

## ***Yefashpeish b'Ma'asav* (Recognizing our Greatness & Purpose) — Part 2**

While *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* is essential in response to *yissurim*, there is a great danger if this is done in isolation. This could easily lead us to simply denigrate ourselves, become depressed, and give up on trying to improve. Therefore, **before we begin examining our actions, we must know that the first step in all personal growth is understanding ourselves and recognizing our own greatness.**

**Rav Wolbe** discussed this in the *Alei Shur* (*Ma'aracha Shniya — Da'at K'tzot Drachav*): (*Hakdama*) — **Understanding ourselves compels us to fix ourselves.** Every single person has a particular path to travel in life. [Our ability to understand this is related to] three different stages in history:

**Initially**, the *nevi'im* (prophets) clarified everyone's individual service, according to each person's spiritual essence.

**Afterwards**, people established their own particular style of service with the *ruach hakodesh* (Divine Inspiration) that they had inside of themselves. This was risky, however, because their biases could cause them to end up directing all of their actions exclusively toward the fulfillment of their desires, while thinking that they were really Divinely inspired.

During the **third period**, which is our present generation, we don't even attempt to establish a personal mode of service for ourselves. Our aspiration is simply that our actions should [generally] fulfill G-d's will. However, even in our generation, people are still obligated to have a specific mode of service, and one wishing to grow must not be satisfied whatsoever with merely a generic fulfillment of *mitzvot*. Therefore, it is very praiseworthy for us to clarify and to improve ourselves with our own specific traits and behaviors, as personally as possible.

In terms of practical efforts, the tradition we have from Rav Yisrael Salanter, is to particularly focus on the small matters which people usually ignore.

**Chapter 1 — Every person needs to know that he is significant.** The *Mishnah* (*Sanhedrin* 4:5) tells us:

Everyone is obligated to say — “*bishvili nivra ha'olam* — The world was created for me.” Rashi adds — That is to say — “I am as significant as an entire world. Therefore, I had better not remove myself from this world with even a single transgression!”

“I am like an entire world” — This is the special nature of man — there was never another individual like him, and there will never be another one until the end of all the generations.

With my distinct blend of abilities, my particular parents, my having been born into this exact time period and this specific environment, there is certainly a [unique] personal service incumbent upon me, and a particular portion [which I have] in Torah. Furthermore, the entire creation is waiting for me to do it, since no one else in the world can possibly fulfill my particular task.

Without an appreciation of one's importance, one cannot accomplish anything in Torah.

Therefore, the prerequisite for the giving of the Torah was:

“You (the Jewish people) should be a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh* — a kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation.”

And, then, following the giving of the Torah, Moshe told the Jewish people:

“Don't be afraid. It was in order to raise you up that Hashem came to you.”

Hashem gave *nevuah* (prophecy) to every single Jew to make them all great and exalted. Both the beginning and the end of the giving of the Torah was the elevation of each individual member

of the Jewish people. Otherwise, they would have been too small to have appreciated the intentions of the Torah.

A person working on himself certainly needs to focus on his spiritual failings. [Therefore,] one who regularly learns *mussar* is constantly confronted with negative character traits and orientations. “*Sur mei’rah* — turn from the bad” seems to be the initial and primary directive in all of our internal work. Therefore, we think that the entire aspiration of learning *mussar* is to uncover and denigrate these negative [aspects of ourselves]. This is actually only half of the truth.

The beginning of all of our personal work is to feel the elevation of man. If one has never experienced the inherent greatness of a human being, and his work with himself is only to magnify his knowledge of his negatives, and to afflict himself for this, he will eventually just give up. And, in the end, he will fully accept this negative [perspective], due to his loss of hope in improving himself.

The *Chovot Halevavot* (Duties of the Heart — Chapter 2), in his introduction to the topic of humility, should be the foundation for all of our work on ourselves: There is an aspect of humility which is common to both people and lower animals. It is a poverty (lowliness) of the spirit. This sort of humility is found among the foolish and ignorant people who are unable to understand the soul and its [tremendous] value. While this is widely considered to be humility, in truth it is simply spiritual poverty and blindness, brought about by a stupidity which overpowers the soul and prevents it from seeing what is best for it.

Humility is really the trait which comes after the soul has [already] been lifted and elevated above the lower qualities which it shares with the animals, due to its superior wisdom, its spiritual nobility, and its clarity of what is elevated and what is lowly. [Only] when humility and lowliness have been built upon [this loftiness of the soul], are they then praiseworthy qualities. Otherwise, they should not even be considered positive traits, but rather among the despicable qualities, for they then [simply lower the soul to the] level of the animals.

[Rav Wolbe then continued —] These words which describe humility guide us on the path in every aspect of our work on ourselves. A person who doesn't recognize the preciousness of his soul is **forbidden** to investigate his faults, nor should he afflict himself because of them.

Rav Yerucham used to say:

Woe to the person who doesn't recognize his spiritual faults, because he doesn't know what to repair, but *oy va'vay* (even more pity) to the one who doesn't recognize his spiritual **strengths**, because then he is ignorant of the tools which will allow him to work on himself in any way.

Of course, the purpose of learning *mussar* is “*sur mei’rah* — turn from the bad.” But even before we can come to this, we must learn “positive *mussar*.” Our learning of *mussar* will awaken an appreciation of the lofty stature of man, an appreciation which will actually **require** us to live an elevated life. Through sitting down and learning even a half-hour of this *mussar* with an excitement and enthusiasm that — “Every single person is obligated to say, “*bishvili nivra ha'olam* — The world was created for me!” one will be transformed. From a very limited perspective of oneself, where one feels of little value, as if no one knows or cares about us, we will grow right away by seeing ourselves as lofty and elevated above all of the animals and their lowly qualities.

It is important for us to realize that we can learn this loftiness of the soul throughout all of the *mussar* works. As one example among many, see how this elevation of man is expressed specifically within the concept of regret of the ***Sha'arei Teshuva*** (1:10): One must understand in his heart that his having left G-d was evil and bitter... He must regret his negative deeds and ask himself — “What have I done? How was there no fear of G-d in front of me?... [And then the *Sha'arei Teshuva* points out —] Even worse than this, I have been cruel to my precious soul and made it impure through my lowly, negative inclinations. What are all its accomplishments worth if it (my soul) is evil in the sight of its Master? How could I have

exchanged an eternal world for a temporal one? What have I become? I have become like an animal, and have followed my negative desires like a horse, and like a donkey with no intelligence, and I have erred from the path of logic. The Creator placed a living soul, wisdom, and the benefit of logic within me, to be able to recognize and fear G-d, and to remain in control of my body, just like I have been given control over all of the animals.

We see from this [section of the *Sha'arei Teshuva*] that without recognizing the “special wisdom and preciousness of the soul,” it is absolutely impossible to have regret over a transgression. There isn't a single one of us that hasn't been afflicted by their conscience about various transgressions. When we begin to learn *mussar*, our conscience is immediately aroused and reminds us of our failings. This can cause us to become depressed, and make it difficult to see the loftiness and significance within ourselves. We need to strengthen ourselves against this, otherwise our *mussar* learning will be unable to accomplish anything positive. Come and learn how precious our soul is! Only once we have clarity with regard to this, and this knowledge is not merely dry, but is a living reality within us, then we can begin to demand from ourselves to “*sur mei'rah* — turn from the bad,” as well as to have regret and abandon our transgressions.

The work of *mussar* and the battle of our desires is no simple matter. Here is how the Ramchal (*Derech Eitz Chaim*) characterized this struggle:

Here is the greatest and most powerful solution to use against the *yetzer hara*, and the strategy which will accomplish the most — Set aside at least one hour every single day, free from all other thoughts, to focus and to seek out [answers to the following questions] with the heart — What did the early Sages, the pillars of the world, do to become so endeared to Hashem? What did Moshe Rabeinu do, what did David, the anointed one of Hashem, do, along with all of the *gedolim* (great ones) before us?

One must then use his mind to decide that whatever is best for a person to do all the days of his life, he will do, and it will be the best for him as well. Then he should think about whether his current situation is according to the path which was chosen by these men of renown, or not.

This is positive *mussar* and it is the **first** step in learning and service of G-d. In fact, this is explicit in the *Tanna D'vei Eliyahu* (chap. 25):

One is obligated to say — When will my deeds reach the deeds of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov?

One is obligated to say this because this is the beginning and the foundation. How confused are those small-minded people who imagine that there are different opinions with this, as if there is one *beit medrash* (school of thought) which stands for “*gadlut ha'adam* — the greatness of man,” and a second which doesn't believe in this. How would it be possible to argue on the essence of the Torah?!...

Whatever one doesn't think about will be very difficult to achieve and perfect. But as soon as one does think about it, it then becomes extremely close to him. In other words, if one never considers the concept of greatness, and does not attempt to learn from the actions of the greatest people, it will be enormously difficult to arrive at that level. For one who **does** elevate himself to think about this, however, this thought alone will draw him very close to perfection.

**Rav Aaron Kotler** (*Mishnat Rebbe Aharon*) wrote:

**Recognizing the value of man is the foundation of fixing one's actions.** The Torah (*Devarim* 14:1) says:

*Banim atem l'Hashem Elokeichem, lo titgod'du v'lo tasimu karcha bein eineichem l'meit*  
— You are children to G-d your L-rd; Don't cut your flesh and don't make a bald patch between your eyes for one who died.

When the verse writes — “*Banim atem* — [The Jewish people] are children [of G-d]” —this is not just an expression, but rather they are **actually** considered to be children, with the same

connection, relationship, and value as children. This incredible level applies to every single Jew, and it impacts his overall conduct. If every Jew is required to have a nice appearance, with no gashes or bald patches, all the more so is he obligated to be far from any spiritual blemishes or lowliness.

The next verse then says:

Because you are a holy people to G-d your L-rd, and G-d chose you to be a treasured nation to Him.

In general, people don't recognize their tremendous importance, but only see their failings, since they feel closer to [these failings] as a result of their physicality and childhood habits. Therefore, they see themselves as lowly and shameful. And, as a result, they actually **do** become smaller and smaller. This is like a wealthy person who is unaware of his riches and is, therefore, unable to utilize them. He will essentially remain a poor person in all respects.

Everyone is, therefore, obligated to recognize his great significance, and the potential that he can actualize with this awareness. The more he appreciates this, the more his significance will grow. This will ultimately be the greatest means to improve his actions. This understanding of his stature will always make him consider which actions are proper for him to do, and he will refrain from any which are not fitting for his greatness.

The essence and spiritual level of a person is a function of this recognition of his own value. [For example,] one who eats in the marketplace is disqualified from testifying in court (*Gemara Kiddushin* 40b and Rambam — *Hilchot Eidut* 11:5). Why is it that a person like this, who is unconcerned about his dignity, cannot testify? Isn't it possible that he still has *yirat Shamayim* (fear of Heaven) and will, therefore, not lie? The essence of the reliability of a witness is the feeling of — “How could I do something so lowly as to testify falsely in *beit din* (Jewish court)?” Since a lowly person will clearly cheapen himself, it is impossible to rely on him, because he could easily lie in his testimony. The principle is that the more a Jew realizes he is the son of the King and destined for greatness, the more he will guard himself and his own dignity. Even a *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar) will be trusted to accurately identify a lost object as his own only if he is careful that his appearance properly expresses the honor of the Torah. If, however, he doesn't recognize his own worth, and thereby belittles himself, this will cause a great loss in all of his spiritual matters.

We are cautioned in *Pirkei Avot* (2:13) — “Don't view yourself as a *rasha* (evil person).” The greatest cause of transgression is not feeling important in one's own eyes, and [ultimately] not even being considered to be a person. Therefore, the recognition of one's intrinsic value is the greatest facilitator for him to fix his actions.

One must also recognize that his **inner** sanctity is his essence and soul, as opposed to what he receives from the outside.

It is obvious that these thoughts and lofty contemplations will not lead to arrogance at all. On the contrary, this will actually increase his feeling of humility. The more a person draws close to spirituality and matters of sanctity, the more he will nullify himself to the reality of G-d. The more he distances himself from the truth, however, the more he really **will** approach arrogance.

You (the Jewish people) should be a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh* — a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

This was the prerequisite to the giving of the Torah, since the purpose of the Torah was to raise every Jew to an elevated sanctity, and to be a treasure to Hashem. People, however, often denigrate themselves and their spirituality. There is then no great difference [in their own eyes] if their spiritual situation is a bit better or a bit worse. Even when it looks like this person is being arrogant; the truth of the matter is that he is minimizing his value.

Our perspective is fundamentally flawed. Every Jew was created from his inception for unlimited greatness. On a physical level, we know that we are just a speck of dust within the multitude of the planets. This might cause us to think that it doesn't matter much whether we are good or bad. Therefore, the Torah spelled out at the very beginning that we are a treasure, and that we are all precious to G-d.

***Netivot Shalom — Netivei Da'at — Pirkei Mevo — Mah Hashem Elokecha sho'eil me'imach?***

The classical work *Yesod Ha'Avodah* wrote in the name of the Ari z"l:

No person has ever been the same as any other person from the beginning of Creation until now, and no person is able to fix what another person is able to fix.

These words establish a great foundation for the obligation of a person in his world. A person must know with complete clarity what Hashem wants from him, from him specifically, and what his particular path is to draw close to Hashem. This will be according to his *shoresh neshama* (the root of his soul), his particular traits, and his particular time period. One who lacks clarity in terms of his particular role and aspiration in his world will be like a traveler with no idea where he is going; he will certainly never reach his destination.

This clarity needs to touch on every single aspect of his service of G-d — his tasks in life, his traits and nature, as well as his obligations under all circumstances. And this will protect him securely in all of his ways in his elevated path towards G-d.

The first step is for every person to think deeply and introspectively, in order to understand — What is my specific obligation in my world, and what is the particular reason that I came down into this world? [Ultimately our task is] to deal with our bad root and the negative that sprouts from it. A useful clue to recognize this [is to think] — What is our greatest challenge? That itself is likely to be our specific task in life.

Just like it is possible to cling to G-d in times of clarity, it is also possible to come close to Him specifically in the midst of darkness and challenges. If it is a time of darkness and *hester panim* (G-d hiding His face), that is a sign that our task at that time is to serve Hashem right in the midst of the darkness. In no other way will we be able to fulfill our particular task in that exact situation.

One needs to clearly be aware that all of the conditions and circumstances surrounding him are the only ways he will draw close to G-d and fulfill his obligation in his world. [For example,] a very wealthy person can connect to G-d through his wealth by generously giving *tzedaka* and doing *chesed*, while the task of a poor person may be to accept his difficult circumstances with love.

We see just how valuable clarity is. The *yetzer hara* (negative inclination) will work even harder to remove our *yishuv hada'at* (peace of mind) than to get us to transgress. The strategy of the *yetzer hara* is to trip us up with our desires and our *middot ra'ot* (negative traits) until we give up. That is actually his main goal. As long as a Jew has clarity, that clarity will save him from even the lowest place. Once he gives up, however, he is then entirely under the control of the *yetzer*, and he will do its bidding without any resistance. The power of a Jew is exclusively when he remains clear-minded. He will realize that even in the lowest of situations, Hashem is with him, and Hashem will never abandon him. The secret of the *emunah* of a Jew is that there is always a way back to Hashem.

## Practical Guidelines for *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* in response to *yissurim*, based on Rabbi Leuchter, Rabbi David Rosenthal, and Rabbi Alexander Seinfeld:

The most painful part of the challenges we are facing may be the very reason why G-d is bringing them; since we need to grow particularly in that area. Just like when a person goes to the gym, the muscle that needs to be worked on the most is the one that hurts the most, so it is with *tzarot* (difficulties and challenges) and their impact on our souls.

*Hashgacha pratit* (Divine Providence) means that G-d interacts with us in the world, trying to teach us and to help us grow through the tests and experiences we go through in our lives. The problem is that, nowadays, without any prophets around, the messages are often unclear. So how do we read the signs?

The key question we should ask ourselves about *yissurim* is — “Where does this **really** hurt us the **most**; which of our buttons is being pressed?” That itself may actually be the main message!

Hashem knows our emotional make-up even better than we do. He knows where our faults lie and He wants us to grow and to overcome them. It is often through the pain of our flaws that Hashem speaks to us the loudest. It is His way of telling us to grow.

Similarly, our reaction to our challenges may also help us to identify their messages:

If something made me angry — maybe I need to work on my anger.

If I caught a cold and felt lousy — perhaps I should work harder to appreciate my health (e.g., saying the “*asher yatzar*” blessing better).

And someone who had become almost obsessed with some achievement, and despondent in the meantime, may have been deriving too much self-esteem from this area.

### Returning to the *Gemara Arachin* (16b)

The *Gemara Arachin* (16b), which spoke about the importance of *yissurim*, at least once every 40 days, certainly shows the critical and central role that *yissurim* play in all of our lives. However, as some of the sources quoted above have explained, by emphasizing that even minor irritations and inconveniences could be considered “*yissurim*,” the *Gemara* is also giving us a tremendous tool to utilize on a daily basis.

What exactly **are** *yissurim*? The clearest source and statement about *yissurim* is the *possuk* (verse) in *Devarim* 8:5:

*V'yadata im levavecha, ki ka'asher ye'yaser ish et b'no, Hashem Elokecha m'yasreka* — And you should know with your heart, that just like a parent gives *yissurim* to his child, G-d your L-rd gives you *yissurim*.”

By comparing G-d to a parent, the Torah is defining and explaining that *yissurim* are difficulties and challenges given to us from G-d's **love**, for **our benefit**.

While the difficulty of major *yissurim* is often in the ability to see this love and benefit within these *yissurim*, the challenge of minor *yissurim* may simply be to see them as being *yissurim* at all; i.e., coming to us from G-d for any purpose whatsoever.

The difference between minor *yissurim* and everyday annoyances is, therefore, this very awareness that they are coming to us from G-d. While this may sound obvious, it can actually be quite difficult to put into practice. How do we make sure that the *yissurim* G-d sends to us every day don't become simply random hassles? The key is *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* — to first see the *yissurim* as coming from G-d's love, for our benefit, and then to try to examine our deeds in response to them.

This very effort to see whatever is happening to us, particularly the minor events, as being from G-d's love, for our benefit, allows them to function as *yissurim*, and thereby to bring us the many

benefits that we have spoken about. And this can occur even if we never end up seeing any single clear message, and never succeed in understanding a specific *middah k'neged middah* aspect in them.

My *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*, often quoted the following idea from the *Orchot Tzadikim* (*Sha'ar Ratzon*) about the importance of really paying attention to what G-d is trying to communicate to us:

The rule of the matter is that one should not be stubborn or stiff-necked against those people who give him *tochacha* (rebuke) or try to teach him the straight path. He should want to listen to them and to accept their words with a full heart...

Rebbe Abahu [spoke similarly about the importance of paying attention to the messages from G-d] — In the future, everyone will be amazed about the person who [truly] listened to G-d. They will ask — “Who is this simple one that never [properly] learned, and yet is sitting with the *Avot* (Patriarchs) and speaking with them?!” G-d will reply to them — “Why are you so surprised? He deserves this because he [really] listened to me [throughout his life].”

At the end of the day, and particularly at the end of our lives, the single most important value that we will have for eternity, is how hard we worked to really listen to G-d and to the many different messages which He sent to us. How we responded to the different types of *yissurim* in our lives will be a big part of that.

A powerful articulation of what it means to respond properly to *yissurim* was expressed by **Rav Chaim Friedlander *zt"l*** (*Sifsei Chaim* — *Derech shel Aliya*), whose teachings are collected and presented in the ***Sifsei Chaim***. About 11 months before he passed away, he wrote about how to see G-d's hand within the *yissurim* in his **own** life and how to learn from them:

I need to remind myself and to feel in my heart that Hashem is calling to me through these *yissurim*. And Who is the One bringing these *yissurim* upon me? The Merciful One Whose *rachamim* (mercy) and *chesed* (kindness) are without any limit at all.

Therefore, I must use all of my ability to really listen to this voice. After all, these *yissurim* are Heavenly assistance to awaken me to a complete *teshuva* from the complacency and habituation of the *yetzer hara*... The choice is entirely within my hands to use this Heavenly assistance and to transform these *yissurim* into something extremely valuable.

And I need to remind myself that the intentions of G-d the Merciful One are exclusively for the good. We need to give thanks for the *yissurim* just like for any other Divine assistance, as the Rabbis taught (*Brachot* 60b) — “Just like we make a blessing for the good, we also make a blessing for the difficulties. And both blessings need to be made with *simcha*.” This Divine Supervision is being given to me with the same measure of *chesed* that bestows unlimited goodness upon me. And whatever cleansing of *aveirot* this accomplishes for me is tremendously beneficial, since any pain in this world is tiny compared to the huge eternal pain [that I would otherwise have] in *Olam Haba*.

The *yissurim* are bad for me only if I myself **turn** them into something bad; if I don't accept them with *simcha*, or if they don't spur me to do *teshuva*. Therefore, the first step at this time is to have a crystal clear understanding... We need to learn from the *yissurim*...and that is their purpose. Specifically at a time like this, one must maintain a constant focus on *hashgacha pratit* (personal Divine Supervision). Within the depths of one's heart, one must know that even the tiniest occurrence is from Hashem, as the Rabbis teach (*Chulin* 7b) — “No person stubs his toe below unless it has been decreed upon him from Above.” Hashem is the One Who orchestrates every single thing that happens to us.

The *yissurim* also come to wake me up from the habituation which blinds us. They teach me about the daily kindnesses of Hashem, and show me that even my bread and water should not be taken for granted.

And, therefore, the **Gemara Brachot** (5a) said — “If one sees *yissurim* coming upon him — *yefashpeish b'ma'asav...*” The purpose of *yissurim* is to create a new entity with new responsibilities and a new awareness which will necessitate a brand new path in one's service of G-d.

Hashem should help every one of us to see G-d's love and our benefit in all of our *yissurim*, particularly the minor irritations and inconveniences of life. And our effort to respond properly to all of them through *yefashpeish b'ma'asav* should help us to not need, *chas v'shalom* (G-d forbid), any bigger *yissurim* than these in our lives.

**This should be *l'zechut ul'iluy nishmat* Ruchama Rivka, a”h, bat Asher Zevulun**