

חובות הלבבות • שער הכניעה • פרק חמישי

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

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In this chapter, the Chovos HaLevavos guides us through the practical steps to acquire the essential middah of kniyah (submission and humility). The author explains that true humility is not reached by accident, but through deep, structured contemplation on the reality of our existence. He presents seven specific areas of reflection that a person must set his mind upon to break his pride and awaken a genuine sense of lowliness before Hashem.

We will learn how to contemplate our physical origins, the constant trials of this world, the fleeting nature of life, and our immense debt of gratitude to Hashem. By looking honestly at our own limitations and the infinite greatness of the Creator, a Yid can naturally strip away the illusions of the yetzer hara and stand before Hashem with a broken and sincere heart.

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

אבל לפני קנות הכניעה, והדרך שמקל אותה על האדם, הוא שתהיה מחשבתו ורעיונו תמיד בשבעה דרכים.

However, the ways of acquiring submission, and the path that makes it easier for a person to attain, is for his thoughts and reflections to be constantly focused on seven topics.

אחד מהם: שרש היותו והתחלתו מן הלבונות והדם, אחר התעפושם ובאש ריחם; ואחר כך הוא נזון מדם הטמאה כל ימי עמדו בבטן אמו; אחר כך יצא והוא חלוש ודל בגופו ואבריו; ואחר כך יעלה מן המדרגה הזאת אל הסמוכה לה, עד שיגיע לרב שנותיו; אחר כך יחלו ימי הזקנה, עד שימלאו ימיו.

The first of these is to contemplate the root of his existence and his beginning from a white drop and blood after they have become putrid and foul-smelling; afterwards, he is nourished from the blood of impurity all the days he remains in his mother's womb; afterwards, he emerges weak and fragile in his body and limbs; and afterwards, he advances from this stage to the next until he reaches the majority of his years; and afterwards, the days of old age begin until his days are completed.

NOTE The "white drop" (levonis) and blood refer to the physical biological origins of human conception as described by the Sages.

ואמר אחד מן החכמים: "אני תמה ממי שעבר במעבר השתן והדם פעמים, היאך יתגאה ויגבה לבו?"

And one of the wise men said: "I am astonished by one who has passed through the pathway of urine and blood twice—how can he become arrogant and haughty in his heart?"

NOTE The "two times" refers to conception and birth, both of which involve passing through these physical pathways.

כי המחשבה בזה ובדומה לו מענין האדם מחיבת הכניעה, כמו שאמר דוד המלך, עליו השלום: "ה' מה אדם ותדעוהו?" ואמר: "אדם ילוד אשה..." ואמר: "אנכי תולעת ולא איש," ואמר: "אף כי אנוש רמה, וכן אדם תולעה."

For reflecting on this and similar aspects of man's nature necessitates submission, just as King David, peace be upon him, said: "Hashem, what is man that You should know him?" and it says: "Man, born of woman..." and he said: "But I am a worm and not a man," and it says: "How much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm."

וְהִשְׁנִי: כִּשְׁהוּא חוֹשֵׁב בְּעֵצָם מָה שְׁיִגִיעַ אֵלָיו בְּעוֹלָם מִמִּינֵי הַנִּסְיוֹן בְּרָעָב וּבְצָמָא, וּבְקָר וּבְחָם, וּבְחִלָּאִים וּבְפִגְעִים וּבְדָאָגוֹת, אֲשֶׁר אֵין לוֹ מְנוּחָה מֵהֶם כִּי אִם בַּמּוֹת.

The second topic is when he contemplates the severity of what will befall him in this world of various trials, such as hunger and thirst, cold and heat, illnesses, mishaps, and worries, from which he has no rest except in death.

וּכְאֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן הָאִישׁ הַנִּלְכָּב אֶל לְבוֹ כָּל זֶה, וַיְבִין חֲלָשְׁתּוֹ וּמַעוּט הַשְׁגָּתוֹ וְקִצּוֹר יָדוֹ מִדְּחוֹת מַעַל נַפְשׁוֹ כָּל זֶה, יִכִּיר מִצּוּרַת מַעֲמָדוֹ כִּי הוּא אֵינוֹ כְּמוֹ אֲסִיר בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, אֲבָל הוּא אֲסִיר בְּאַמְתּוֹ.

And when an understanding person takes all of this to heart, and realizes his weakness, his limited understanding, and his helplessness to ward all of this off from himself, he will recognize from the nature of his situation that he is not merely like a prisoner in this world, but he is a prisoner in truth.

וַיִּכְנַע כְּנִיעַת הָאֲסִיר הַמוֹשָׁם בְּבוֹר, אֲשֶׁר אֵין לוֹ תַּחֲבוּלָה וְלֹא יִכְלֹת לְהַתִּיר אֶת עַצְמוֹ מִכַּלְתִּי אֲדוֹנָיו, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב: "תְּבוֹא לִפְנֵיךָ אֲנִי אֲסִיר," וְאָמַר: "הוֹצִיָּאָה מִמִּסְגֵּר נַפְשִׁי."

And he will submit himself with the submission of a prisoner placed in a dungeon, who has no strategy or ability to free himself without his master's consent, as it is written: "May the sighing of the prisoner come before You," and it says: "Bring my soul out of prison."

וְהִשְׁלִישִׁי: כְּאֲשֶׁר יֵחָשֵׁב בְּחִלְיָתוֹ וּבּוֹא אֵלָיו הַמּוֹת מִהֶרָה, וְהַפֶּסֶק מֵאֻיּוֹ וְתַקְנוֹתוֹ בָּעֵת הַהִיא, וְעֻזּוֹ כָּל קִנְיָנוֹ, וְהַתִּיָּאֵשׁוּ מִקַּחַת מֵהֶם מְאוּמָה לְצִדָּה, וּמַהוֹעִיל בָּהֶם בְּעַמְדוֹ בְּקִבְרָה.

The third topic is when he reflects on his passing and the swift arrival of death upon him, the cutting off of his desires and hopes at that moment, his leaving behind of all his possessions, and the hopelessness of taking any of them along as provisions or of them benefiting him when he lies in the grave.

וּכְבָּר חֲלָף אֹר פָּנָיו וְשַׁחַר מְרֹאָהוּ, וַיֵּרָם תּוֹלָעִים וְעָפּוֹשׁ וּמַגָּלָא, וַיַּחֲלֹפוּ סִמְנֵי יָפִי גּוֹפּוֹ, וַיִּחַזַּק בְּאוֹשׁ רִיחוֹ, כְּאֵלוֹ לֹא רַחֵץ וְלֹא מָרַק וְלֹא הִפִּיחַ רִיחַ הַטּוֹב.

And already the light of his face has departed and his appearance has darkened, and he breeds worms, decay, and putrid fluid; the signs of his body's beauty have vanished, and his foul odor grows strong, as if he had never been washed, scrubbed, or perfumed with sweet fragrances.

כִּי כְּאֲשֶׁר יַעֲבֹר עַל לֵב אָדָם זֶה וְכִיּוֹצָא בּוֹ, יִכְנַע בְּנַפְשׁוֹ וַיִּשָּׁח, וְלֹא יִתְגַּאֵה וְלֹא יִגְבֶּה לְבוֹ, וְלֹא יִתְנַשֵּׂא וְלֹא יִתְגַּדֵּל, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב: "חֲדָלוּ לָכֶם מִן הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָה בְּאָפּוֹ, כִּי בַמָּה נִחָשֵׁב הוּא?" וְאָמַר: "אֵךְ הֶבֶל בְּנֵי אָדָם, כָּזָב בְּנֵי אִישׁ וְגו'."

For when this and similar thoughts pass through a person's heart, he will become humbled in his soul and bowed down; he will not become arrogant, his heart will not grow haughty, and he will not uplift or aggrandize himself, as it is written: "Turn away from man, in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" and it says: "Men of low degree are but vanity, and men of high degree are a lie, etc."

וְהִרְבִּיעִי: כֹּאֲשֶׁר יַעֲבִיר עַל לְבוֹ מָה שֶׁהוּב חַיֵּב בּוֹ מַעֲבֹדֶת הָאֱלֹהִים עַל רֹב חֲסָדָיו וְגִדְל טוֹבוֹ אֵלָיו, וְהִתְעַלְמוֹתוֹ מִן הַמִּצְוֹת הַשְּׁכָלִיּוֹת וְהַשְּׁמַעִיּוֹת וְקִצּוּרוֹ בָּהֶן, וְהַפְסַק טַעֲנוּתָיו וְאַמְתְּלָאוּתָיו בְּבֹא יוֹם הַחֲשָׁבוֹן, וְחִרְטָתוֹ בְּמַעֲמַד הַגָּמוּל, יִכְנַע וְתִשְׁבֵּר רוּחוֹ, כִּמוֹ שְׁאָמַר: "כִּי הִנֵּה הַיּוֹם בָּא בַּעַר פְּתָנוֹר וְגוֹי", וְאָמַר: "וּמִי מִכֻּלָּל אֶת יוֹם בּוֹאוֹ?"

The fourth topic is when he brings to mind the service he owes to G-d for His abundant kindness and great goodness toward him, and how he has neglected both the rational commandments and the revealed commandments and fallen short in them, and how his arguments and excuses will be cut short when the day of reckoning arrives, and his deep regret at the standing of retribution—then he will submit and his spirit will be broken, as it says: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, etc.," and it says: "But who can endure the day of his coming?"

NOTE The "rational commandments" (sichliyos) are mitzvos that human intellect would naturally understand, like not stealing, while "revealed commandments" (shim'iyos) are decrees we keep purely because Hashem commanded them, like kashrus.

וְהַחֲמִישִׁי: כֹּאֲשֶׁר יַחֲשֹׁב בְּגִדְלַת הַבּוֹרָא יִתְבַּרַּךְ וְעַז גְּבוּרָתוֹ, הַמְשַׁקִּיף עַל נִרְאָהוֹ וְנִסְתָּרוֹ, וְיִתֵּן אֶל לְבוֹ הָעֵנִין הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה, כִּמוֹ שְׁזָכְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ ז"ל עַל הַרְבֵּה חֲסִידִים שֶׁהָיוּ בַּדּוֹרוֹת הָעוֹבְרִים מִן הַמּוֹרָא וְהַגְדְּלָה.

The fifth topic is when he contemplates the greatness of the Creator, blessed be He, and the power of His might, Who watches over his outer and inner self, and he takes to heart this great matter, just as our Sages of blessed memory mentioned regarding many pious men of past generations concerning their awe and dread of His greatness.

וְהוּא מָה שְׁאָמְרוֹ: "נָתַן עֵינָיו בּוֹ וְנַעֲשֶׂה גֵל שָׁל עֲצָמוֹת"; וְאָמְרוּ עַל יוֹנָתָן בֶּן עֲזִיָּאל: "כְּשֶׁהָיָה דּוֹרֵשׁ בַּתּוֹרָה, כָּל עוֹף שָׁמַיָּה פּוֹרַח עָלָיו מִיַּד נִשְׂרָף."

And this is what they said: "He cast his eyes upon him and he became a heap of bones"; and they said of Yonatan ben Uziel: "When he was expounding the Torah, any bird that flew over him was immediately burnt."

NOTE These examples illustrate the intense spiritual power and awe that rested upon the holy Sages of the Talmud.

וְאִין סָפַק שֶׁמַּעֲלַת הַנְּבִיאִים לְמַעַלָּה מִמַּעַלְתָּם; וְתִמְצָא הַנְּבִיאִים כִּי הָיָה כָחַם נֶמֶס וְכוּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים בְּפָגִיעַת הַמַּלְאָכִים, כִּמוֹ שְׁאָמַר בְּדִנְיָאֵל וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ וְהִרְבֵּה כְמוֹהֶם.

And there is no doubt that the level of the prophets was even higher than theirs; yet you find that the prophets' strength would melt away, and they would bow and prostrate themselves upon encountering angels, as is stated regarding Daniel, Yehoshua, and many like them.

וְתִמְצָא בְּסִפְרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים כִּי הַמַּלְאָכִים כּוֹרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לַבּוֹרָא יִתְבַּרַּךְ, כִּמוֹ שְׁאָמַר: "וּצָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם לָךְ מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים", וְאָמַר: "הֵן בַּעֲבָדָיו לֹא יֶאֱמִין וְגוֹ", וְאָמַר: "וּבִהְיָכֻלּוֹ כָּלוּ אִמֵּר כְּבוֹד", וְאָמַר: "וְקִרָא זֶה אֶל זֶה וְאָמַר: קְדוֹשׁ וְגוֹ."

And you find in the books of the prophets that the angels themselves bow and prostrate themselves before the Creator, blessed be He, as it says: "And the host of heaven prostrates itself to You," and it says: "Behold, He puts no trust in His servants, etc.," and it says: "And in His temple, everyone speaks of His glory," and it says: "And one called to another and said: Holy, etc."

ובמה שהוא נראה לדעתנו מצד ברוואיו, כמו השמש והירח והכוכבים והגלגל והארץ וכל אשר עליה ממוצק וצמח וחי, די למי שיבין וישיכל, כמו שאמר: "מה גדלו מעשיה, ה'! מאד עמקו מחשבתיה. איש בער לא ידע וגו', " ואמר: "כל הגוים כאין נגדו, " ואמר: "וכל דירי ארעא כלא חשיבין."

And regarding what is visible to our intellect from the side of His creations—such as the sun, the moon, the stars, the celestial sphere, the earth, and all that is upon it of minerals, plants, and living creatures—this is sufficient for anyone who understands and has intellect, as it says: "How great are Your works, Hashem! Your thoughts are very deep. A brutish man does not know, etc.," and it says: "All the nations are as nothing before Him," and it says: "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing."

וכאשר יחשב הנלכב המבין בערה המדברים, וערה המדברים אל כדור הארץ, וכדור הארץ אל גלגל הירח, וגלגל הירח אל גלגל העליון, והכל אצל גדלת הבורא יתברך כאין, יפנע בנפשו וישפל לפני בוראו, כמו שאמר: "מה אנוש כי תזכרנו וגו'."

And when the wise, understanding person reflects on the insignificance of mankind, and the insignificance of mankind relative to the globe of the earth, and the globe of the earth relative to the sphere of the moon, and the sphere of the moon relative to the highest celestial sphere, and how all of this is like nothing next to the greatness of the Creator, blessed be He, he will be humbled in his soul and lower himself before his Creator, as it says: "What is man that You should remember him, etc."

NOTE The author uses the medieval cosmological model of concentric celestial spheres (galgalim) to illustrate the vastness of the physical universe relative to man, and how all of it is utterly nullified before Hashem.

והששי: כשקורא בספרי הנביאים ורואה חזק ענש הגאים והגבוהים, כמו שאמר בגאווה והגבהות: "עיני גבהות אדם שפל, ושח רום אנשים, ונשגב וגו', " ואמר: "כי יום לה' צבאות על כל גאווה ורם, ועל כל נשא ושפל."

The sixth topic is when he reads in the books of the prophets and sees the severity of the punishment of the arrogant and the haughty, as it says regarding pride and haughtiness: "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and He shall be exalted, etc.," and it says: "For there is a day for Hashem of Hosts upon everyone that is proud and lofty, and upon everyone that is lifted up, and he shall be brought low."

ואמר בשתי הכתות: "מעודד ענוים ה', משפיל רשעים עדי ארץ וגו', " ואמר: "כי רם ה', ושפל יראה וגו'; " ואמר בשפלים: "וענוים ירשו ארץ, " ואמר: "יעז משה ה' אתי לבשר ענוים, " ואמר: "לפני שבר גאון, " ואמר: "לפני שבר יגבה לב איש."

And it says regarding both groups: "Hashem upholds the humble; He casts the wicked down to the ground, etc.," and it says: "For though Hashem is high, yet He regards the lowly, etc."; and it says of the humble: "But the humble shall inherit the earth," and it says: "Because Hashem has anointed me to bring good tidings to the humble," and it says: "Pride goes before destruction," and it says: "Before destruction, the heart of man is haughty."

והשביעי: כשיראה תהפוכות עניי הברואים בעולם, ומהירות התחלפות הממלכות והממשלות בו, והעתקות אנשיו מענין אל ענין, והשחתת עם לתקנת עם אחר, וסוף הכל אל המות. כמו שכתוב: "כצאן לשאול שתו, מות ירעם וגו'."

The seventh topic is when he observes the reversals of the affairs of created beings in the world, the rapid changing of kingdoms and governments in it, the shifting of its people from one state to another, the destruction of one nation for the benefit of another, and the end of everything leading to death, as it is written: "Like sheep they are appointed for the grave; death shall be their shepherd, etc."

יִכְנַע וְלֹא יִתְגַּאֵחַ בְּמֵאוֹמָה מֵהוֹן הָעוֹלָם, וְלֹא יִבְטַח לְבּוֹ עַל דְּבַר מִמֶּנּוּ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב: "אֲשֶׁרִי הַגָּבֵר אֲשֶׁר שָׁם ה' מִבְּטָחוֹ, וְלֹא פָנָה אֶל רֵהֱבִים וְגו'."

He will then submit and not pride himself in any of the wealth of the world, nor will his heart trust in any part of it, as it is written: "Praiseworthy is the man who makes Hashem his trust, and does not turn to the arrogant, etc."

וְכִשְׁלֹא יִהְיֶה לֵב הָאָדָם רִיק מֵאַחַד מֵאלֶּה הַשְּׁבָעָה עֲנִיָּוִים אֲשֶׁר זָכְרָנוּ, יִהְיֶה תָמִיד נִכְנָע וְשָׂפֵל, עַד אֲשֶׁר תִּהְיֶה לוֹ הַכְּנִיעָה טָבַע דָּבֶק, לֹא יִפָּרֵד מִמֶּנּוּ.

And when a person's heart is never empty of at least one of these seven matters we have mentioned, he will constantly be submissive and lowly, until submission becomes an attached nature for him, never parting from him.

וְכֵאֲשֶׁר יִדְבֶּק בְּכְנִיעָה, תִּרְחִיק מִמֶּנּוּ כָּל פְּגַעֵי הַגָּאוּן וְהַגִּבּוֹה וְהַגָּדֹלָה, כֵּאֲשֶׁר הִקְדַּמְנוּ, וַיִּנָּצַל בָּהּ מִן הַחֲטָא וְהַמְכָּשׁוֹל, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב: "וּבַעֲבוּר תִּהְיֶה יְרֵאתוֹ עַל פְּנֵיכֶם לְבִלְתִּי תַחֲטְאוּ."

And when he clings to submission, it will distance from him all the pitfalls of pride, haughtiness, and self-aggrandizement, as we have previously explained, and through it, he will be saved from sin and stumbling, as it is written: "And so that His fear may be upon your faces, that you do not sin."

וְאָמְרוּ חֲכָמֵינוּ ז"ל: "הַסֵּתֶפֶל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְּבָרִים וְאֵין אֹתָהּ בָּא לְיָדֵי עֲבֵרָה: דַּע מֵאֵין בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, וּלְפָנַי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לֵתֵן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן."

And our Sages of blessed memory said: "Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin: Know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give a judgment and accounting."

NOTE This is a famous Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (3:1) taught by Akavia ben Mahalalel.

מֵאֵין בָּאתָ? מִטֶּפֶה סְרוּחָה; וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ? לְמָקוֹם עָפָר, רֶמָּה וְתוֹלָעָה; וּלְפָנַי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לֵתֵן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן? לְפָנַי מֶלֶךְ מְלָכֵי הַמְּלָכִים, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

From where did you come? From a putrid drop. And where are you going? To a place of dust, maggots, and worms. And before Whom are you destined to give a judgment and accounting? Before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

The chapter outlines the first five of seven contemplations necessary for acquiring submission. First, one must remember his lowly physical beginnings from a putrid drop and his eventual return to the dust, which naturally subdues pride. Second, one must realize that the tribulations of this world—like sickness, cold, and worry—make man a literal prisoner, entirely dependent on his Master for relief. Third, reflecting on the swiftness of death and how one must abandon all material possessions helps a person remain humble. Fourth, recognizing our shortcomings in serving Hashem despite His endless kindness brings a broken spirit in anticipation of the Day of Judgment. Finally, contemplating the infinite greatness of the Creator, the awe-inspiring power of the Sages and prophets, and the vastness of the cosmos forces a person to realize his utter insignificance before the Master of the Universe.

My dear friend, the Chovos HaLevavos is handing us the keys to the palace of kniyah, true, deep submission before Hashem. He teaches us that humility is not a feeling we must wait to descend upon us; it is a state of mind we must actively build. The Chiddush here is that the yetzer hara's greatest weapon is forgetfulness, and our only defense is constant, structured contemplation. By looking at our physical beginnings, our absolute vulnerability to the trials of this world, and the greatness of the Creator, we shatter the illusion of our own independence.

Think about the mashal the Rabbeinu Bachya brings: we are like a prisoner in a deep dungeon. A prisoner does not walk around the cell with a haughty chest, boasting of his power. He knows that every breath, every piece of bread, and his ultimate release depend entirely on the mercy of the King. When we realize that we cannot protect ourselves from a simple cold, let alone the larger storms of life, without Hashem's constant hashgacha, our hearts naturally soften. We stop demanding, we stop controlling, and we begin to surrender.

This is our avodah. True yiras Shamayim and emunah are born when we stop looking at ourselves as the masters of our destiny. When you feel the urge to become angry because things did not go your way, or when ga'avah starts to creep in because of your successes, pause and remember the reality of who we are. We are entirely dependent on the chessed of the Creator for every single heartbeat.

Today, when you say the words 'Modeh Ani' or find yourself facing a frustrating situation where you feel you are losing control, take thirty seconds to stop and think: 'I am a prisoner in Hashem's world, and everything I have is a gift.' Let go of the need to control the outcome, and consciously hand the steering wheel back to Hashem.