

DEVELOPING HASKEL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"I want to learn," he said, *"but I don't want any of that commandment stuff."* The outreach professional just smiled patiently, having heard such lines before, and having witnessed how, after a year, maybe less, such people end up pursuing the "commandment stuff" with a vengeance.

"So, why did you change your mind?" he asked the student, six months later. *"Why did you decide to start doing . . . what did you call it back then . . . 'commandment stuff'?"*

The young man thought for a moment, and then said, *"The more I learned, the more it made sense, and the more it made sense, the more I felt I had to do it. Learning about a commandment can only take you so far. Then you have to do it to actualize it and really understand what it is that you learned."*

What he was really after is called Haskel, from the word seichel, which means mind. Haskel, therefore, refers to a level of consciousness on which a person becomes mindful of an idea, to the extent that it becomes an axiom of his perspective on life. On such a level, violation of the idea is a violation of self.

This is different from Dayah and Binah, two lesser levels of awareness, which mean knowledge and understanding respectively. Dayah is really just awareness of an idea, before one actually begins to understand its meaning or role in life, something that is a function of Binah, or understanding.

However, how many smokers stop smoking just because they understand how dangerous it is to smoke, or people cut back on sweets after watching a movie about the risks of obesity? Not enough. Understanding something or even its consequences alone is not necessarily enough to change a person's path in life.

A heart attack or something similar, God forbid, does change lives. To intellectually confront death lacks impact; to experientially confront it is real enough to cause a person to identify their errant behavior with catastrophic results. This has the capacity to change a person's life, and to force them to take responsibility for their actions to the point of biting the bullet and quitting what they should have quit a long time ago, or to start doing that which they should have begun doing a while back.

This is the level of Haskel, or Da'as. It is the level of intellectual realization on which an idea merges with one's mindset. A person has a difficult time living with himself if his life runs contrary to the concept, which is what forces a person to eventually do teshuvah, even if he might be able to get away with what he has done.

If he doesn't, then he has to shut himself down emotionally, which can and usually will have extreme consequences, such as, at best, becoming a hypocrite, and at worst, a sociopath. When that happens, a person can do just about anything without any real sense of remorse, making him a danger to society and himself.

It is only on the level of Haskel that ideas become part of reality, and they make life exciting. Ideas that are based in truth, when implemented, impact us and the world in which we live. The more truth-based they are, the greater the impact they will have, some of which is visible to us, much of which takes place in spiritual realms beyond our ability to perceive.

This can be both exhilarating and dangerous at the same time. If the idea being actualized is implemented at the wrong time, or even in the wrong place, it can damage the world and the person responsible. The intention can be good, and the act great, but if the conditions are wrong then the impact is wrong and destructive.

There is no question that Nadav and Avihu, the two eldest sons of Aharon HaKohen, were great people. They learned their Torah directly from the mouth of their uncle, Moshe Rabbeinu, and they had been sanctified for their roles in the Mishkan. If they suffered from anything, it was a little too much religious fervor, too great a desire to achieve Haskel on some of the holiest ideas known to mankind.

They had been trained to connect to God. They knew things that others did not, and could not. Officiating in the Mishkan required more than obedience and a memorization of responsibility. It required a deep and profound understanding of what was supposed to be accomplished, and how. If they had been drunk on anything, it was on all of the sublime knowledge they had been exposed to in a very short period of time.

It was only natural for them to want to become unified with that knowledge, to experience what they had already gained on the levels of Dayah and Binah on the level of Haskel. And, in time, they would have done exactly that, with the permission of God, just as Adam HaRishon would have been permitted to eat from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah on the first Shabbos, had he waited for Divine permission to do so.

For, God does not create knowledge and then keep it away from man. What we are not supposed to know at all we do not know about. What we are told about is something that we can know, but only at the right time, when we're ready to know it, and when history is ready for us to learn it. To jump the gun is to bring about exactly the opposite of what the knowledge is meant to do: bring us closer to God, and make life a Godly experience.

This is also true of levels of knowledge as well. We may already know about something on the level of Dayah and Binah, but not yet on the level of Haskel. As hungry as we may be to make that leap of knowledge experience, and we should be, we have to be careful to not emotionally bite off more than we can chew at the time.

However, I suspect that such mistakes are not the norm, and that they rarely happen. I believe that the majority of the time people are ready for higher levels of knowledge, or at least could be, but they do not pursue them. Instead, they accept their current level of understanding and intellectual appreciation, and intellectually, and therefore emotionally, stagnate.

We are now into the period of Sefiras HaOmer, the goal of which is to develop a leiv tov—good heart. The 32 days from Pesach to Lag B'Omer is for developing a heart (the gematria of leiv, or heart, is 32), so-to-speak, and the 17 days after Lag B'Omer, the gematria of tov, or good, is for transforming our hearts into good hearts, as it says:

He [Rebi Yochanan] said to them [his students], "Go out and discern which is the best way to which a person should cling."

Rebi Eliezer said: "A good eye (i.e., be tolerant of others)."

Rebi Yehoshua said: "A good friend (i.e., he should be one and have one)."

Rebi Yosi said: "A good neighbor [from whom he can learn good traits]."

Rebi Shimon said: "One who considers consequences [of his actions]."

Rebi Elazar said: "A good heart [that will lead him to all of the above]."

He said to them, "I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over your words, for included in his words are your words." (Pirkei Avos 2:13)

If ever there is a time of year to achieve a good heart, it is now. Ultimately speaking, it is about becoming real with truth, which means knowing what you know not just on the level of Dayah and Binah, but on the level of Haskel as well. That is when a person has a difficult time acting contrary to what he knows is the Godly way to behave.

Over the next few weeks, we'll discuss this a bit more, b"H, in time for Shavuos. In the meantime, a good starting point is getting clear about what life is truly about, and where your way of life reflects that knowledge, or deflects it.

Text

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