

The CHASSIDUS PERSPECTIVE with Reb Yoel Kahn

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OF ROOTS AND BRANCHES

In Parshas Shoftim we read the *possuk*, “*Ki ha’adam eitz hasadeh*, man is [comparable to] a tree in the field.” Indeed, we find that Chazal draw numerous parallels between humans and trees.

One of these parallels is mentioned in Pirkei Avos: “Someone whose *chochmah* (knowledge) surpasses his *maasim* (good deeds) is like a tree with many branches but few roots. A [single] wind can come and uproot it. However, someone whose good deeds surpass his knowledge is like a tree with few branches but many roots. Even if all the winds in the world blow at it, they will not move it from its place.”

We see here that the Mishnah compares knowledge to branches and good deeds to roots. However, it would seem that the opposite is true. Seemingly, deeds stem from knowledge: when we know the correct way to act, we will conduct ourselves appropriately, and conversely, improper conduct demonstrates a deficiency in knowledge. If so, the roots should represent knowledge, and the branches should signify deeds!

WHERE’S OUR NESHAMAH?

Elsewhere, the Gemara compares the *neshamah* to a root and the body to a branch. This, too, is difficult to understand. The body is not an offshoot of the soul; it is a separate entity, in which Hashem placed a *neshamah* to give it life. Why does the Gemara compare the body to a branch and the *neshamah* to a root?

When the Gemara says that the body is like a branch, it is not referring to the body itself, but to the “ray” of the *neshamah* that enters the body. The body is too “small” to house the *neshamah* itself. Therefore, the *neshamah* itself remains Above, and only a small part of it comes down and enters the physical body.

Although the main part of our *neshamah* remains Above, it still influences us.

Chazal tell us that there are certain heavenly voices that call out each day. What is the point of these announcements if we don’t hear them?

The Baal Shem Tov explains that in truth we *do* hear them. It happens that we are overcome with a sudden desire to do *teshuvah*. How does this happen? The part of our *neshamah* that remains Above hears these announcements, and this arouses the part of our *neshamah* that is in the body.

When we base our actions on our intellect, we are limited—we will only do as much as we understand.

The *possuk* relates that when Daniel experienced a heavenly vision, the men who were with him were gripped with awe, although they did not see it. The Gemara explains that “although they did not see, their *mazel* saw.” The *mazel* refers to the *neshamah* Above. The word *mazel* is related to the word *nozel*, to drip, because inspiration “drips” from the *neshamah* Above to the *neshamah* below.

In any case, when the Gemara says that the body is a branch, it is referring to the part of the *neshamah* that is clothed in the body. This part of the *neshamah* is indeed an offshoot of the main part of the *neshamah* that is found Above.

INTELLECT AND KABOLAS OL: THE BEST OF BOTH

One of the effects of the higher level of the *neshamah* is that we are able to act with *kabolas ol*, beyond the constraints of our intellect.

The body is limited, and therefore the lower part of the *neshamah* is limited as well. This confinement is expressed in our intellectual capacities. Intellect is limited and prone to change—if you understand something one way today, you may not understand it that way tomorrow. Every *sevara* can be challenged with an opposite *sevara*. When we base our

actions on our intellect, we are limited—we will only do as much as we understand.

However, we have the ability to devote ourselves to Hashem in an unlimited way, regardless of whether or not we understand.

We are called Hashem's children, like a child whose connection to his parents knows no bounds; we are also called Hashem's servants, like a slave who obeys his master whether he understands or not. This ability comes from the part of our *neshamah* that is found Above.

On the other hand, in order to internalize our connection to Hashem, we must harness our intellectual powers. Although intellect is limited (unlike the unlimited power of *kabolas ol*), it has an advantage too. If we only have *kabolas ol*, our connection to Hashem is not part of who we are. It could be that we understand differently, yet we put our understanding to the side and serve Hashem regardless. However, Hashem wants our connection to Him to be part of us. This happens through reflection, so that we come to appreciate Him and His commands.

At the same time, our motivation to understand shouldn't be simply for the sake of understanding, but because Hashem wants us to. The intellect itself must be based on *kabolas ol*.

THE DEEP-ROOTED TREE

Let us return to the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos.

The Mishnah compares knowledge to branches and deeds to roots. Knowledge and action reflect the two parts of the *neshamah*. The *neshamah* found in the body is the branch, and it is expressed in knowledge—the limited capacity of intellect. Its source is the root, the *neshamah* Above. This part of the *neshamah* is expressed in *maaseh*, in doing what

Hashem wants even if we don't understand.

This is also related to another meaning of the word *maaseh*, to force (as in the phrase "*me'asin al hatzedakah*, we force people to give *tzedakah*"). The *neshamah* Above is what enables us to

follow Hashem's instructions even when we must *force* ourselves to listen.

A tree with many branches but few roots represents a person who doesn't have much *kabolas ol*. Instead, he acts primarily according to his understanding. The higher part of his *neshamah*—the root—doesn't illuminate his life. He lives based on the

"branches," the limited part of the *neshamah*.

Such a tree can easily be overturned. Although today he may understand that he must serve Hashem, tomorrow he may understand differently. His devotion to Hashem is shaky and won't last.

By contrast, a tree with few branches but many roots represents a person whose main focus is *kabolas ol*. Even when he attempts to understand, he only does so because that's what Hashem wants. Such a tree will remain steadfast; his devotion to Hashem—including his intellect—will endure and will not falter.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, pp. 1210–1212.

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