

חובות הלבבות • שער הכניעה • פרק ראשון

Sentence by Sentence • Punctuated Hebrew with Translation and Notes • Navy & Gold Edition

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In this opening chapter of Shaar HaKniyah, the Chovos HaLevavos introduces us to the fundamental middah of kniyah (submission and humility). The author defines this essential trait not merely as an external behavior, but as an inner lowliness of the soul, where a person truly humbles their neshama and does not hold themselves in high regard.

We will learn how this internal state of yiras Shamayim and humility naturally flows outward, manifesting in a person's physical actions and speech. The chapter outlines the practical signs of a submissive soul, showing how a true servant of Hashem speaks softly, controls their anger, and refrains from taking revenge even when they have the full power to do so.

All introductions, summaries, and contextual notes are the editor's commentary and are not part of the original text.

אבל הכניעה היא שפלות הנפש, ושחיתות, ומעוט ערכה אצלה.

But submission (keniyah) is the lowliness of the soul, its bowing down, and its holding itself in very low esteem.

NOTE The author is defining 'keniyah' (submission/humility) not as an external behavior, but as an internal state of mind where a person truly feels small and unassuming before Hashem.

והיא מדה ממדות הנפש; וכאשר תתישב בה, יראו אותותיה על האברים.

It is one of the character traits of the soul; and when it becomes firmly established within it, its signs will become visible upon the physical limbs.

NOTE True middos are internal, but they naturally overflow into a person's physical actions, speech, and body language.

מהם: הלשון הרפה, והקול הנמוך, והענוה בעת הפעם, ומעוט הנקמה אחר היכלת עליה.

Among these signs are: a soft tongue, a low voice, humility in times of anger, and refraining from taking revenge even when one has the full power to do so.

כאשר נאמר על אחד המלכים, שאמר למי שנתחייב אצלו, לאחר שהביאו השוט: "חי ה'! לולא חזקת בעסי עלי, הייתי נוקם ממך נקמה גדולה"; ומחל לו.

As it was told about a certain king, who said to someone who had sinned against him, after they had already brought out the whip for punishment: "As Hashem lives! Were it not for the intensity of my anger against you, I would have taken great revenge upon you"—and then he pardoned him.

NOTE The king realized his anger was a personal, ego-driven response, so his humility prompted him to hold back and forgive rather than act out of personal pride.

וַאֲמָרוּ עָלָיו שְׁהִיָּה אוֹמֵר: "אֵינִי יוֹדֵעַ עוֹן שֶׁהוּא שׁוֹקֵל יוֹתֵר מֵעֲוֹנוֹתַי" (ס"א: מֵעֲוֹנוֹתַי).

And they said about him that he used to say: "I do not know of any sin of others that weighs more heavily than my own sins" (and some versions read: "than my humility").

NOTE The alternative reading 'than my humility' suggests that the king was so humble he even worried that his own self-perceived humility was imperfect and therefore a shortcoming.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

The chapter defines kniyah as an inner lowliness and bowing of the soul, explaining that once this middah is firmly established within, it inevitably reveals itself through one's limbs and conduct—such as speaking with a soft tongue, maintaining a low voice, and showing humility during times of anger. To illustrate this deep level of self-control and humility, the author brings the famous story of a king who pardoned a convict to avoid acting out of personal anger, and who humbly viewed his own shortcomings as greater than the sins of anyone else.

לְמַעֲשֶׂה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

The Chovos HaLevavos is teaching us a profound secret about true kniyah, submission of the soul. It is not just a nice feeling in your heart; it is a physical reality that must settle so deeply into your neshama that it actually changes how your body reacts. When a person truly holds themselves as small before Hashem, it immediately shows on their limbs. Their voice becomes softer, their tongue becomes gentler, and most importantly, their physical reaction to anger completely changes.

Look at the incredible story the Chovos HaLevavos brings about the king. He had the whip ready, the power to punish was in his hands, and his anger was burning. Yet, because of his kniyah, he stopped and pardoned the man, saying that his own shortcomings before Hashem were far greater than whatever this man did to him. This is the ultimate test of kniyah. When someone insults you or wrongs you, and you have the perfect comeback or the power to get even, true submission means you quiet your limbs, lower your voice, and let it go because you realize we are all just standing before the Creator.

Today, when someone pushes your buttons or does something that makes your blood boil, pause for three seconds. Before you answer back, consciously lower the volume of your voice and speak softly. Use your physical voice to quiet the storm in your neshama.