

חובות הלבבות • שער הכניעה • פרק רביעי

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

ON THIS PAGE

In this chapter, the Chovos HaLevavos guides us through the practical application of submission, outlining the seven specific areas of life where a person is obligated to conduct himself with genuine lowliness and humility. The author shows us how this middah must penetrate our daily interactions with other people, our attitude toward Torah scholars, and our inner response to both praise and criticism from others.

We also learn how a Yid must humble himself when Hashem bestows material wealth upon him, recognizing the immense responsibility that comes with it. The chapter further details how submission is demanded when we learn the words of the Torah and Nevi'im, and even when we are actively engaged in performing mitzvot, ensuring that our avodah remains pure and free from any touch of pride.

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

אבל באיזה ענין חייב להתנהג בכניעה ובשפלות?

But in what matters is a person obligated to conduct himself with submission and lowliness?

אומר, כי הכניעה חייב אדם להתנהג בה בשבעה ענינים.

I say that a person is obligated to conduct himself with submission in seven distinct areas.

אחד: במשא ומתנו עם אנשי דורו, ובמנהג הטוב עם בני מינו, כאשר אבאר במה שאני עתיד לדבר בו; ובו אמר הכתוב: "נבזה בעיניו נמאס".

First: In his business dealings with the people of his generation, and in proper, ethical conduct with his fellow human beings, as I will explain in what I am destined to discuss later; and regarding this, the verse says, "Despised and disgraceful is he in his own eyes."

והשני: כשיפגש חכמים בדעת אלהים ובתורתו, והחסידים הקרובים אל האלהים, כמו שנא': "יהלמני צדיק חסד ויוכיחני", ואמר: "שחו רעים לפני טובים".

Second: When he meets sages who are wise in the knowledge of Hashem and His Torah, or pious men who are close to Hashem, as it is written, "Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me," and it says, "The evil bow before the good."

והשלישי: כשישבחוהו במדותיו הטובות, חייב להכנע, ויעביר על לבו מה שקדמו לו מן העונות והחטאים אשר הבורא יודעם וכסה אותם עליו והאריך לו כדי שישוב מהם.

Third: When people praise him for his good character traits, he is obligated to humble himself and bring to mind his past sins and transgressions, which the Creator knows about but has hidden from others, showing him patience so that he may repent of them.

וְאֵל יִשְׁמַח בְּטָעוֹת בְּנֵי אָדָם בּוֹ, אֲךָ יֵאָכַל בְּעֶבֶר שֶׁהַבּוֹרָא יִתְעַלֶּה יוֹדֵעַ בְּאַמֶּת רֵעַ מַעֲלָלָיו וְהִתְעַלְמוֹתוֹ מִפְּרַע חוֹבוֹת הָאֱלֹהִים וּגְמוּל טוֹבָתוֹ, וְיִכְנַע בְּלִבּוֹ כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר: "כִּי עֲוֹנִי אֲגִיד, אֲדַאֵג מִחַטָּאתִי."

He should not rejoice that people are mistaken about his true spiritual standing; rather, he should mourn because the Creator, Exalted be He, knows the absolute truth of his bad deeds and how he has neglected to pay his debts of service to Hashem and show gratitude for His goodness, and he should submit in his heart, as the verse says, "For I will declare my iniquity; I will be anxious because of my sin."

וְהִרְבִּיעִי: כְּשֶׁמְסַפְּרִים בְּגִנוּתוֹ, יִכְנַע לְבוֹרָא וְיוֹדֶה לוֹ עַל אֲשֶׁר גָּלָה לוֹ מַעַט מִהֶרְבֶּה לְיִסְרוֹ וּלְהוֹכִיחוֹ כְּדִי שִׁיָּשׁוּב אֵלָיו, כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר: "וַיִּגַּל אֶזְנוֹם לְמוֹסֵר".

Fourth: When people speak disparagingly of him, he should submit himself to the Creator and thank Him for revealing to him a tiny fraction of his many faults to chasten and rebuke him, so that he will return to Him in teshuvah, as it says, "He opens their ear to discipline."

וְהִחֲמִישִׁי: כְּשֶׁמְטִיב לוֹ הַבּוֹרָא בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה בְּמִינֵי הַטּוֹבוֹת, יִכְנַע לֹאֵל מִפְּנֵי כְּבֹד מִשָּׂא חוֹבַת הַהוֹדָאָה עֲלֵיהֶם, וַיִּשְׁפַּל לְפָנָיו מִיִּרְאָתוֹ שֶׁלֹא תִהְיֶינָה לְנִקְמָה מִמֶּנּוּ, כִּי רַב הַמָּמוֹן בְּעוֹלָם יִהְיֶה לְאַחַד מִגִּ' דְּבָרִים: לְטוֹבָה מֵאֵת הַבּוֹרָא יִתְבָּרֶה, אוֹ לְנִסְיוֹן וּמִבְחָן, אוֹ לְנִקְמָה וּמִכְשׁוֹל.

Fifth: When the Creator bestows various kinds of goodness upon him in this world, he must humble himself before Hashem because of the heavy burden of gratitude he owes for them, and lower himself before Him out of fear that perhaps these blessings are actually a form of retribution. For an abundance of wealth in this world is granted for one of three reasons: as a genuine benefit from the Creator, Blessed be He; as a trial and test; or as retribution and a stumbling block.

וְסִימָן הַטּוֹבָה: שִׁיְהִיָּה בְּעֲלִיָּה טְרוּד בְּקִיּוֹם חוֹבוֹת הַבּוֹרָא מִהֶתְעַסֵּק בָּהֶן, וְתִהְיֶה סִבָּה לְהוֹסִיף בְּמַעֲשֵׂה לֵאלֹהִים, וְלֹא יֵשִׁים לְבוֹ לְטוֹבָה הַהִיא וְלֹא יִבְטַח עָלֶיהָ וַיּוֹצִיאָהּ בְּחוֹבוֹת הַבּוֹרָא.

The sign that wealth is a genuine benefit is that its owner is more occupied with fulfilling his duties to the Creator than with managing the wealth itself, it serves as a catalyst for him to increase his service to Hashem, and he does not set his heart on this physical benefit or trust in it, but rather spends it on fulfilling his obligations to the Creator.

דּוּמָה לָמָּה שֶׁמְסַפֵּר אִיּוֹב מִמִּנְהֶגוֹ בְּמָמוֹנוֹ, וְהֵיכָּה הִזָּה מוֹצִיאֻ אוֹ בְּחוֹבוֹת הַבּוֹרָא, וְאָמַר בְּמַעֲוֹט בְּטָחוֹנוֹ בּוֹ: "אִם שְׁמִתִּי זָהָב כֶּסֶל, וְלִכְתֶּם אִמְרָתִי מִבְּטָחִי".

This is similar to what Iyov relates regarding his conduct with his wealth—how he would spend it on his duties to the Creator, and how little trust he placed in it, saying, "If I made gold my hope, or said to fine gold, 'You are my security.'"

וְסִימָן הַנִּסְיוֹן וְהַמִּבְחָן: שִׁיְהִיָּה בַּעַל הַמָּמוֹן טְרוּד בְּהִרְגָּשָׁתוֹ עַל שְׁמִירַת מָמוֹנוֹ וּלְהוֹסִיף עָלָיו וּלְפַחַד עָלָיו מִן הַפְּגָעִים, מִקִּיּוֹם מָה שֶׁהוּא חַיָּב מִהוֹדָאת הַבּוֹרָא עָלָיו, וּבְעָלָיו מְנֻסָּה בּוֹ.

The sign that wealth is a trial and a test is that the owner of the wealth is constantly preoccupied with guarding his money, increasing it, and worrying about potential losses, rather than fulfilling his obligation of gratitude to the Creator for it, meaning the owner is being tested by it.

אֵין לוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ אֵלָּא אֶרֶךְ הַדֹּאֲגָה בְּעֶבְרוֹ וּשְׁמִירָתוֹ, וְשִׁיְהִיָּה בָּא עָלָיו לִידֵי חֲשָׁבוֹן; וּבְכַמּוֹתוֹ אָמַר הַכָּתוּב: "כִּי כָל יָמָיו מִכְּאָבִים וְגוֹ'".

He gets nothing from it but endless worry over its preservation and guarding, and yet he will still be held accountable for it in the future; of such a person the verse says, "For all his days are painful, and his occupation is vexation..."

וְסִימָן הַנִּקְמָה: שִׁיחָהּ בַּעַל הַמָּמוֹן טָרוֹד בַּתַּעֲנוּג בּוֹ וּבְהִנָּאָה, מִפְּרַע חוֹבוֹת הַבּוֹרָא וְחוֹבוֹת בְּנֵי אָדָם שֶׁהוּא חַיֵּב מִמֶּנּוּ, וְשָׂכַח בַּעַל הַטּוֹבָה, וְלֹא יִרְגִּישׁ בָּמָה שֶׁהוּא חַיֵּב עָלֶיהָ מִהֶעֱבוֹדָה, כַּמּוּ"שׁ הַכָּתוּב: "וְהִנֵּה שָׁשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה, הֶרֶג בָּקָר וְשַׁחַט צֹאן וְגו'", וְאָמַר: "וְהִנֵּה כְּנוֹר וְנֶכֶל תֵּף וְחִלְלִיל גִּיזַן מִשְׁתִּיָּהֶם וְגו'".

The sign that wealth is a form of retribution is that the owner of the wealth is entirely preoccupied with indulging in physical pleasures and enjoying his money, neglecting his duties to the Creator and his obligations to his fellow men that he owes because of this wealth; he forgets the Benefactor and does not feel his obligation of avodah, as the verse says, "And behold, joy and gladness, slaying cattle and slaughtering sheep..." and it says, "And the harp and the lyre, the tambourine and the flute, and wine are at their feasts..."

וְזֹאת הִיא הַנִּקְמָה בְּדַמּוּת הַטּוֹבָה.

And this is indeed retribution disguised as a benefit.

וְהַמְשָׁכִיל, כְּשֶׁתְּבוֹא לוֹ טוֹבָה וְהָעוֹלָם מְקַבֵּל כְּחֶפְצוֹ בְּכָל עֲנִיָּו, יִכְנַע מִיִּרְאָתוֹ שֶׁלֹּא תִהְיֶה נִקְמָה מֵאֵת הַבּוֹרָא, כַּמוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "עֲשֹׂר שָׁמֹר לְבַעְלִיו לְרַעְתּוֹ".

But the wise person, when good fortune comes to him and the world goes smoothly according to his desires in all his affairs, will humble himself out of fear that perhaps this wealth is a form of retribution from the Creator, as it is written, "Riches kept by their owner to his own hurt."

וְהַשֵּׁשִׁי: כְּשֶׁהוּא קוֹרֵא בַּתּוֹרָה וּבְסִפְרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים וְרוֹאֶה הַגְּמוּלָה וְהַעֲנָשׁ, וְיוֹדֵעַ בְּנַפְשׁוֹ כִּי קָצָר בְּחוֹבוֹת הָאֱלֹהִים, הֵתְחַיֵּב לְהִכְנַע וּלְהִשְׁפָּל לִפְנֵי הַבּוֹרָא יִתְבַּרַּךְ מִיִּרְאָתוֹ אֶת עָנְשׁוֹ, כַּמּוּ"שׁ בִּיאֲשִׁיהוּ: "וַיְהִי כִשְׁמַע הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת דְּבָרֵי סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו".

Sixth: When he reads the Torah and the books of the Prophets and sees the rewards and punishments, and knows in his soul that he has fallen short in his duties to Hashem, he is obligated to submit and lower himself before the Creator, Blessed be He, out of fear of His punishment, as we find written concerning Yoshiyahu: "And it came to pass, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Torah, that he rent his clothes."

וְאָמַר לוֹ הַבּוֹרָא: "יַעַן רַךְ לְבָבְךָ וַתִּכְנַע מִפְּנֵי ה'".

And the Creator said to him, "Because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before Hashem..."

וְהַשְּׁבִיעִי: כְּשֶׁהוּא מַתְעַסֵּק בְּמַעֲשֵׂה מִמְּעֵשֶׂה הֶעֱבוֹדָה, כְּצִדְקָה וְתַפְלָה אוֹ מִצְוָה אוֹ רְשׁוּת אוֹ תוֹכָחָה, שֶׁלֹּא יִתְעַסֵּק בּוֹ וּבְלִבּוֹ שׁוֹם גָּאָה וְגִבּוֹה, אֲבָל יִכְנַע וַיִּשְׁפָּל לִפְנֵי הַבּוֹרָא בְּנִגְלָהוּ וּבְנִסְתָּרוֹ.

Seventh: When he is engaged in any act of divine service, such as giving tzedakah, praying, performing a mitzvah, dealing with permitted mundane matters, or giving rebuke, he must not engage in it with any pride or haughtiness in his heart; rather, he must submit and lower himself before the Creator, both outwardly and inwardly.

NOTE The word "רְשׁוּת" (permitted/optional matters) refers to everyday physical actions, like eating or sleeping, which a person elevates by doing them for the sake of Heaven (leshem Shamayim).

וְאֵל יִחְשְׁבֵהוּ בְּנַפְשׁוֹ לְמֵאוּמָה אֲצֵל גִּדֹּל מָה שֶׁהוּא חַיֵּב בּוֹ לְאֱלֹהִים מִכְּפָלֵי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה הַהוּא, כַּמּוּ"שׁ: "בָּמָה אֲקֻדֶּם ה', אֲכַף לְאֱלֹהֵי מְרוֹם? הִירָצָה ה' בְּאֵלָפֵי אֵילִים וְגו'?" הַגִּיד לָהּ אָדָם מָה טוֹב וְגו'".

He should not consider his deed as anything of significance in his own mind when compared to the immense debt of service he owes to Hashem, which is many times greater than that single deed, as it is written: "With what shall I come before Hashem, and bow myself before the High G-d? Will Hashem be pleased with thousands of rams...? He has told you, O man, what is good..."

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

The chapter details the seven areas of required submission: first, in business and social dealings with our fellow men; second, when encountering Torah scholars and pious men; third, when receiving praise, by remembering our hidden shortcomings; fourth, when facing criticism, by accepting it as a wake-up call from Hashem; fifth, when blessed with wealth, which requires deep humility and self-examination to determine if the riches are a true benefit, a trial, or a dangerous retribution; sixth, when learning the rebukes and punishments in the Torah; and seventh, when performing mitzvos and acts of service, which must always be done with an inward and outward lowliness before the Creator.

למעשה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

My dear friend, the Chovos HaLevavos is teaching us a profound secret about how to live with true emunah. We often think that humility is something we only practice when we feel low, but the Rabbeinu Bachya reveals that the ultimate test of a Yid's submission to Hashem actually happens when things are going beautifully. When people praise you, or when Hashem sends you success, wealth, and comfort, that is the exact moment to bend your head in deep, genuine humility.

Think about how easy it is to let our hearts swell when we are praised or when our pockets are full. The yetzer hara whispers that we earned this, or that we are truly as righteous as people think we are. But the Chovos HaLevavos warns us that worldly success can be a test, or G-d forbid, a distraction that distances us from our Creator. The truly wise person looks at their blessings and feels an overwhelming weight of gratitude, thinking, "Hashem has covered my shortcomings and showered me with kindness, how can I use this to serve Him even more?"

When you receive a compliment today or experience a moment of success, do not let it feed your ego. Instead, quietly whisper a thank you to Hashem, acknowledge that He is the source of this blessing, and immediately look for one small way to use that positive energy to do a chesed or learn a word of Torah.