

חובות הלבבות • שער יחוד המעשה • פרק רביעי

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

ON THIS PAGE

In this chapter, the Chovos HaLevavos opens our eyes to the three great spiritual pitfalls that ruin a Yid's ability to serve Hashem with pure, unadulterated devotion (yichud hamaaseh). The first two of these barriers are ignorance of Hashem and His goodness, and ignorance of the mitzvos and the Torah. The third barrier is the constant, deceptive whispering of the yetzer hara, which tries to make this world look sweet while pulling a person away from his true purpose in the World to Come.

We will learn how a lack of daas of Hashem inevitably leads a person to seek the approval of flesh and blood rather than his Creator. The Chovos HaLevavos draws a powerful and sobering contrast between a simple idol worshipper and a flatterer (a hypocrite), showing us how the flatterer's hidden deceit is actually far more damaging to the world and to his own neshama than outright avodah zarah.

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

אבל מפסדי יחוד המעשה לאלהים, הם שלשה דברים.

However, the things that ruin the dedication of one's actions solely to Hashem are three.

אחד מהם, שלא יבין את האלהים ואת טובתו.

The first of them is that a person does not understand Hashem and His goodness.

והשני, שלא יבין מצוות האלהים ואת תורתו.

The second is that he does not understand the mitzvos of Hashem and His Torah.

והשלישי, הרהור היצר ורמיזתו לאדם במה שיחבב אליו העוה"ז, וירחקהו מדרך העולם הבא.

And the third is the prompting of the yetzer hara and its subtle hints to a person, by which it makes this world beloved to him and distances him from the path of the World to Come.

אבל אפני הפסד הסכלות מדעת האלהים למעשה העבודה, הוא מפני שכל מי שאינו יודע את אדוניו, לא יעבדה בלב; אבל יעבד מי שיודע ענינו, ויתכן ממנו התועלת והנזק.

Now, the way that ignorance of Hashem ruins the service of Him is because anyone who does not know his Master cannot serve Him with his heart; rather, he will only serve someone whose existence he is aware of and from whom benefit or harm is expected.

ואם יעשה מי שאינו יודע את האלהים מעשה ממעשי העבודה, כוננתו בהם למי שירא ויקנה מבני אדם בלבד; ועובד בני אדם ולא הבורא אותם, מפני שאיננו יודע ולא מכיר ענינו.

And if someone who does not know Hashem performs an act of service, his intention in doing so will only be for those human beings whom he fears or hopes to gain from; thus, he is serving human beings and not the Creator Who made them, because he does not know or recognize Him.

וכן נאמר בהעובד כוכבים, כי מביאתו לזה סכלותו באלהים יתברך.

The same can be said of an idol worshiper, for it is his ignorance of Hashem, may He be blessed, that brings him to this.

ויש יתרון להעובד כוכבים על החנף בארבעה דברים.

Yet, the idol worshiper actually has an advantage over the hypocrite in four ways.

NOTE The term 'chaneif' refers to a hypocrite who outwardly pretends to serve Hashem but inwardly does so to please people.

אחד מהם, כי העובד כוכבים בזמן שאין חזון איננו מזהר ע"י נביא שיברר אצלו הפסד מחשבתו באותות ובמופתים; אבל המחנף בתורת האלהים, יש עליו טענה במה שקבל מן המצוות בעבודת האלהים והזהרה מעבודת זולתו.

First, in a time when there is no prophecy, the idol worshiper has not been personally warned by a prophet who could demonstrate the falsehood of his beliefs through signs and wonders; whereas the hypocrite who acts within the framework of Hashem's Torah has no excuse, since he has already accepted the mitzvos to serve Hashem and the prohibition against serving anyone else.

והשני, כי העובד כוכבים עובד מי שאינו ממרה את האלהים; אבל המחנף בתורת האלהים, עובד מי שממרה את האלהים ומי שאינו ממרה אותו.

Second, the idol worshiper serves forces of nature or celestial bodies which do not actively rebel against Hashem; whereas the hypocrite who acts within the Torah serves human beings, who are capable of actively rebelling against Hashem as well as obeying Him.

והשלישי, כי העובד כוכבים הוא עובד דבר אחד בלבד; והחנף, אין תכלית לנעבדיו.

Third, the idol worshiper usually serves only one specific thing; whereas for the hypocrite, there is no limit to the number of people he tries to please and serve.

והרביעי, כי העובד כוכבים אין ענינו נסתר מבני אדם, והם נשמרים ממנו מפני פרסום כפרנותו באלהים; אבל החנף, אין כפרנותו נראה, ובני אדם בוטחים בו ויתכן לו להזיקם, מה שלא יתכן לזולתו.

Fourth, the idol worshiper's path is not hidden from people, so they protect themselves from him because his denial of Hashem is public; but the hypocrite's denial is concealed, so people trust him, enabling him to cause them spiritual harm in a way that an open denier cannot.

והוא הגדול שבמדות העולם, ונקרא בלשוננו חנף ויהיר ומפתה.

This hypocrisy is the greatest sickness in the world, and in our sacred tongue, such a person is called a flatterer, a haughty one, and an enticer.

אך מי שאינו מבין מצוות האלהים ותורותיו, אין מעשהו מיחד לשם האל בעבודתו; שכיון שאינו מבין אפני העבודה שהם התורת, כל שכן שלא יבין אפני השלמתם ביחוד לבבו בהם לאלהים.

Furthermore, one who does not understand the mitzvos of Hashem and His Torah cannot dedicate his actions purely to Hashem's Name in his service; for since he does not understand the proper ways of performing the service, which are the Torah's laws, he certainly will not understand how to perfect them with the complete devotion of his heart to Hashem.

וְכָל מָה שֶׁהוּא עוֹשֶׂה מִמַּעֲשֵׂי הָעֲבוּדָה, כְּוֹנֵנֵהוּ בִּזְוִילַת הָאֱלֹהִים, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא כְּמִסְתַּפֵּק בְּאַמְתַּת חַיּוּבוֹ בָּהֶם, וְאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ מַה שִׁיִּפְסִיד יִחוּד לְבָבוֹ בַּעֲשׂוֹתוֹ לֵאלֹהִים, וְאִם הוּא יוֹדֵעַ הָאֱלֹהִים וְטוֹבָתוֹ.

And whatever acts of service he does perform, his intention will end up being for someone other than Hashem, because he remains in doubt as to whether he is truly obligated in them, and he does not know what ruins the devotion of his heart when serving Hashem, even if he otherwise knows Hashem and His goodness.

NOTE This is why Chazal teach in Pirkei Avos that an ignorant person cannot be truly pious (am ha'aretz lo chasid), because without Torah knowledge, one cannot know how to guard his intentions.

אָבֵל הִרְהוּר הַיֵּצֵר מִתְחַלֵּק לְשְׁנֵי חִלְקִים.

Now, the promptings of the yetzer hara are divided into two categories.

אֶחָד מֵהֶם, מַחְשְׁבוֹת מְסַפְּקוֹת עָלָיו הָאֲמִתּוֹת וּמַשְׁבִּשּׁוֹת עָלָיו אֱמוּנָתוֹ, עַד שֶׁלֹּא יִשָּׁלַם לוֹ מַעֲשֶׂה לֵאלֹהִים.

One category consists of thoughts that cast doubt on the truths of our faith and confuse his emunah, so that he cannot perform any action with complete devotion to Hashem.

וְהַחֵלֶק הַשֵּׁנִי, שֶׁהוּא בָּא עִמּוֹ מִדֶּרֶךְ הַטַּעֲנָה וְהִרְאָה, כִּי מָה שֶׁהוּא רֵץ אֵלָיו וּמִשְׁתַּדֵּל בּוֹ מִן הַמַּעֲשֶׂה לֵאלֹהִים אֵינוֹ חוֹבָה וְלֹא מִדֶּרֶךְ הַזְרִיזוֹת, אָבֵל מוֹרָה אוֹתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת לַעֲוֹלָם הַזֶּה וּלְיֹשְׁבָיו.

And the second category is when the yetzer hara comes to him with arguments and intellectual proofs, claiming that his running and striving to perform actions for Hashem is neither an obligation nor a worthy act of zeal, but instead directs him to work for this world and its inhabitants.

WHAT TO TAKE FROM IT

The chapter explains that without knowing Hashem, a person cannot serve Him with devotion, as he will naturally seek to please people he fears or hopes to benefit from. This hypocrisy, or flattery, is shown to be worse than idol worship in four distinct ways, making the flatterer the most dangerous spiritual disease. Furthermore, the author clarifies that without Torah knowledge, a person cannot serve Hashem properly because "an ignorant man cannot be pious." Finally, the chapter outlines how the yetzer hara works to destroy our avodah through two methods: by casting doubts on our emunah, and by arguing that our exertion in mitzvot is unnecessary, urging us instead to focus on the pursuits of this world.

My dear friend, the Chovos HaLevavos is opening our eyes to a frightening truth: when we lack a deep, personal knowledge of Hashem and His Torah, we naturally begin to serve other people instead of Him. If we do not consciously feel Hashem's goodness and understand His mitzvos, we find ourselves performing actions just to please those around us, seeking their approval or fearing their criticism. This is the trap of the 'flatterer'—living a double life where our outer actions look like avodah, but our inner hearts are actually serving the opinions of flesh and blood.

To protect ourselves from this, we must actively fight the two-pronged attack of the yetzer hara. The yetzer hara either tries to weaken our emunah with quiet doubts, or it whispers that we are being 'too frum' and that our extra efforts in avodat Hashem are unnecessary. It tries to convince us to invest our energy into this world and what people think of us, rather than what the Creator of the world desires.

Today, before you do one mitzvah—whether it is saying a berachah, putting on tefillin, or giving tzedakah—pause for just five seconds. Say to yourself: 'I am doing this solely for Hashem, who loves me and gives me life, and not for the eyes of any human being.'