

# Table of Contents

## PART I

### AWARENESS AND CLARITY

<i>Chapter 1: The Most Basic Need</i> . . . . .	3
<i>Chapter 2: Separate Realities</i> . . . . .	6
<i>Chapter 3: Who Am I?</i> . . . . .	9
<i>Chapter 4: The Opinion of Others</i> . . . . .	12
<i>Chapter 5: Mindfulness</i> . . . . .	15
<i>Chapter 6: Real Listening</i> . . . . .	20
<i>Chapter 7: The Owner of Nothing</i> . . . . .	24

## PART II

### DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

<i>Chapter 8: Strategies</i> . . . . .	29
<i>Chapter 9: Aloneness and Togetherness</i> . . . . .	33
<i>Chapter 10: Akeidos—Large and Small</i> . . . . .	35
<i>Chapter 11: The Return to Normal (after COVID)</i> . . . . .	38
<i>Chapter 12: Lilacs</i> . . . . .	41
<i>Chapter 13: Nachamu</i> . . . . .	44
<i>Chapter 14: The Snake</i> . . . . .	47
<i>Chapter 15: Without Bounds</i> . . . . .	50
<i>Chapter 16: Help for Pain</i> . . . . .	53

PART III

MIDDOS AND GROWTH

*Chapter 17: Middos Tovos* . . . . . 59  
*Chapter 18: Joy* . . . . . 63  
*Chapter 19: Past and Future* . . . . . 66  
*Chapter 20: It Depends.* . . . . . 69  
*Chapter 21: What's That in Your Hand?* . . . . . 72  
*Chapter 22: Our Deeds Matter* . . . . . 75  
*Chapter 23: In Plain Sight* . . . . . 78  
*Chapter 24: The Pursuit of True Simchah* . . . . . 81

PART IV

LESSONS FROM LIFE

*Chapter 25: Messages* . . . . . 87  
*Chapter 26: Adventures of a Different Kind* . . . . . 90  
*Chapter 27: Disposable.* . . . . . 93  
*Chapter 28: The Strength of Knowing Who You Are* . . . . . 97  
*Chapter 29: The Ploys of Pharaoh.* . . . . . 100  
*Chapter 30: Existential Questions* . . . . . 104  
*Chapter 31: Flying.* . . . . . 107  
*Chapter 32: The Trip.* . . . . . 109  
*Chapter 33: Remembering.* . . . . . 112

PART V

YAMIM NORA'IM

*Chapter 34: Preparations* . . . . . 117  
*Chapter 35: Introspection* . . . . . 120  
*Chapter 36: Plans for the New Year/Lost Sheep.* . . . . . 123  
*Chapter 37: Yom Kippur.* . . . . . 126  
*Chapter 38: The Aftermath* . . . . . 129

PART VI

YAMIM TOVIM

*Chapter 39: Sukkos* . . . . . 135  
*Chapter 40: “Beware until Your Last Day!”* . . . . . 137  
*Chapter 41: Purim: Coincidences* . . . . . 140  
*Chapter 42: Purim: Achdus* . . . . . 144  
*Chapter 43: The Holiday of Freedom* . . . . . 147  
*Chapter 44: Chill* . . . . . 150  
*Chapter 45: The Power of Prayer.* . . . . . 153

PART VII

RELATIONSHIPS

*Chapter 46: Siblings* . . . . . 157  
*Chapter 47: My Zaidy* . . . . . 160  
*Chapter 48: The Yahrzeits of My Parents* . . . . . 163  
*Chapter 49: Reflections* . . . . . 166  
*Chapter 50: Love and Affirmation* . . . . . 169  
*Chapter 51: Moms and Boundaries* . . . . . 172  
*Chapter 52: Children.* . . . . . 175  
*Chapter 53: Sadness and Joy* . . . . . 178

PART VIII

LIFE CYCLES

*Chapter 54: Mourning and Joy* . . . . . 185  
*Chapter 55: Women* . . . . . 188  
*Chapter 56: Power* . . . . . 192  
*Chapter 57: The Good and the Bad.* . . . . . 195  
*Chapter 58: The Fork in the Road.* . . . . . 198  
*Chapter 59: Connecting* . . . . . 201  
*Chapter 60: Yizkor.* . . . . . 204  
*Chapter 61: Leaves* . . . . . 207



## Chapter 1

# The Most Basic Need

**T**he need to be acknowledged and validated is primary for human beings—perhaps, in fact, the most important need of all. We all want to matter. At the deepest level, this need is the manifestation of a desire to have a role in the destiny of mankind, to be connected to eternity, to something that will never die.

The yearning for validation shows up in experiences large and small. To illustrate, one of our grandchildren from out of town, a very special young man, recently called my husband on a Friday afternoon to inquire about his health and to wish him a good Shabbos. At the conclusion of the call, I asked my husband if my grandson had inquired about me or sent me a good Shabbos wish. My husband's response confirmed that he had not.

Not one to take such an offense sitting down, I called my grandson and asked him if I was chopped liver.

"Ouch," he replied contritely. He apologized for the oversight, and ever since, without fail, he has asked to speak to me.

I share this anecdote for an important reason. Instead of being resentful that I had been overlooked, I asked for what I needed—and remarkably, husbands, wives, children and grandchildren are all educable. It is never productive to be a martyr and pretend that we don't care. At the end of the day, we all have a *need to matter*.

A very poignant episode in the Torah is the reunion of Yosef and Binyamin after a twenty-two-year separation. Binyamin was Yosef's only brother from their mother, Rachel, and he was a youngster when

the older brothers sold Yosef into slavery. Before Yosef revealed his identity, he asked Binyamin about his family and whether he had any children. Binyamin responded that he had been blessed with ten sons.

Yosef inquired further about the children's names. When Binyamin listed them, Yosef was puzzled about the meanings of the names. Binyamin explained that each name had been designed to remind him of Yosef; for example, he had chosen the name Bela, meaning "swallow," because Yosef had been swallowed up among the nations, and Naaman, meaning "pleasant," because Yosef had been so pleasant.

The Torah states that Yosef was so overcome by Binyamin's response that he quickly went to his room and cried. From the Torah's elaboration on Yosef's extraordinary weeping, we have a window into his heart. After twenty-two years of separation, Yosef might well have come to believe that he had long been forgotten. Instead he realized that not only was he remembered but that he mattered to his brother every minute of every day.

There is a wonderful anecdote about Sir Winston Churchill, who was once approached by a beggar for a coin. After rummaging through his pockets and coming up with nothing, Sir Winston said sadly, "I am sorry, my brother, I have nothing to give you."

"Quite the contrary," the beggar responded. "You have given me a lot. You called me your brother."

Our son Mordechai has a great talent for connecting with people, whoever they may be and wherever they are. Mordechai recently traveled from his home in London to Milwaukee, and when he arrived at the airport in London found it crowded, full of people flying to the States.

Noticing a particularly fatigued and harassed airline employee, Mordechai went over to commiserate with him. A short time later, the employee sought him out and upgraded him to a better class of service. The simple courtesy of inquiring about his well-being, though brief, had made him feel recognized and warmed his heart.

Our granddaughter Ruche'le of Milwaukee took her eight-year-old daughter, Chaya'la, out to give her some personal attention. Ruche'le scheduled activities that she knew Chaya'la would enjoy, and they had

a grand old time. On the way home, she asked Chaya'la what had been the best part of the day for her and which activity she had enjoyed most.

Chaya'la responded, "Spending time with you, Mommy, was the best part of the day."

Young as she is, Chaya'la was able to articulate that her mother's willingness to set aside time for her made her feel special and confirmed her worthiness.

It is important for us to understand that what we need is what others need as well. This issue becomes more challenging when we are dealing with people whom we don't care for, or worse yet, toward whom we have antipathy.

The *sefarim ha'kedoshim* tell us that the Torah provides a formula to address this issue. Yaakov Avinu instructed Yosef, "Go and investigate *shelom achecha* [the well-being of your brothers]." One of the commentaries offers an alternative translation of the word "*shelom*," interpreting it as deriving from the root *shalem*, meaning "wholeness." Yaakov was urging Yosef to inquire about the "totality" of his brothers' being, to go beyond a superficial glance, which always produces a distorted picture.

When we look more comprehensively at a person, we see not only what we perceive to be their flaws but their positive qualities as well. We are then in a much better position to affirm and validate them.

When all is said and done, we need to recognize that we are all more alike than we are different. We all seek our place in the sun as we make our way in our journey through life.

## Chapter 2

# Separate Realities

**S**eparate realities are a fascinating phenomenon.

Our children have been taking turns coming to Milwaukee to take care of their “old folks.” Our three older daughters, Ruchie, Baila, and Yoche are forever cold and shivering, even in very mild weather. Chumie breaks out in a sweat even when snowflakes are falling from heaven. Chagi and Bas Sheva, though also inclined to suffer from the heat, are nonetheless more reasonable about it. And to mention my boys, lest they feel left out, they prefer a cooler environment.

Ironically, history repeats itself.

When our children were little, my husband, who is always cold, would go into their bedrooms when they were asleep and make sure that they were adequately covered. Unbeknownst to him, I used to adjust the thermostat to make the house cooler.

Separate realities.

“Just as people’s faces are so dissimilar from one another,” our Sages state, “so too are their opinions.”

Our community is made up of people from all walks of life. Twenty years ago, Sharon began coming to our classes. Sharon was from a secular family and, while she was Jewish, she knew very little about Judaism. Sharon became a regular and before long, she moved closer to our community so that she could partake in Shabbos with us, send her children to Jewish schools, and learn more regularly with members of our community. Sharon always dressed with a flair. She was fashionable, and her hair, outfit, and shoes turned heads wherever she went.



I remember the day that Sharon decided to put on a *sheitel*. Her secular friends—her closest friends for many years—and her family thought that she had lost her mind. Why would you wear a wig when you have beautiful long locks of hair? The decision was a difficult one, but when Sharon walked in with a long, wavy, very fashionable *sheitel*, it was an emotional moment. Sharon has not lost her flair, but her flair includes long sleeves and a flowing skirt. If Sharon were to visit a mainstream frum community, people might look at her and comment on the long, flowy *sheitel* or her dramatic clothing, but how many people would understand the *mesirus nefesh* it took for Sharon to dress this way? How precious is her *sheitel* and clothing to the Almighty? Yet, some of us might for a moment pass judgment, for surely we are more modest, or are we? You and I might see Sharon very differently.

It is somewhat commonplace for humans to judge others for a variety of reasons: how people spend their money, where people send their children to school, or how people pass their leisure time. We notice what people wear and how often they wear it. We look at people's homes, comment on their children's behaviors, their reactions to things, and so on.

How often do we pause and reflect? How often do we admire the way that someone spends their money, or take a moment to compliment someone? How often do we express that we don't know what makes someone tick and offer them the benefit of the doubt?

Separate realities. No two people are the same. No two lives are the same. No two backgrounds. No two families. No two situations are the same. We are privy to a mere snippet of time.

Separate realities, and each is beautiful in the eyes of the Almighty.

This presented itself in a very meaningful way recently. There is a young woman in our community with Down syndrome. Shira is in her 20s, and is very capable, compassionate, and independent. She is especially attentive to my care and well-being. She greets me with a hug in shul every week. At the end of the davening, she always tells me that my husband is waiting to leave, and it's not proper to keep the rabbi waiting! She has made it her personal mission to see me home safely. She holds onto my arm and warns me about any irregularities in the

sidewalk and/or street. She won't let go of my arm until she has safely seen me to the front door. She is always watching out for me.

Last week, Sarah, one of our beloved community members, gave birth to a baby boy with Down syndrome. Our tight-knit and cohesive community was both happy for and concerned about how Sarah's family would be affected by the care that the baby would need. Shira's response was immediate, joyous, and unequivocal. She clapped her hands in delight and said "Hooray! Now, I won't be the only person with Down syndrome in our community." The birth of Moshe Aharon made her day. Reb Dovid, Moshe Aharon's father, in his remarks at the *bris*, spoke of his total faith that Hashem knew what He was doing, and as such, it shouldn't be seen as just something that was meant to be, but should be seen as a blessing for his family.

The community response, Shira's reaction, and Dovid's comments, are all part of the same picture, but everyone experiences it differently.

We often wonder what drives one person in one direction and the other down a different path. The truth lies in understanding the concept of separate realities. What works for one person is anathema to another and *no one* is in a position, nor has the right, to judge others.

It is imperative for us to know that while we have personality traits, experiences, and challenges, we are not fated or programmed to behave in a particular way.

Secular psychologists such as B.F. Skinner developed the concept of psychic determinism: If we know a person's early years, we can predict their future. Sigmund Freud stated that "the child is the father of the man."

However, Torah *hashkafah* asserts that while it is true that there are influences that affect a person, we always have *bechirah*, free choice. We can rise above these influences and make choices consistent with the G-d-given *neshamah* that resides within each and every one of us.

## Chapter 3

# Who Am I?

Upon the birth of a new baby brother, our four-year-old great-granddaughter Devoiry of Yerushalayim was dispatched to her maternal grandmother so that her mother could recuperate. When Mom recovered her strength, Devoiry came back home. Shortly thereafter, her father noticed that Devoiry was busy making a *Beruchim Ha'ba'im* (Welcome Home) sign. He asked her who the sign was for. She answered, "For myself, because I finally came home." I am confident that her grandmother's home was perfect, and that she was treated very well, but as my mother would always say, "Every place is wonderful, but home is still the best."

"Home," it has been noted, is one of the most powerful words in the dictionary. While the truth of that statement needs very little elaboration, "home" has many significant connotations. I would propose that the most essential meaning of home is "where the *self* dwells," or more precisely, where the self is *defined*. Throughout the ages, and much more so in the last half century, people have traveled far and wide, if not literally, then figuratively, trying to find themselves. We are on a quest to find our home, our legitimate roots, the place where we truly belong.

Our son Rabbi Efraim, of Chicago, elaborated in one of his *shiurim* on the *Ramban's* (Nachmanides) understanding of why the first of the Ten Commandments, which begins with the words "*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*—I am Hashem your G-d," establishes His credentials by referring to Hashem taking us out of Egypt, rather than Hashem having created heaven and earth. The *Ramban* explains that the reason for this

is that because He took *us*, specifically, out of Egypt, He has earned the right to *our* allegiance, and “deserves” to be *our* G-d. Hence, *we, more than anyone else*, are obliged to heed His commandments.

Rabbi Efraim observed that in Egypt, Jews suffered humiliation, degradation, brutality, and the very worst that enslavement entails. B’nei Yisrael became virtually *nothing*, seen as non-humans. There was a total *loss of self*. Our “*tzelem Elokim*,” our dignity and human configuration, were gone. We had descended to the bottom of the abyss. It was at that point, when Jews could sink no lower, that Hashem, in His utter and complete kindness, embraced and redeemed us and, most importantly, restored to us a sense of *self*. Hashem gave us back *ourselves*, even though we were totally undeserving.

It is for this reason that the *Ramban* asserts that Hashem states, “I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of Egypt,” rather than, “I am the G-d of Creation,” and why we remember the liberation from Egypt daily. Hashem, in effect, is telling Klal Yisrael that although we did not earn His miracles, yet He did choose us, and as a result it behooves us to defer to His will. Simply put, for the gift of giving us back ourselves, we are indebted and beholden to Him. It is also the reason that we emphasize in the Haggadah that Hashem “*asah li*,” that G-d made me, “*li*,” meaning, He gave me *myself*.

B’nei Yisrael are completely and totally indebted to the Master of the World for our essential freedom. Indebtedness, “*hakaras hatov*,” is the identifying feature of Klal Yisrael. Hence, the name *Yehudim*, derived from the root word meaning “thanks,” where acknowledging kindness and being grateful is the hallmark of our people.

Our nation is built on gratitude. The daily berachos we recite during davening acknowledge the many gifts we receive from Above, and express our awareness of Hashem’s blessing.

Most of all, however, we should thank Him for giving us *ourselves*, the authentic *homecoming*, where we can freely be connected to the supernal, to the “*chelek ha’Eloki*,” the piece of the Divine, within ourselves.

The *me*, the *us*, that our Heavenly Father liberated and conferred upon us, demands its due. It demands that we recognize the magnificence that resides within each of us. We dare not underestimate or

shortchange ourselves. We are able, if we so choose, to reach for the realization of the great and unique potential that Hashem has invested within us.

As we move closer to Shavuos, the day commemorating *kabbalas ha-Torah*, receiving the Torah, we would all do well to follow little Devoiry's example of making a sign for ourselves that reads, "Welcome Home." We have arrived at our destination.

## The Opinion of Others

**T**he *Torah ha'kedoshah* is replete with food for thought—insights that are timely and relevant to our daily existence.

In the Torah portion of *Shelach*, dealing with the Meraglim, scouts sent to spy out the land, the narrative tells us that they reported the following: “We were in our eyes as grasshoppers, and so were we in their eyes.”

This comment begs a study into human nature.

Why would the spies care about how they appeared to the inhabitants of the land they were poised to conquer? And for that matter, by extension—why do *we* care so much about what others think of us or how we appear in their eyes? We might often say/hear, “Will they like what I wear?” or “What will he/she think of what I say or do?” We seem to live in other people’s heads.

This only serves to make us judge ourselves more harshly. We are often uncomfortable in our own skin. We often feel apologetic for being ourselves. It seems that we, as a society, live according to our perception of other people’s standards.

This paradigm makes us feel inauthentic, anxious, judgmental, mostly inadequate, and undeserving.

Psychologists note that at the end of the day, other people’s opinions of us are none of our business. The opinion of others has nothing to do with us and everything to do with them, their pasts, their expectations, and their likes and/or dislikes.

As one public speaker commented, “Some people really enjoyed what

I said and others forgot it as soon as they left the room.” She said that some people told her that they enjoyed her talks because she reminded them of their favorite aunt or friend, while another person said that they couldn’t process her words because she sounded exactly like their “annoying sister-in-law.” Some people heard and understood her message while others chose to discount it. Once again, this reiterates the fact that the thoughts and opinions of *others* have nothing to do with us and everything to do with *them*.

How then, do we stop caring about what other people think of us?

Byron Katie, a secular author, outlines the following helpful suggestion. “Know to stay in your own business.” There are three types of “business” in the world, she posits:

1. G-d’s “business”: The weather is His business. Who dies and who is born is G-d’s business. The body and genes we were given are His business. We can’t control G-d’s business, try as we might.
2. Other people’s “business”: What others do is their business. What your neighbor thinks of you is his business.
3. Your “business”: If you get annoyed with another driver on the road because you have to drive more slowly, that’s your business. If you get irritated because your mail didn’t show up or your friend didn’t call yesterday, that’s your business.

We have only one business with which to concern ourselves—*our own*. What we think, feel, and do are the only things *we can control in life*.

When we base our feelings on other people’s opinions, we are allowing them to rent space in our heads, to be a puppet master that pulls our strings; as a result, we might feel better or worse.

The key is to realize that our emotions and our feelings are a product of our own thinking. We are in the driver’s seat and as such we can reclaim ownership of the feelings that we mistakenly attribute to what others say or do.

The insecure and ego-driven assessment of the spies that they felt like grasshoppers and were seen as such by everyone else could easily be countered by Eleanor Roosevelt’s statement that “No one can make you feel inferior without your permission.”

All too often, indeed, we give this permission to others—the media, our culture, and/or our friends—and allow it to determine our thoughts and actions.

There are many perks for those living in large cities such as New York, and its surrounding communities. There are kosher products galore, many restaurants, shuls every few blocks, and numerous educational institutions from which to choose, among other things. On the flip side, there are often standards that many feel they must adopt, be they children dressed alike, preferably in designer clothing; expenses of a *chossan* and *kallah* that have escalated to exorbitant levels, *mishloach manos* that must now be themed; and the proverbial “Joneses” run the show. One is forced to follow the herd or chance the possibility of being seen as “different.” Oftentimes, out of town, it is that much easier to be one’s own person. There may be less pressure to conform to given norms such as how one dresses and how houses should look; and more opportunity to be one’s own person.

“When you try to make an impression, that’s the impression you make.”

The Kotzker Rebbe said, “If I am I because I am I, and you are you because you are you, then I am I and you are you. But, if I am I because you are you, and you are you because I am I, then I am not I and you are not you.”

The mistake of the Meraglim, the spies, was a costly one. Instead of going into the Land of Israel, the nation ended up dying in the desert over the next forty years, and it was only the next generation that were privileged to enter the land.

Succumbing to the opinions of others is, at the end of the day, a betrayal of our own essence. The ideal approach is “To thine own self be true.”