make it easier for you to wake up energetically to serve Hashem.

This is different than the *cheshbon hanefesh* made by *Krias Shema Al Hamitah*. Then you are thinking about your personal growth, whereas here you are thinking about an idea in Chassidus, not necessarily how it pertains to your *avodah*. This should be done (before or) after *Hamapil* and immediately before sleeping, not during *Krias Shema Al Hamitah*.

The Friediker Rebbe says<sup>22</sup> that the time after *Hamapil* should be spent thinking over words of Torah. Some chassidim mention that a person should think over *Tanya*,<sup>23</sup> but you can review any idea in Chassidus, as long as it keeps your mind fully occupied.<sup>24</sup> The Rebbe writes in *Hayom Yom*<sup>25</sup> that when a person's mind is not engaged in thinking holy thoughts, it will automatically be open to accepting unholy ones. The only way to have proper thoughts before going to sleep is by thinking holy thoughts, especially ideas of Chassidus.

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<sup>20</sup>. כתר שם טוב סי' ריב.

<sup>21</sup>. I heard this from R. Aryeh Leib Kaplan, *Rosh Yeshiva* in Montreal, who heard it from R. Shlomo Chaim Kesselman.

<sup>22</sup>. סה"ש תש"א ע' 56.

<sup>23</sup>. I heard this from R. Pinye Korf. See also *Reb Shlomo Chaim* (pp. 290 and 572) where he speaks about thinking over a *perek Tanya* before *Krias Shema Al Hamitah*.

<sup>24</sup>. A related idea is the following *eitzah* I once heard from R. Menachem Zev Halevi Greenglass *a"h*: To help a person sleep properly, he should repeat the names of the *Rebbeim* before *Hamapil* (starting with the Rashbi and the Arizal and then continuing with the Baal Shem Tov), including their names and their mothers' names.

<sup>25</sup>. ט"ז חשוון.

Going to sleep is a very special time; it is the time you are preparing your *neshamah* to go up and receive a renewed dose of life and energy from Hashem. You should try to put yourself in the proper frame of mind so that your *neshamah* will receive vitality from the *tzad hakedushah* and you will be able to wake up with renewed energy and vigor, prepared to use the day in its fullest to serve Hashem.