

NEPHESH HACHAIM 1:4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Nephesh Hachaim Gate 1, Ch. 4

1.

Now, no one should ever say, Who am I to think that I could do anything of consequence with my meaningless actions ¹? In fact, R' Chaim asserts, *each one of us* has it within him or her to bring about the sorts of profound things we'd cited above with our actions ².

As he puts it, "not a single one of our actions, words or thoughts ... is ever lost!" ³. Every action that each one of us takes is "great, far-reaching, and momentous" ⁴ and affects the very heavens and the supernal lights ⁵.

In fact, were we astute enough to understand what actually happens in the heavens as a consequence of our deeds we'd *tremble*, R' Chaim asserts. For we'd come to realize just how much damage could come about by even our most minor misdeeds ⁶!

R' Chaim then makes a very astounding, incredibly distressing statement.

In fact, he says, what we'd be doing with our sins would be even worse than what Nebuchadnezzar and Titus did when they (seemingly!) destroyed the first and second *Beit Hamikdash*!

2.

In point of fact, Nebuchadnezzar and Titus could have no effect on the sup-ernal realm⁷, because they weren't linked to it and couldn't influence it ⁸. But we, on the other hand, who are so quite intimately linked with the supernal realm, *can* affect things in the heavens and the supernal *Beit Hamikdash* ⁹.

And so while Nebuchadnezzar and Titus could "only" destroy the phys-ical *Beit Hamikdash*, we could destroy the corresponding supernal *Beit Hamikdash* with our sins ⁹.

It should also make us tremble to realize that not only do we have it within us to do that, but it's also

true that we ourselves incorporate all worlds and their resources and capacities ¹⁰ which themselves comprise the supernal *Beit Hamikdash*!

3.

For, just as our heart incorporates everything vital to our being and sits in the center of our body and thus corresponds to the *Kodesh Kedoshim* ¹¹ in the *Beit Hamikdash* which sat in the center of Jerusalem ¹², our heart also corresponds to the *even shetiyah* ¹³, which incorporates within it all of the sources of holiness ¹⁴.

So when we dwell ¹⁵ on adultery, for example, we set a virtual harlot ¹⁶ in the supernal *Kodesh Kedoshim*, G-d forbid! And we thus empower the forces of impurity and the "other side" there and actually do more harm that way than Titus did when he set an actual harlot in the physical *Kodesh Kedoshim*! And the same goes for any sin: with each one we commit we allow "strange fire" ¹⁷ to enter our hearts, as when we become angry or express any other untoward desire ¹⁸, G-d protect us ¹⁹.

For by virtue of the soul that has been implanted within us, we are the very soul of, the driving force behind, and are in command of innumerable supernal and earthly worlds ²⁰.

Footnotes:

¹ See *Mesillat Yesharim* Ch's 2 and 3 for the dangers of this attitude.

² This democratic assertion that *everyone's* actions count in this way contrasts with R' Chaim's statement in his second footnote to this chapter that it's *tzaddikim* that affect such things! But see R' Chaim's remark in his *Rosh Hashanah Drasha* to the effect that no two people are alike, in that some can bring about great changes thanks to their spiritual standing while others can barely bring about any such changes at all (citing Ramchal's *Da'at Tevunot* 126). As such his point here seems to be that we each do indeed affect changes, but *tzaddikim* can do even more.

³ I.e., is ever in vain.

⁴ After all, as R' Chaim points out in his first footnote here, aren't we told that we ourselves instigate what happens above, citing *Pirkei Avot* 2:1? But in point of fact, the Mishna there says that if you're ever to avoid sinning you'd need to *דע מה למעלה ממך* – literally, to "Know what's above you" (i.e., "an eye that sees and an ear that hears"; and that "all your actions are recorded in a book") and to thus be mindful of what you do.

But R' Chaim legitimately but quite non-literally translates *מה למעלה ממך דע* as saying, "Know that all that happens above *is from you*" in order to make his point. (See *Ruach Chaim* on that Mishna, too). Interestingly enough, though, the *Ba'al Shem Tov* and his disciples understood the Mishna the same way as R' Chaim did (see for example *Kedushat Levi*, *Parshat Metzora*). Is this then an instance of R' Chaim acknowledging the legitimacy of Chassidic thought? Perhaps so, given that R' Chaim seemed sympathetic toward the movement: for one thing, he didn't sign the ban against Chassidism that his teacher, the Gra, initiated. And R' Chaim was known to have all of the major works of Chassidic Thought in his library.

(The reading of the Mishna itself, though, might actually derive from Zohar 2:117b).

⁵The "supernal lights" spoken of here (*צחצחות האורות העליונות*) will be cited in 1:6, 12 (R' Chaim's footnote in 1:13) and 4:21 below.

⁶It goes without saying that if our misdeeds cause such great harm, then our laudable deeds do great good, of course.

⁷Where all of this counts, as we'll see.

⁸R' Chaim nonetheless cites a statement in 3:12 below from *Eitz Chaim* that speaks to the powers that Nebuchadnezzar had in fact on the upper realms with his use of certain impure powers. Apparently then while Titus and he had some degree of power up above, they didn't have the nearly ultimate power that we do.

⁹See *Da'at Tevunot* 160.

⁹R' Chaim asserts that their act was as superfluous as grinding flour (which, by definition, is already ground), citing *Eicha Rabba* 1:41. That's a striking statement, saying in effect that everything Titus and Nebuchadnezzar did was redundant for all intents and purposes since we'd already done the hard part with our sins!

¹⁰R' Chaim points out that this will be explained later on in 1:6 and 2:5.

¹¹I.e., The Holy of Holies.

¹²See Zohar 2:157 and *Kuzari* 4:24.

¹³The "Foundation Stone", which is the point from which the rest of the world was formed (Zohar 1:131 and *Yomah* 54b). Also see Zohar 1: 71b and 2:222 for it resting in the center of the world.

¹⁴R' Chaim also cites Zohar 3:161a here to further prove his point.

R' Chaim touches upon the centrality and potency of the *Beit Hamikdash*, its correspondence to our own beings, and he calls upon each one of us to make ourselves into a human *Beit Hamikdash* in his second footnote here -- along with the dire warning that the earthly *Beit Hamikdash* will do us no good (i.e., it will no longer help to purify us and expiate our sins) if we violate the *one within us!*

¹⁵ In our heart.

¹⁶ R' Chaim terms a harlot "the image of jealousy", in reference to Ezekiel 8:3, 5. See Rashi there as well as Zohar 2:3b and *Avodah Zara* 55a.

¹⁷ I.e., foreign and unwanted potencies; see Leviticus 10:1.

¹⁸ Notice that R' Chaim is terming anger a *ta'ava* here: a lustful desire – one that's perhaps on par with the sorts of immoral desires that would have set a harlot in the supernal *Beit Hamikdash!*

¹⁹ R' Chaim cites Isaiah 64:10 and Ezekiel 43:7-9.

²⁰ R' Chaim cites and explains the import of Genesis 2:7 to make this point.