

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller How to Come Close to Hashem

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As soon as we approach the subject, “How to serve Hashem,” we encounter a problem: “serving” anyone implies that we have to let go of being ourselves in favor of the one whom we are serving. Serving Hashem, however, is different than any other form of service. When a person serves Hashem, instead of losing herself, she discovers herself.

In order to understand this, let’s focus for a moment on what makes us human. Suppose someone — a family member or a guest — ate a croissant in your kitchen. Let’s say he didn’t use the plate or the napkin you offered him. The result is crumbs of flaky pastry all over the kitchen floor. The next morning when you go to sweep the floor, you discover ants all over. In the process of cleaning up, you tread on a few ants. Is this a cause for mourning? Would you feel heartbroken over the death of these ants? Obviously not.

Switch the scene. It’s the morning after the suicide bombing at the Hillel Café, in which Dr. David Appelbaum and his daughter Nava, whose wedding was scheduled for that night, were murdered. Was there any Jew in Jerusalem who didn’t feel heartbroken, devastated, by the deaths of these two human beings? Even people who did not personally know the Appelbaums cried when they learned of the deaths of these two noble individuals.

What makes human beings more special than ants? The Maharal says that human beings are unique in creation because they exist in Hashem’s image. How does the Divine image in the human being manifest itself? The Maharal points to three features:

Our ability to search for meaning.
Our ability to understand and our desire to be understood.
Our ability to make moral choices.

We serve Hashem through the mitzvot, but the effect of every mitzvah is to give us a clearer and deeper and more authentic relationship to ourselves. Rather than losing ourselves when serving Hashem, we gain ourselves — or regain ourselves.

COMING HOME TO THE PALACE

In his commentary on the Song of Songs, the Vilna Goan (whom we refer to by the acronym “the GRA”) enumerates five modes that a person should bring to serving Hashem. Before discussing each of these modes, I want to clarify what these five are.

The GRA is not telling us that there are five mitzvot. There are 613 mitzvot, not five. Rather, he’s

teaching us that there are five mitzvot that change the quality of the other mitzvot. These five mitzvot, which are postures of the mind and heart, will uplift our service of Hashem to an entirely new level.

The Song of Songs is an allegory.

Once there was a king. The king takes as a wife a commoner, but a commoner from good stock. The queen finds life in the palace too stressful, due to all that is expected of her. She has to maintain such a high standard of behavior, such a royal standard, that she buckles, and flees the palace. Outside, however, she discovers that she has become a different person because of her tenure in the palace.

When she re-enters the ordinary world, she finds it to be coarse and vulgar. The people of the world also see her as different, so they humiliate her and beat her. She wants to return to the palace, but she’s worried. How can she face the king? In the midst of her journey back, she encounters the king. He reassures her by explaining to her that the ketubah, the marriage contract, between him and her is different from any other ketubah, because it has a clause which stipulates that no matter how she betrays him, he will always take her back. This, of course, is an allegory about the relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people.

In discussing the queen’s return to the king, our return to Hashem, the GRA offers these five modes as five avenues of return.

•LOVE

The first path is the path of love. Loving Hashem, just like loving another person, means taking joy in giving.

One of my favorite stories to illustrate such love started in the early seventies. A man, whom I’ll call Michael, had an almost pathological aversion to piercing ears. He felt it was pagan to make holes in one’s body and stick gold and silver into the holes. And this was in the era when only women and girls made only one hole and only in their ears. Imagine how poor Michael must be flipping out today!

Michael’s wife, let’s call her Michelle, decided that marrying him was worth a lifetime without pierced earrings. So they lived happily ever after for fifteen years, until their oldest daughter, Sandy, became a teenager. One day Sandy came home from school and announced that the reason nobody likes her is that she is the only one in the world who doesn’t have pierced ears, and that’s why she looks like such a neb, and that’s why she has no social life. No matter how hysterical her complaints, her father refused to give in and let her pierce her ears.

Some time later, Sandy overheard her mother kvetching in the kitchen. Michelle was saying to Michael, “We never get away.” Michael replied, “We go on a vacation every year.” Michelle countered, “You go on a vacation every year. You stop work and do leisure activities and refresh yourself. Do you know what I do on our vacations?”

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Instead of taking care of the kids at home, I take care of the kids somewhere else. Instead of having a convenient kitchen with modern appliances, we go to the country.”

Sandy overheard this conversation and decided to give her parents a vacation without the kids. She organized her siblings; they pooled their resources and saved their allowances. Sandy got both sets of grandparents involved. One set came to stay with the kids and the other set sent food, and also contributed financially.

When Sandy and her younger siblings surprised their parents with this vacation, Michael and Michelle were thrilled. It had so obviously come from a place of pure love and desire to give.

Driving home from their getaway weekend, Michelle said to Michael, “You know, we should really buy something for Sandy. It was such an incredible thing she did.” They were passing a mall. Michelle was too sleepy to go in, so Michael went in to buy Sandy a gift. He came out with a pair of pierced earrings.

This is what true love is: not giving out of resentment, not giving in order to receive something, not bookkeeping, but rather giving joyfully to the one you love. Such giving engenders more love, in a radiant spiral.

Notice that giving can concretize your bond with another person only if that is your intention. Giving without wanting that bond does not lead to love. That’s why a waitress at a pit stop who serves coffee to the same trucker every day would not feel an attachment to the trucker. Giving only affects a bond if you want the bond.

Many people don’t love Hashem because they were taught to perceive Hashem as a punitive being who has His own agenda. To give you an example of this perception: Imagine that you got a job distributing food trays in a hospital. The personnel manager who hired you for this job really doesn’t care about you; he would just as soon replace you with somebody else who would distribute the food trays. His only concern is that the food be distributed. His concern is with the goal, not the person achieving the goal. If you, for whatever reason, didn’t distribute the food trays, in short order you would be fired.

People often distort Hashem’s attitude because they look at only part of the picture. In the Torah it says many times that if you don’t do such-and-such, you’ll be punished. If we understand from this that Hashem punishes because he cares about getting the job done, but doesn’t care about us, then we’ve distorted the truth. In fact, the “job,” i.e. the mitzvah, is the means, and we are the end.

The Zohar calls the 613 mitzvot, 613 “eitzot,” meaning “advices.” They advise us how to actualize our highest potential. They advise us how to forge an attachment to Hashem. We don’t have to understand how an elevator works in order to ride it to 50th floor. Similarly, the mitzvot elevate us, whether or not we understand how.

The purpose of all Divine punishments (and all punishments are Divine, because there is only One Source in the universe) is to prevent us from destroying ourselves. Hashem is interested in us, not the job.

If you look at the world objectively, you’ll see both order and beauty on the one hand, and chaos and horror on the other. Hashem created both, because both have a purpose. The purpose of the chaos and horror is to force us into a situation whereby our search for meaning, our search for morality, is actualized through the choices that we have to make. The way that humans operate, unfortunately, is that we tend not to make the big choices unless we are forced into them. The difficulties and horrors of life are meant to force us into discovering ourselves.

The beauty, the constancy of giving, which is far, far more predominant than the horror, is there for an entirely different purpose. It’s to let us know how beloved we are. Think about your favorite food for a minute. It has taste, texture, smell. These are all gifts that Hashem gives us out of love. We would eat if food did not look good, smell good, and taste good. We would eat because we are hungry. Hashem throws in the delicious taste, the tantalizing smell, as free gifts, out of His love for us.

There’s a rule of thumb: the more we need something, the more prevalent it is; the less we need something, the more rare it is. We need air to breathe, so Hashem has provided us with abundant air. Nobody really needs a diamond, so diamonds are very rare. All of Hashem’s constant giving is to make us feel beloved.

There’s another rule: If you let yourself feel beloved, you’ll love. A normal person, who feels beloved wants to give love back, wants to reciprocate. The more we let ourselves feel beloved, the more our giving towards Hashem is going to move us somewhere, just as Sandy’s love moved Michael past his life-long aversion to pierced earrings.

•YIRAH

Yirah is usually translated as fear of God. Many people misunderstand yirah to mean a cringing, abject fear, like a child’s fear of the boogeyman. To understand real yirah, we begin with this admission: deeds have consequences. To deny this truth is both dishonest and misleading.

Picture this: You’re in a fine restaurant, and you see someone at the next table eating his peas with a knife. Would you go over to him and say, “Use a fork!”? Of course not! It’s not your business to teach the world table

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manners, and you have no connection to this person. If your own child, however, were eating peas with a knife, you would correct him.

Hashem is connected to everything all the time. The level of punishment Hashem administers is in direct proportion to the depth of the connection. Hashem is constantly pouring life force into everything. He has, however, very little expectation, in terms of response, of a tree or a blade of grass. There's no such thing as a good blade of grass or an evil tree. They are what they are existentially. Humans, however, could be either good or evil, according to our choices.

Hashem responds to us according to our choices. All relationship issues between us and Hashem begin with us. What is called, "an awakening from below," creates a more than parallel response from above.

Yirah is difficult to arouse because we rarely see the spiritual results of our choices. Let's say Linda spoke badly about you. Now you get a phone call from a prospective employer who's considering hiring Linda. He's calling you for a reference. You have a choice. You can take revenge on Linda by speaking badly about her, or even insinuating that there's something bad you're not saying. (Revenge, of course, is prohibited by the Torah.) Or you could swallow your words and instead say something positive about Linda, or, if there's really nothing positive to say, you could say you really don't know about her skills.

Let's say you choose the latter option. You chose not to take revenge. No other person is aware of the feat of spiritual heroism you just accomplished, but you've just created a space where Hashem could put His chesed (loving-kindness) into the world. And since Hashem's chesed is infinite, what enters the world as a result of your action is enormous beyond compare. But you'll probably never perceive the connection between that chesed and your overcoming the urge to take revenge.

Conversely, let's say you chose to say, "If you hire Linda, you may come to regret it." Then you've just made a space for cruelty to come back and challenge you. But when it does, you probably won't recognize that it has anything to do with your taking revenge on Linda.

Anytime punishment comes into the world, it comes from one place, that where we're living what I'll call Plan B.

Here's the Plan A world: Hashem says to Adam, "Don't eat of the forbidden fruit." Adam says to Eve, "Hashem said, 'Don't eat of that fruit.'" And what does she say to him? "God forbid!" Then the snake comes and says, "Touch it." And Eve says, "I don't want to talk to you." That's Plan A.

Obviously, Plan A is not the plan that worked. So human history has been following Plan B. Plan B doesn't mean that Hashem gives up and starts all over again. Plan B means that Hashem gives us challenges and tikunim (fixings) to get to the same place that we could have reached had we stayed with Plan A.

Here's another example of how Plan A was diverted into Plan B: When Cain became jealous of Abel because Hashem had accepted Abel's offering, but had rejected Cain's, what ideally should have happened? The conversation should have sounded like this: "Abel, I'm feeling jealous. What can I do to make my offering acceptable to Hashem?" To which Abel should have replied, "I understand how hurt you feel. Let me help you." Since that conversation never took place, and instead Cain murdered Abel, humanity regressed even deeper into Plan B, which means harder challenges.

The crux of the idea here is that Hashem doesn't give up on us. Instead, he manipulates the situation so that we can get to where we have to be. The so-called "punishments," and difficulties and pain are all part of what we have to go through to get back to where we could have been painlessly had we, the human race, made better choices.

Should a person fear punishment? Absolutely, because Plan B is a lot more painful than Plan A. It's not a worse plan, but it's a far more painful plan. The beginning of yirah is fear of painful consequences, the urge to do it right because doing it wrong yields pain. Integrating this kind of yirah includes understanding that the challenges and "punishments" come from a place of love, in the same way that a loving parent will discipline a child rather than let her life spin out of control.

The next higher level of yirah is the perception of the enormity of Hashem's commitment to us, and His 24/7 awareness of our deeds. There are deeds that we would never do in the presence of someone we respect: yell at our children, pilfer grapes in the supermarket, use bad language, etc. Yirah means living with that kind of awareness all of the time. This could be stressful. How stressful? So stressful that the queen sometimes tries to escape from the palace. But no real escape is possible, because outside the palace isn't where we want to be.

Yirah should take us to a level where our relationship to Hashem is so real and palpable that we're afraid of anything that will distance us from Hashem.

•CLEAVING

The next path back enumerated by the GRA is cleaving to Hashem. At the point where the Torah enunciates the mitzvah to cleave to God, Rashi asks the obvious question, "How

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can a finite human being cleave to the infinite?" Then Rashi brings the answer the Talmud provides: "Attach yourself to Torah scholars."

What does that mean practically? Does it mean that you should find the tzaddik of the week in a religious newspaper, find out where he lives, knock on his door, and say, "Rebbe, you don't know me, but I want a relationship with you!?" How can you even begin to cleave to God by cleaving to Torah scholars?

Pirkei Avot (The Sayings of the Fathers) provides us a hint when it says that we should drink the words of the sages thirstily. What does it mean to "drink thirstily"? Let's say you get lost in the Judean Desert. Your tour group stops at a remote desert vista on the way to Masada, you wander off slightly to take a picture of a particularly majestic mountain, you turn around, and . . . the group and the bus are gone. A couple hours go by, you drink up all the water in your bottle of spring water, no other tour bus comes to this remote place, and you are growing increasingly desperate as the day gets hotter and you get thirstier. Finally, after say, six hours, an army patrol comes by and rescues you. One of the soldiers offers you his filthy canteen full of warm water. Will you take it? Will you be grateful for it? Will you drink it thirstily?

Now switch to another scenario. You're dining in a five-star hotel. At the end of your meal, the waiter comes and asks, "Would you like anything else?" You say, "Yes, I'd like some ice water, please." He brings you a filthy canteen full of warm water. Will you drink it, or be grateful for it? Obviously not!

The more aware you are that you are in need, the less finicky you'll be about from whom you are taking. We are all desperately in need of spiritual guidance and direction. Yet many of us say, "I won't learn from anyone who's not on the level of Moshe Rabbeinu or the Baal Shem Tov!"

Learn from everyone. Look for piety and integrity in people whom you know, and try to learn from them.

Look at people who have life experience. Look at Holocaust survivors.

Look at people who have had access to the great souls of the previous generation. If you open yourself, you will find people who will show you more than you have already seen. Cleave to them.

•IMITATING HASHEM

The next path in the GRA's list is the mitzvah of imitating Hashem. As the Torah commands: "Go in His ways." This means imitating the Divine character traits that Hashem has revealed to us: mercy, forgiveness, kindness, truth, the willingness to give even to those who revile you, etc. Let's look at just one of the three traits the GRA discusses.

Hanun, means "one who gives for free." Hashem is constantly giving life to every sentient

being. Even when a person curses God, it is God Himself Who is animating that person's limbs, keeping his heart beating and his lungs breathing, keeping his endocrine system functioning, etc.

In the West, the prevalent misapprehension is that there's an 11th Commandment: "Don't be taken advantage of." Are you ready? There's no such commandment. We're worried about giving without reciprocation. We're worried about giving to someone unworthy. We're worried about not being properly acknowledged, or, in more contemporary jargon, not being validated.

Consider for a moment the Patriarch Abraham. Here he is in the middle of the desert in his tent open on all four sides so he can see wayfarers passing in any direction. He's old and he's recovering from having circumcised himself three days before, and it's a very hot day. Three travelers pass by. If this were us, we would look through the peephole in our door, and ask suspiciously, "Who are you and what do you want?"

And who were they? Three Arabs! Can you imagine yourself inviting them in? "Please have a seat, Abdul."

Abraham not only bowed to them and ran to fetch them water to wash their feet and offered them a sumptuous meal, he also engaged his son Yishmael in serving them. Not only are we worried that we might become shmattas, but also we teach our children not to let themselves be "taken advantage of." We worry that our children might resent the guests, that they may feel that they have to share the spotlight.

There's a Jew in England who is well-known for his hospitality. His children remember weeks at a time when charity collectors from Israel would stay at their home. Often the children would be awakened late at night and told to vacate their beds for guests. They would have to move in with a brother in his bed.

Rabbi Aryeh Levin used to say to the people who were close to him: "If you want to change yourself, then the first thing you have to learn is to change the question you ask when you meet someone. You have to see the other as big and needy, and see yourself as small and willing."

Don't worry about being taken advantage of, because I have a secret for you: The least problem of our generation is being too loving towards each other.

•BEING CAREFUL

The final way the GRA offers is being careful, guarding oneself. The definition of a fool (kseil) in Judaism is someone who speaks or acts before thinking. If you want to get anywhere close to Hashem, you have to train yourself to think

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before
you speak or act.

People sometimes reject carefulness because it is at odds with spontaneity. “Does it mean I can’t trust my feelings?” they ask in horror. Here’s the bad news answer: Yes, you can’t trust your feelings. The mind should lead the heart and not vice versa.

A well known Rebbetzin always used to say, “Look where you put the cup down.” She meant it literally, as in “Don’t put it on the edge of the table where the toddler could reach it and dump the hot coffee on herself,” but she also meant it spiritually, as in: “Don’t heedlessly create situations which will end up hurting yourself and others.” Stop and consider the outcome of the situation, like a chess player who, before he moves his piece, thinks three or four moves ahead. Otherwise, in our lives we will suddenly find ourselves checkmated . . . again and again.

I’ll give you an example of this kind of perspicuity. Hanoch Teller was once riding on the same bus as Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, one of the greatest rabbis of our generation. Until Rabbi Shlomo Zalman was quite old, he used to take the bus to his yeshiva every day, rather than “waste” the yeshiva’s money on taxi fare. That particular day, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman was sitting alone. A scantily clad woman (it was summer) got on the bus and sat down right next to Rabbi Shlomo Zalman. What did he do? He rang the bell as if the next stop was his, got up, and actually got off the bus, although it was far from his yeshiva.

Hanoch Teller followed him. He saw that Rabbi Shlomo Zalman was standing at the bus stop, waiting for the next bus to his yeshiva. Hanoch Teller approached him and asked, “Rebbe, why did you get off the bus? You could have just gone to the back of the bus and sat somewhere else.” Rabbi Shlomo Zalman responded, “No, she would have looked.” This great rabbi did not want to offend this secular woman, which would have made her feel rejected, and affected her attitude toward Torah. So, he was willing to get off the bus, spend time waiting for another bus, and pay a second fare, rather than cause long-term harm to this woman’s attitude toward Judaism. That’s being careful.

If we make these five paths part of our lives, an integral part of how we approach life, we will draw close to Hashem. The queen will return to the palace.