

חובות הלבבות • שער הכניעה • פרק שמיני

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

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In this chapter, the Chovos HaLevavos addresses a fundamental question in our avodah: does the middah of submission depend on other good traits, or is it the other way around? The author guides us to understand that true service of Hashem requires a person to completely divest himself of any feelings of masterhood, leaving that crown to Hashem alone, while fully accepting the yoke of slavehood.

We will learn how slavehood and masterhood are completely interdependent, meaning a person cannot truly serve Hashem without first acquiring deep submission and humility. The chapter shows us how shedding pride and self-glory is the very first step, serving as the essential foundation for all other spiritual achievements.

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

אבל אם הכניעה סמוכה למדות הטובות, או המדות הטובות סמוכות לה? אומר בתשובת זה:

But as to whether submission is secondary to other good character traits, or whether other good traits are secondary to it? I will say in response to this:

NOTE The author is posing a fundamental question of spiritual hierarchy: is humility just one of many good traits, or is it the foundation upon which all other traits depend?

מן הידוע אצלנו, כי תחלת מה שתתקיים בו העבודה לאלהים מן האדם, הוא שיתנצל לו ממדות האדנות, ויחד אותן לו בלבד, ושיקבל על עצמו כל מדות העבדות לבורא.

It is well known to us that the very beginning of how a person's service of Hashem is established is for him to divest himself of all traits of masterhood, reserving them for Hashem alone, and to take upon himself all the traits of servitude to the Creator.

NOTE To serve Hashem properly, a person must first realize that he is not the master of his own life; he must yield all control and sovereignty to the Creator.

כי העבדות והאדנות הן משער המצטרף, אשר תתחייב מציאת כל אחד במציאת האחר; שהאדם איננו ראוי לשם עבד עד שיהיה לו אדון, והאדון לא יהיה ראוי לשם הוה עד שיהיה לו עבד.

For servitude and masterhood are correlative concepts, where the existence of one necessitates the existence of the other; a person cannot be called a servant until he has a master, and a master is not fit for this title until he has a servant.

וכל אחד מהם, כענין הקונה והקנוי, איננו קודם את חברו בשם ובערך.

And each of them, much like the relationship between a buyer and the item bought, does not precede the other in title or in relationship.

ולא תתקיים העבודה מן האדם לאלהים, אלא עד שיקבל על עצמו כל מדות העבדות, והן הכניעה והשפלות לפניו, ושיתנצל לו מכל מדות האדנות, שהן הגדלה, והיקר, והגבה, והתפארת, והגאון, והדומה לזה.

Thus, a person's service of Hashem cannot be established unless he takes upon himself all the traits of servitude—which are submission and lowliness before Him—and divests himself of all traits of masterhood, which are self-aggrandizement, honor, haughtiness, glory, pride, and the like.

ואמר אחד מן החכמים: הגדלה מעטה הבורא, ומי שרוצה להכנס עליו במעטהו, יהדפנו.

And one of the wise men said: 'Grandeur is the cloak of the Creator, and whoever wishes to approach Him wearing His cloak, He will cast him away.'

ואמר דוד (תהלים צב): ה' מלך גאות לבש.

And David HaMelech said: 'Hashem reigns, He is clothed in majesty.'

ואין מדה טובה למאמין עד שיפרע החובה, כמו שאמר הכתוב (שמואל א ט"ו:כ"ב): הנה שמע מזבח טוב.

And a believer cannot attain extra piety until he first pays his basic obligation, as the verse says: 'Behold, to obey is better than a sacrificial offering.'

NOTE A person cannot look for extra-credit spiritual stringencies (piety) if they are neglecting the basic, fundamental duty of listening to Hashem's command.

ולא תתקיים לו הטובה עד שיקבל עליו עבודת הבורא, ויודה לו בכל מדות העבדות.

And this goodness cannot be established for him until he accepts upon himself the service of the Creator and submits to Him with all the traits of servitude.

ולא תתכן ממנו העבדות, אלא באמן כניעתו לאלהים, ושפלותו, ושחיתו לפניו, כאשר הקדמנו.

And servitude itself is impossible for him except through the training of his submission to Hashem, and his lowliness and self-effacement before Him, as we have previously explained.

וזה מחייב שתהיינה כל המדות הטובות והחובות סמוכות לכניעתו, והיא ראש ותחלה להן.

This dictates that all good character traits and spiritual duties are secondary to his submission, and that submission is the head and the beginning of them all.

והדין נותן בעבור זה, שלא תתכן מדה טובה למי שילבו ריק מהכניעה לאלהים, ויש בלבבו מאומה מן הגאון והגדלה.

Logic therefore dictates that no good trait can truly exist in one whose heart is empty of submission to Hashem, or who has even a trace of pride and self-importance in his heart.

NOTE If pride is present, any seemingly good trait is tainted by self-interest and cannot be considered a true, pure spiritual acquisition.

וְכֵן רֹאשׁ הַתְּשׁוּבָה הַשְּׂפִלוּת, וְהַשְּׁחִית, וְהַכְּנִיעָה, כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר הַכָּתוּב (ד"ה ב ז): וַיִּכְנָעוּ עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא שְׁמִי עֲלֵיהֶם, וַיִּתְּפְּלוּ, וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ פָנַי, וְגו'.

Likewise, the very beginning of teshuvah is lowliness, self-effacement, and submission, as the verse says: 'If My people, upon whom My Name is called, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face...'

וְאָמַר (שם יב): נִכְנָעוּ, לֹא אֶשְׁחִיתֵם.

And it says: 'They have humbled themselves; I will not destroy them.'

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

The author explains that a Yid cannot reach true piety or even fulfill his basic obligations to the Creator without first accepting the conditions of slavehood through submission and humility. Because masterhood belongs solely to Hashem, any trace of pride or self-glory pushes a person away from His presence. Ultimately, the chapter establishes that submission is the head and beginning of all moral qualities, and it is the indispensable first step for any genuine teshuvah and divine service.

לְמַעֲשֶׂה WHAT TO TAKE HOME

My dear friend, the Chovos HaLevavos is teaching us a fundamental rule in our avodah: you cannot build a beautiful structure of mitzvos and middos on a foundation of pride. We often try to work on our character traits or add beautiful hiddurim to our mitzvos, but the Rabbeinu Bachya reveals that all good traits are secondary to submission. If a person has even a trace of arrogance in their heart, their spiritual achievements are hollow. True service of Hashem only begins when we step down from the throne of 'masterhood' and accept the reality of our 'slavehood' to the Creator.

Think about how this plays out in daily life. When we feel insulted, when we demand that things go exactly our way, or when we feel a surge of self-importance because of our successes, we are trying to wrap ourselves in the 'garment of the Creator', which is grandeur and majesty. But as Chazal warn us, Hashem pushes away anyone who tries to wear His royal garment. True peace and genuine middos only come when we let go of the need to control and instead humble ourselves before Hashem, recognizing that He is the Master and we are here to serve Him.

Today, when something does not go according to your plans, or when you feel the urge to assert your honor, pause for one moment, take a deep breath, and say quietly to yourself: 'Hashem is the Master, and I am His servant.' Let go of the need to control the outcome, and yield to His will with joy.