

חובות הלבבות • שער הכניעה • פרק שני

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

ON THIS PAGE

In this chapter, the Chovos HaLevavos begins to break down the concept of kniyah (submission) into its distinct categories, helping us understand what true, holy submission looks like in our avodah. The author warns us against a counterfeit form of lowliness that stems merely from ignorance or a weak mind, which is no better than the submissiveness of an animal. Instead, he shows us that true kniyah is a praiseworthy trait that only comes after a person has elevated their neshama and gained a clear, Torah-based understanding of their own self-worth.

We will also explore the different levels of submission that exist in human relationships, such as a student before a rebbe, or a borrower before a lender. While these forms of kniyah are proper and necessary in their right place, they are ultimately limited by time and circumstance. This prepares us for the highest, most essential category: our constant, unconditional submission to Hashem.

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

אבל באור חלקי הכניעה הוא, שהכניעה תחלק לשלשה חלקים.

Now, the explanation of the divisions of submission is that submission is divided into three distinct categories.

אחד מהם כולל את האדם ורבים ממיני בעלי חיים שאינם מדברים, והוא דלות הנפש וסבלה ההזק אשר היתה יכולה לדחותו, מפני סלותה באפני דחיתו.

One of these categories is common to man and many species of non-rational animals, and this is a poverty of the soul and its passive bearing of harm that it actually has the power to ward off, simply because of its ignorance regarding how to prevent it.

וזה יהיה מן הכסילים שבבני אדם ועמי הארץ, מפני מעוט ידיעתם וחלישת הפרתם את נפשותם וערכיהם.

This type of submission is found among the foolish of mankind and the unlearned, due to their lack of knowledge and their weak understanding of their own souls and their true worth.

וזה נקרא כניעה מדרה הסכמה, אבל על דרך האמת הוא דלות (ס"א דוות) הנפש ועורונה בסכלות הגובר עליה מראות מה שיש בו תקנתה, כמו שאמר: "כי לבם צפנת משכל, על כן לא תרמם" (איוב יז, ד).

This is called 'submission' only by way of common convention, but in truth, it is merely a poverty and blindness of the soul, caused by the ignorance that overpowers it and prevents it from seeing what would bring about its own benefit, as the pasuk says, 'For You have hidden their heart from understanding; therefore You shall not exalt them.'

אָבֵל הַכִּנְיָעָה הִיא אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶה אַחֵר רוֹמְמוֹת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְהַתְנַשְּׂאוֹת מִהַשְׁתַּתָּף עִם הַבְּהֵמוֹת בְּמִדּוֹת הַמְּגֻנוֹת, וְגִבּוֹהוּתָהּ מִהַדְּמוּת בְּמִדּוֹת פְּחוּתֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם, בִּיתְרוֹן חֲכָמָה וִיקָרָת נֶפֶשׁ וִידִיעָה בְּרוּרָה בְּמִדּוֹת הַטּוֹבוֹת וְהַמְּגֻנוֹת.

True submission, however, is that which comes only after the elevation of the soul and its rising above sharing the base traits of animals, and after it exalts itself above resembling the low character traits of vulgar men, through superior wisdom, nobility of soul, and a clear understanding of which traits are noble and which are disgraceful.

NOTE The author emphasizes that true kniyah (submission) is not a product of low self-esteem or ignorance, but rather a conscious choice made by a highly refined and self-aware soul.

וְכֹאֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה סְמוּךְ לָזֶה כְּנִיעַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְשִׁפְלוּתָהּ, אִז תִּהְיֶה מִדָּה מְשֻׁבָּחָה; אָבֵל זֹלָת זֶה אֵינָנָה נִכְנָסֶת בְּמִדּוֹת הַמְּשֻׁבָּחוֹת וּמַעֲלוֹת הַנֶּפֶשׁ, אֶךְ בְּמִגְנוֹת שִׁבְחָהּ, כִּי עֲנִינָהּ בָּזָה כְּעֲנִין הַבְּהֵמוֹת.

When the soul's submission and humility follow this high level of refinement, only then is it considered a praiseworthy trait; otherwise, it does not enter the category of commendable traits and virtues of the soul, but is rather among the disgraceful ones, for its nature in this case is just like that of the beasts.

וְהַחֲלָק הַשֵּׁנִי: הַכִּנְיָעָה לְבְּנֵי אָדָם, אִם מִפְּנֵי מְשָׁלָם בּוֹ, כְּמוֹ הָאֶסִיר בְּיַד אוֹיְבוֹ וְהָעֶבֶד בְּיַד אֲדוֹנָיו;

The second category is submission to other human beings, whether because of their dominion over him, such as a captive in the hand of his enemy or a slave in the hand of his master;

אוֹ לְחִסְרוֹנוֹ לָהֶם וְגָדֵל צָרְכּוֹ לָמָּה שֵׁישׁ אֲצֵלָם, כְּשָׂכִיר לְשׁוֹכְרוֹ, וְהָרֶשׁ לְהַעֲנִיקַת הָעֲשִׂיר, וְהַתְּלִמִּיד לְרֵבּוֹ;

or because of his dependency on them and his great need for what they possess, such as a hired worker toward his employer, a poor man looking for the generosity of a wealthy person, or a student toward his rebbe;

אוֹ לְחוּב רָאוּי שְׂאִין הָאָדָם יוֹכֵל לְפָרְעוֹ, וְהוּא חַיָּב לְהַכְנִיעַ וּלְהַשְׁפִּיל לְפָנָיו לְבָעָלָיו (לפני בעליו), כְּמוֹ שִׁכְתוּב: "וְעֶבֶד לֹוֹ לְאִישׁ מִלּוֹה" (משלי כב, ז).

or due to a legitimate debt that a person is unable to repay, where he is forced to submit and humble himself before his creditor, as it is written, 'And the borrower is a servant to the lender.'

אוֹ לְדַעְתּוֹ שֶׁהוּא מְקַצֵּר בְּעֲנִינֵי מוֹסְרֵי הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וְהָעוֹהֶה"ב, וְסִכְלוֹתוֹ בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַיִּשְׁרָה.

Or, this submission may stem from a person's awareness that he is falling short in his duties regarding the ethical teachings of this world and the World to Come, and from his ignorance of the straight path.

וְכֹאֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדוֹ נְבִיא דוֹרוֹ, אוֹ מוֹרֶה צֶדֶק, אוֹ קוֹרֵא עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ הַטּוֹבָה, יִכְנַע לוֹ וְיִשְׁפֹּל לְפָנָיו;

When such a person finds the prophet of his generation, a righteous guide, or one who calls people to the good path, he will submit to him and humble himself before him.

כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ רַז"ל: "גְּדוּלָּה שִׁמּוּשָׁה יוֹתֵר מִלְמוּדָה", שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "אֵלִישָׁע בֶּן שָׁפְט אֲשֶׁר יָצַק מִיָּם עַל יְדֵי אֵלִיהוּ" (מלכים ב ג, יא) — "אֲשֶׁר לָמַד" לֹא נֶאֱמַר, אֶלָּא "אֲשֶׁר יָצַק", מִלְמַד שֶׁגְּדוּלָּה שִׁמּוּשָׁה יוֹתֵר מִלְמוּדָה;

This is just as Chazal have said: 'Serving Torah scholars is greater than studying from them,' as it is said, 'Elisha the son of Shaphat, who poured water on the hands of Eliyahu.' It does not say 'who studied,' but rather 'who poured,' which teaches us that serving a sage is greater than studying from him.

ואמר: "ומשרתו יהושע בן נון נער וגו'" (שמות לג, יא).

And the Torah likewise says, 'And his servant, Yehoshua the son of Nun, a lad, did not depart from the tent.'

ואמר החכם על כלל עם הארץ: "ועבד לזה לאיש מלוא" (משלי כב, ז).

And the wise king, Shlomo, said regarding the general populace who depend on others, 'And the borrower is a servant to the lender.'

והחלק הזה מחלקי הפניעה, ואם הוא ראוי, איננה תדיר, מפני שאינו כולל את כל המדברים, ולא ראוי בכל זמן ובכל מקום;

Now, this category of submission, even though it is proper and correct in its place, is not constant, because it does not apply to all human beings, nor is it appropriate at all times and in all places.

כי האסיר כשיצא ממאסרו, והעבד כשיפדה את עצמו, והלוא כשיפרע את חובו, והתלמיד כשאיננו עם רבו, והרש כשאיננו עם עשיר (ס"א והרש כשיעשיר) — אינם חייבין להכניע להם ולהשפל ולשום לפניהם.

For when the captive is released from his imprisonment, when the slave redeems himself, when the borrower repays his debt, when the student is no longer in the presence of his rebbe, and when the poor man is no longer before the wealthy man, they are no longer obligated to submit, humble themselves, or bow down before them.

והחלק השלישי: הפניעה לבוֹרָא יתברך, וחובתו כוללת כל המדברים, והם חייבין אליו בכל זמן ובכל מקום, ואליו היתה כוננתו בשער הזה.

The third category is submission to the Creator, may He be blessed. The obligation of this submission encompasses all rational human beings, and they are bound by it at all times and in all places; and it is this category that is our primary focus in this gate.

והנכנע הוא הנקרא בספרי הקדוש: עניו, ונבזה בעיניו, וצנוע, ודכא, ושפל רוח, ורוח נשברה, ונדכה, ורה לבב, ונכה רוח, ולב נשבר, ונפש שחה.

One who has attained this submission is referred to in the Holy Scriptures by various terms: humble, lowly in his own eyes, modest, contrite, lowly of spirit, broken-spirited, crushed, soft-hearted, wounded in spirit, broken-hearted, and bowed down of soul.

ומה שגדבר בפניעה סתם, אין כוננתו אלא החלק השלישי הזה, אשר היא המדרגה העליונה שפניעה.

Therefore, whenever we speak of 'submission' without further qualification, our intention is solely this third category, which represents the highest possible level of submission.

ומי שעלתה בידו, אין רחוק ממנו דרך קרבת אלהים ולעמד לפניו, ויהיה מקבל ורצוי אצל הבורא, כמ"ש: "זבחי אלהים רוח נשברה, לב נשבר ונדכה אלהים לא תבזה" (תהלים נא, יט).

And for whoever acquires this trait, the path to closeness to Hashem and standing before Him is near at hand; he will be accepted and favored by the Creator, as it is written, 'The sacrifices of Elokim are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, Elokim, You will not despise.'

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

The chapter outlines three distinct categories of submission. The first is a false, animalistic lowliness born of ignorance and a lack of self-awareness, which is actually a disgraceful trait. The second is submission between human beings, which is

appropriate in specific relationships—such as a slave to a master, a borrower to a lender, or a talmid serving a Torah sage—but is limited because it ceases once those situational bonds are dissolved. The third and ultimate category is absolute submission to the blessed Creator, which is a constant obligation for all rational beings. This true kniyah brings a person to a broken and contrite heart, which is the highest spiritual level and the key to achieving genuine nearness to Hashem.

לְמַעֲשָׂה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

My dear talmid, the Chovos HaLevavos is teaching us a profound secret about true kniyah (submission). There is a cheap, counterfeit humility that comes from a broken, weak place, like a person who lets others walk all over him simply because he does not recognize his own worth. The Torah does not want this. True kniyah only begins after you recognize the greatness of your own neshama, rising above animalistic desires and realizing how precious you are in the eyes of Hashem. Only when a person knows his true value, yet chooses to bend his heart in complete surrender to Hashem, does it become the highest avodah.

Think of the difference between a slave who bows because he has no choice, and a prince who willingly bows before his father, the King. When we humble ourselves before Hashem, it should not come from feeling worthless, but from realizing that despite our immense spiritual potential, we are completely dependent on the Creator of the universe. This is the "broken heart" that Hashem cherishes, a heart that knows its own greatness but chooses to lay it all down before the Master of the world.

Today, when you say the words "Elokai, netzor leshoni me'ra" at the end of Shemoneh Esrei, or when you face a moment that tests your pride, do not just shrink back out of habit. Take one deep breath, remind yourself of the beautiful, lofty neshama Hashem gave you, and then, from that very place of strength, consciously choose to surrender your will to His.