

Drawing from Our Deepest Source of Strength

The following discourse by Rav Eliyahu Dessler is in many ways the “crown jewel” of this book. In order to absorb its impact, we must appreciate the context. Rav Dessler’s educational philosophy came directly from Rav Yisrael Salanter,¹ the father of the modern Mussar Movement. Shortly after giving this talk, he made aliyah and became the *mashgiach ruchani* (dean of spiritual growth) of the illustrious Ponevezh Yeshiva. Here he was taking these ideas of cosmic proportion from the Midrash, *Rashi*, the *Ramban*, the *Maharal*, and the *Ramchal*, and he was telling us in no uncertain terms that they applied not just to the Avos, and not just to the great *tzaddikim* throughout history—they applied to each and every one of us. A generation shattered by World War II was being told that they had an obligation, *first and foremost*, to discover and actualize the unique spiritual greatness that they possessed, and that this greatness was none other than the same greatness embodied by their forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. It was Rav Dessler who gave us permission, and, moreover, gave us a *mandate* to take these ideas seriously with every Jew we have the merit to engage with, bring these concepts to life, and literally make them part of the curriculum

1 Rav Dessler’s father, Rav Reuven Dov Dessler, studied many years under the Alter of Kelm, Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv Broide, a prime disciple of Rav Yisrael Salanter. Rav Dessler’s mother was a granddaughter of Rav Yisrael.

for our children and students as they grow to become Jewish adults and find their place in the Jewish People.

In this, Rav Dessler echoes the opening of Rabbeinu Yonah's *Shaarei Ha'avodah*, with which we opened Section I. Contrary to common wisdom, the launchpad for serving Hashem is not beating oneself up. It is building oneself up.² His clearly stated advice is know your primary, positive trait:

*Michtav Me'Eliyahu, vol. II, Parashas Lech Lecha*³

וראשית עבודת האדם היא שיכיר ויגלה את מדתו העיקרית הזאת, יפתחה לשלימותה על פי דרכי התורה, ויהיה נאמן לה. אך אל לו להסתפק רק בזאת, כי הרי גם המידות האחרות טמונות בחובו, וכדי להגיע לשלמות עליו להשתדל לפתח גם אותן, ולהביא את הגרעין לידי צמיחה.

The beginning of a person's service of Hashem is that he will recognize and reveal this dominant quality of his. He should then develop it to its perfection using Torah guidelines and approaches, and remain faithful to it.

However, he should not be satisfied with just this, for the other attributes are also included within his personal obligation, and in order to reach [his personal] completion, it is incumbent upon him to develop these as well and bring the seed [implanted within him] to its fruition.

For a number of reasons, when most people think about “working on their character,” they immediately hone in on their weaknesses and on what they do not do right. But if we break down the process that Rav Dessler is mapping out for us here, *we will find that working on our weaknesses should come only after seriously investing in developing our primary*

2 Section IV is dedicated to developing this overarching “positivity principle” in Judaism.

3 We are quoting these two paragraphs first, out of order, to drive toward Rav Dessler's primary goal of getting us to first know ourselves, and build up our natural strengths, before we do anything else.

strengths. Notice how robust the initial process of nurturing our natural core strengths is, and note how it must demand our full attention and energy before we work on anything else.

Here is our expanded rephrasing of **Rav Dessler’s Five Steps for Growth**:

- **Step One** is mainly in the mind—to “recognize and reveal” our primary spiritual drive in life. In order to recognize these traits in ourselves, we have to study what the Torah teaches us about them, which can be done by carefully studying the lives of the Avos, guided by the keen perspective of Chazal.⁴ This study is profound and nuanced, and can and should continue in parallel with one’s study of oneself. Only with one eye on the Torah and another introspecting will we achieve clarity on who we are and who we can become.⁵

One of the classic tools we will learn in Section IV is how to spiritually look at ourselves in the mirror by reflecting on which traits we admire most in others. Observing what we value in others allows us to see our own values more vividly. Another method for generating insights is directly meditating on our actions as if we were third parties.⁶ Journaling in a stream-of-conscious way, and speaking to the people who know us best, are other ways of coming to “recognize” what truly makes us tick.

After this general awareness is reached, Rav Dessler tells us to figure out how this clarity of our inner strength “reveals” itself in all areas of our lives. In Section VI, we explore how the major areas of Jewish living can also serve as mirrors if we pay

4 The continuation of this discourse in *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, vol. II, *Parashas Lech Lecha*, pp. 162–165, is a great place to start since this is precisely his intention.

5 See the *Malbim’s* comments on *Mishlei* 17:24: “את פני מבין חכמה ועיני כסיל בקצה ארץ”—Within the [one] who understands exists wisdom, [but] the eyes of the superficial thinker [look] toward the ends of the earth.” We have been trained to look everywhere but inward to find answers to our questions. Those who understand what the Torah is trying to achieve are always looking within themselves. The Torah helps us understand ourselves, and knowing ourselves helps us understand the Torah.

6 *Alei Shur* II, *Vaad* #8 in “*Hisbonenus*,” pp. 276–277.

attention to what they bring out in us. How does our primary spiritual motivation play into our *avodas Hashem*, our learning, our relationships, our careers, our hobbies, and so on?

- **Step Two** is to turn that cognitive clarity of our raw abilities into the stuff of our character—to “develop” this essential trait so that we learn to actually exercise it in all areas of our lives. Once we discover this diamond within ourselves, we should be inspired to polish it and bring out its shine. This requires deliberate and mindful practice in order to not simply rely on our intuitions, reflexes, and natural skills. Let’s say we discover that our primary trait is *chessed*. We will probably find that although we are naturally gifted, we are not as consistent as we would like to be. We are very caring with the people we get along with, but not with the ones with whom we struggle. Or perhaps we enjoy doing *chessed* for strangers, but we do not put in the often-larger effort required to do more involved and sustained *chessed* for those who are closest to us. Developing a *middah*—like developing Gemara skills, athletic skills, or artistic skills—demands willpower, focus, and wise instruction to develop beyond the amateur level.
- **Step Three** is to develop expertise—to “perfect” our primary spiritual strength so that we become a true master of it, to the point that we can comfortably and fluently teach and train others in it. Over time, through the combination of conceptual study in Torah and practice and introspection in life, the workings of our inner dynamics start to click, our instincts become more sharply honed, and we can describe things with much more precision. To achieve this level of self-awareness and expertise can take many years, but we surely owe it to Hashem and ourselves to make the most of the gifts He has given us.
- **Step Four** is the long haul of “remaining faithful” to ourselves, come what may in life. This is one of the major themes that we explore in Section V. Being true to our essential identity is an incredible act of *emunah* (faith) in a world in which social forces seek to homogenize us. This said, when we maintain resolve to

stay the course, we emerge on the other side not exhausted, but fortified. Our ability to inspire others to be themselves is largely a function of them seeing our ability to remain strong and true to ourselves.

Only after moving through these first four steps with focus and dedication in order to build ourselves up, Rav Dessler instructs us to work on our weaker points:

- **Step Five** is the broader, lifelong mission of working on our weaker character traits in order to become a complete person, always maintaining one's core identity at the center. Being balanced and whole is among Judaism's highest values, but Rav Dessler is teaching us that the road to get there does not begin with juggling everything at once. It must start with focusing on and embracing what makes us spiritually unique.⁷

7 We have focused on the first four steps that Rav Dessler outlines for developing one's particular area of innate greatness. The fifth step, to use one's strengths and confidence to work on one's weaker traits, is part of the ultimate purpose of life in becoming a complete person, an **אדם השלם** (see *Mesilas Yesharim*, ch. 1).