

AVODAH: THE BASICS OF INNER PURITY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Basics of Inner Purity ¹

Chazal speak in such powerful and absolute terms about the importance of *midos*, that you might think they are using a bit of hyperbole. When they look for a definite line in the sand differentiating "us" and "them," they turn to *midos*. ("Whoever possesses these three things - a generous eye, a humble spirit, a meek soul - is among the disciples of Avraham; whoever possesses... [their opposite] is among the disciples of the wicked Bilam." [2]) When they attempt to paint a picture of the person who pleases his Creator, they again turn to *midos*. ("Whomever the spirit of the public finds pleasing, Hashem finds pleasing." [2])

They are not exaggerating. Attaining excellent *midos* is not just an important mitvah, incumbent upon every person to pursue. Rather, *midos* are the person! They are foundational to the observance of Torah and mitzvos, and fully determine whether or not a person can be said to have accomplished the task for which he was created. (If they are so important, asked R. Chaim Vital in *Sha'arei kedushah*, why don't they appear on the list of the 613 mitzvos? The answer, he said, is that they are the all-important preparation for all the mitzvos. In that sense, a deficiency in *midos* is a more serious lapse than failure to observe mitzvos!) Without proper *midos*, taught Rabbenu Yonah, Torah cannot take up residence within a person. Sandwiched in between a description of the attitudinal foundations of Torah belief and his detailed listing of all the practical laws of the Torah, the Rambam found it necessary to place his *Hilchos De'os*, describing the *midos* that he saw as primary in the quest for mitzvah fulfillment.

Good *midos* are the wings with which a person takes spiritual flight. Without them, a person's Torah and mitzvos are not able to soar. To whatever extent a person perfects his *midos*, his entire being is uplifted, raising up his Torah and avodah to a higher plane. For this very reason the *yetzer hora* shows unusual strength and tenacity in this arena. More so than in other areas, the *yetzer hora* wishes to clip our wings, so that we cannot elevate ourselves. As the ba'alei mussar say, it is easier to become proficient in *shasthan* to uproot a single evil midah that has taken hold in our heart.

Good character is readily endorsed by most people. Those who show exemplary *midos* win profuse praise from the masses. *Ba'alei mussar* are even more enthusiastic in describing the importance of *midos*. To them, *midos* are everything; they define the person. *chassidus* provides the conceptual framework for building an even taller pedestal upon which to place proper *midos*. *chassidus* sees

devekus as the objective of all Torah and mitzvos. Imperfect *midos* simply do not allow that closeness and relationship - "the cursed cannot attach themselves to the blessed." [3]

In the way of *chassidus*, acquiring superlative *midos* is insufficient. A person must also extirpate the evil from within; he must change his very being so that these sterling *midos* become part of his essence. As is stated in *Peri Ha-Aretz*, what good is it that a person does not violate any transgression if he has not erased the source of transgression from his heart?

The gemara informs us about a survival tactic. "Whenever Yisrael [envelop themselves in a *talis* as HKBH demonstrated to Moshe and] perform the order of the thirteen *midos*, they are immediately answered." [4] *Reishis Chochmah*, however, cites those who find difficulty with this claim. Do we not see many people and communities reciting the thirteen *midos*, without their prayers bringing them much success? They answer the question. "Performing" here does not mean reciting. It means emulating those *midos* of Hashem, and integrating them into their personalities.

Happiness is working on oneself and achieving pure *midos*. Good *midos* bring happiness; bad *midos* bring the opposite. The days of a person burdened by bad *midos* are full of anger and bitterness. He consumes others, and is consumed himself in the process. He is not tolerated by others, not can he tolerate the company of men. Thus, his life ceases to be one worthwhile living. One who is privileged to have purified his *midos*, on the other hand, is always happy. He delights in others, and others delight in him. He is a source of *berachah* to himself and all around him. (This is what Hashem meant when He told Avraham, "and you will be a blessing.")

Rambam provides a startling anecdote [5] about perfected *midos*. "A *chassid* was asked, 'What was the happiest day of your life?' This is what he answered. 'I traveled by boat. My place was the least desirable, lowliest of all on the vessel. One of the passengers saw me as so insignificant and degraded that he relieved himself upon me. By the life of Hashem - I was not pained by what he did, and my anger did not rise within me. I was overjoyed that the disgrace did not pain me, and that I did not sustain any hurt from it.' Another person would have seen that day as the worst imaginable, treated in such a disgraced manner. The *chassid* saw his achievement of ultimate forbearance as grounds for ecstatic happiness.

The recipe for success in *midos* development includes an ingredient not immediately recognizable as part of the *midos* orbit. Ultimately all issues of good and evil revolve around a single central point: *kedushah*. No one can perfect his *midos* without having incorporated *kedushah* in his life. As Ramban [6] explains, the call to *kedushah* includes what is permissible according to halachah, what has not been proscribed by the Torah. *kedushah* means elevating the arena of *reshus*.

The two must work in tandem. We work on perfecting our inner *midos*, while endeavoring to increase the *kedushah* of the way we live our lives. Keeping both of these goals before us, we can hope to "ascend the mountain of Hashem." [7]

1. Based on Nesivos Shalom, vol. 1, pgs. 75-77
 2. Avos 3:17
 3. Rashi Bereishis 24:39
 4. Bereishis 12:2
 5. Commentary to Mishnah, Avos 4:4
 6. Vayikra 19:2
 7. Tehilim 24:3
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