

Learning about Ourselves from the Avos

Let's spend time together studying in more detail the three root spiritual strengths as explained by Rav Dessler. Understanding these three profound perspectives will help us understand what makes us unique in the deepest of ways:

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

...עלינו להתבונן על כל מה שמספרת התורה הקדושה מעניני האבות. כי בכל מעשה ומעשה שמספרת לנו התורה מעניניהם היא באה ללמדנו דרגות עליונות בדרכי עבודת השם יתברך השלימה... וענין זה פותח לנו פתח גדול בדרכי עבודת ה' הטהורה. ועתה נגש אל ביאורו בעזרת השם יתברך.

הכחות העיקריים

באדם נמצאים שלשה כוחות יסודיים שבאמצעותם יוכל להגיע אל הטוב, וכל אחד שונה מחברו בשורשו ואופיו ואלו הם:

1. חסד, שבו שם האדם את עיקר מעיינו באחרים ומשתדל להיטיב עמהם ולהשפיע עליהם, ובמקום אחר קראנו לזה "כח הנתינה".
2. יראת שמים, בניגוד לחסד שעיקר פנייתו החוצה, ביראה פונה האדם אל תוך עצמו בחוששו לתוצאות מעשיו.

3. אמת, כח בקשת האמת מברר את הדרך הנכונה בעבודת השם, בלי לנטות ימין ושמאל, אל צד החסד המופרז, או אל צד ביקורת העצמית המופרזת שממעטת במעשים...

אנו מוצאים כרגיל שאופיו המיוחד של האדם מבוסס בעיקר על אחד משלשה הכוחות העיקריים האלה שהזכרנו למעלה, יען כי על פי רוב מהוה אחד מהם את תכונתו הרוחנית האישית אשר על פיה, בעיקר, מושפעים ומודרכים כל מחשבותיו ומעשיו.

...It is incumbent upon us to deeply contemplate everything that the holy Torah tells us about the Avos because every single occurrence that is told over to us by the Torah about them is coming to teach us about the highest levels of the paths of complete service of Hashem...

This opens for us a great gateway into the paths of the pure avodas Hashem.¹ We will now proceed to explain it, with the help of Hashem.

The Primary Strengths

There are three fundamental powers found within a person, through which one can reach the ultimate good. Each one differs from the other in its root and character. These strengths are:

1. *Chessed—through it man places his primary interest in others and tries to do good for others and influence them. Elsewhere [in “Discourse on Loving-Kindness”] we called Chessed the “power of giving.”*
2. *Yiras Shamayim—in contrast to Chessed whose main focus is outward, [yiras Shamayim is a trait through which] man turns inward into himself in his concern for the consequences of his actions.*
3. *Emes—the power of demanding the truth clarifies the correct path in avodas Hashem without veering right or*

1 Rav Gershenfeld explains that Rav Dessler emphasized the word “טהורה—pure” so people would not suspect that these ideas were derived from twentieth-century psychology. This discourse was given over in Gateshead, England, in 1943. Even then, he wanted people to appreciate the authenticity of these defining ideas of what life is about.

left—either toward the side of excessive Chessed [and giving too much or in an inappropriate way], or toward the side of [yiras Shamayim with] excessive self-criticism [that brings one to a spiritual standstill], [ultimately] diminishing the good deeds one can perform...

We normally find that the unique nature of a person is based principally on one of these three primary traits mentioned above. Generally, one of these three traits creates in him his unique personal spiritual nature through which all of his thoughts and actions are influenced and directed.

In our work with students, we have found this framework to be tremendously powerful. Of course, Rav Dessler presents it in a highly simplified form, but this is precisely why it is useful. Amid the many facets of our personalities, it helps us focus on what is *at the root* of who we are, revealing an elegance of understanding that we would not have thought to be possible until we discover it for ourselves.

Rav Dessler writes that even though all three traits of the Avos are found in every person, one of the three functions is the root motivator inside of each person, while the other two traits are secondary to it.² All of Hashem's values are implanted in every person, but one of them is the

2 For simplicity, we only quoted part of Rav Dessler's essay, but he actually fleshes out this point. He illustrates with the following example: One person can feel a deep drive to do *chessed* but always seeks to do it in a truthful way, whereas another person's drive for truth brings him to want to share that truth with others, effectively becoming a giving person, but driven primarily by truth. The first person's root motivation is *Chessed*, whereas the second person's root motivation is *Emes*. Of course, Avraham was also motivated by a deep *yiras Shamayim*, but when the verse in *Michah* says that Hashem "[gave] *Chessed* to Avraham," it reveals that *Chessed* was his deepest *middah*—the root motivation implanted in him by Hashem.

This actually helps us appreciate the *chiddush* of Hashem declaring after *Akeidas Yitzchak*, "Now I know that you are a *yirei Elokim* in that you did not withhold your son—your only [son]—from Me" (*Bereishis* 22:12). Hashem was communicating to Avraham, "Now that you've gone to the nth degree to fulfill My Will, against the grain of your *middah* of *Chessed*, I can say that you have developed a true *yiras Hashem* that is real, even while it is rooted in your root *middah* of *Chessed*" (Rav Dessler, *ibid.*).

essential value through which the others are measured.³ For example, one whose essential motivator is kindness certainly may value discipline and truth, but instead of discipline and truth being motivators, they provide the person with the ability to help others in a more organized and honest way. Ultimately, one's primary trait shines through.

This deep motivator-*middah* is what was referred to above as the "particular aspect of the *Merkavah*" found in every *tzaddik*. Yaakov Avinu manifested the *middah* of *Emes* as much as a human being could, and descendants of Yaakov manifest their smaller, but no less bright, portion of that original great light. They are thereby an aspect of the same *Merkavah* of Hashem.

A person's essential motivator-*middah* is responsible for that first flash of motivation that leads to any given decision. This is why our essential *middah* is called our *shoresh ha'neshamah*, the "root of the soul." It drives us at the root level of our psyches and nourishes us like a root nourishes a tree and allows it to grow. Knowing what ignites our own engines allows us to more proactively motivate ourselves. And learning how to perceive what motivates others helps us more effectively speak to the hearts of our children and students.

At the risk of caricaturing these ethereal concepts, let's elaborate on these three root motivators of people in order to be able to think about them more concretely:

Avraham-Neshamos

"Avraham-*neshamos*" are rooted in Hashem's essential value of *Chessed*. As such, these people primarily look at the world through its "horizontal" dimension, which, when channeled in a positive way, focuses on interpersonal relationships, the sensitivities and desires of people around them, and what they can do to fulfill the needs of others. In a developed state,⁴ Avraham-*neshamos* walk into a room and tend to

3 The word for character trait, "*middah*," literally means "measurement." In part, it is for this reason: our *middos* become the vessels through which we measure and value other things. Our primary *middah* is therefore the *middah* through which the value of our other *middos* is measured.

4 Our descriptions here center on the high-functioning appearance of these root drives. On

be attuned to the expressions on people’s faces and the opportunities available for them to be helpful.⁵ Before they consciously contemplate “what Hashem wants from me” per se, or “what the truth is” of the situation, they are already empathizing and imagining how they can give of themselves to others.⁶ The simplicity of the drive of *Chessed* is what makes it so powerful. Avraham-*neshamos*, when mature, rapidly notice that someone is in need of something that they can provide, and react swiftly and genuinely to fill that need.⁷

Yitzchak-Neshamos

“Yitzchak-*neshamos*” are rooted in Hashem’s essential value of *Yirah* (Reverence), also known as *Gevurah* (Strength) and *Din* (Justice),⁸ and as such, they naturally look at the world through its “vertical” dimension. Their mind’s eyes tend to gaze inward into their inner worlds and upward toward deep and lofty perceptions of that which is “above” them. Yitzchak-*neshamos* more naturally see themselves as nullified to Hashem’s Higher Will, eagerly awaiting opportunities for self-sacrifice

the lower-functioning side of the spectrum, “bad *middos*” can cloud the picture equally for everyone. As people emerge from the fog of immaturity, their deeper soul motivations appear with more clarity. These clearer, high-functioning pictures are what we’re trying to sketch here.

- 5 The person in the Torah who most embodies *Chessed* is, of course, Avraham. The vignette into Avraham’s life that most encapsulates the *middah* of *Chessed* is his tending to the needs of three travelers despite the painful third day after his *bris milah* (beginning of *Parashas Vayeira*). *Rashi* draws our attention to a kind of dance between Avraham and his potential guests until he prevails over them to sit down for a drink. Avraham first sees the wayfarers in need of his hospitality, and then, noticing that they did not want to bother him, he gets up to insist so that they would know that it is not a bother for him (*Rashi* on 18:2, based on the two appearances of the word וירא, “he saw”). The Torah highlights the identification of *Chessed* opportunities and the focus and human sensitivity necessary to pursue them.
- 6 It is in this same episode, highlighted in the last footnote, where Avraham excuses himself from receiving the *Shechinah* itself in order to receive these guests (18:3, see *Rashi*).
- 7 Notice the pervasive “running” and “hurrying” in *Bereishis* 18:2, 6, and 7.
- 8 “*Yirah*” refers to the profound perception that one was put in the world with a cosmic purpose and needs to live up to it (*Maharal, Nesiv Hayirah*, ch. 1). “*Gevurah*” refers to the strength one applies to control his desires as a function of his *Yirah* (*Avos* 4:1). “*Din*” refers to one’s commitment to justice as defined by the True Judge, and to establish and uphold the rules that preserve that justice in the world (*Maharal, Nesiv Hadin*, ch. 1).

to fulfill the purpose for which they were created.⁹ In an imperfect world, they strive toward perfection.¹⁰ What inspires them more than anything is to fulfill their overall life missions on the macro-level, and execute all of the more detailed obligations on the micro-level—all according to the awesome precision prescribed by the Divine.¹¹ Similarly, their sensitivities to the nuances of perfection in *avodah*, for purity of heart and mind, produce in them a propensity for self-assessment and self-critique.¹² Their greatest hope is to totally control themselves in mind, heart, and body in alignment with Hashem’s will.¹³ The experience of superficiality especially awakens in them cravings for an experience of life that is deeper and “more spiritual” — “more connected” to a higher, purer world of ideals.¹⁴

9 The prime example of this is, of course, the self-sacrifice of Yitzchak on Har HaMoriah at the *Akeidah*, at the end of *Parashas Vayeira*.

10 One may ask: What do *avodah*-centered people look like before they see themselves as servants of Hashem? It is easier to see how *Chessed* and *Emes* manifest themselves independent of “religiosity,” but *Yirah* is harder to grasp. It turns out that the “secular” presentation of a Yitzchak-*neshamah* is perfectionism, the striving toward the loftiest of ideals that is, by definition, perfection. It is fascinating to see that people need not be religious in order to strive toward the sublime ideal of perfection. The *Yirah* at the root of their *neshamah*, whether they are aware of it or not, is what drives this pursuit.

11 “*Akeidah*” means tying the arms and legs behind the back (*Rashi* on *Bereishis* 22:9). Yitzchak was concerned that he would flinch ever so slightly from an uncontrollable reflex and thus invalidate himself as a *korban*. He therefore asked his father to tie him in this manner (*Bereishis* 22:9, *Bereishis Rabbah* 56:8). A Yitzchak-*neshamah* strives for self-control; the uncertainties that he cannot control directly, he finds ways to control indirectly.

12 The *Gur Aryeh* (*Bereishis* 27:21) explains that the reason Yitzchak thought that Eisav was a *tzaddik* despite his rarely mentioning Hashem’s Holy Name was because Yitzchak himself rarely felt worthy of mentioning Hashem’s Name, and he reasoned that his son Eisav was coming from the same place.

13 Perhaps the most hair-raising window into the astounding internal self-control of Yitzchak is at the moment he realizes he has given the blessing to the wrong son. After sixty-three years of investing day after day in Eisav as the firstborn, thinking that he would grow up to be a *tzaddik* who would partner with his brother Yaakov, he “trembled with a great terror” (*Bereishis* 27:33) at his mistake, and in that same instant—in the same verse—Yitzchak, without ego getting in the way, nimbly accepted that he has been wrong and affirmed the will of Hashem over his own: “He, too, should be blessed.” With that, he ratified the blessing he had given to Yaakov as being clearly what Hashem wanted.

14 It is well-known that in the majority of arguments between Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel, Beis Shammai’s perspective reflects a more strict adherence to the absolute ideal (*Biur HaGra* on *Tikunei Zohar*, *daf* 80, *amud* 4, gloss 245).

In contrast to the trait of *Chessed*, in which a person turns his attention outward toward others, this person tends to turn inward toward himself and his *avodah*. This is not to be misconstrued as a self-centered tendency. Rather, it is quite the opposite—they are focused on “what *they* have to do,” often for the sake of other people. What they do will be contextualized in their mind’s eye as “doing the will of Hashem,” and how it will ultimately impact their relationship with Hashem. They may walk into a room and think about what they can do for others, but they would more likely phrase it as, “Whom does Hashem want me to help here, and how does He want me to do so?”

Yaakov-Neshamos

“Yaakov-*neshamos*” are rooted in Hashem’s essential value of *Emes*, and thereby strive to see the world through the clear lens of the balanced truth, wary at all times of veering toward any extreme that would distort their sober, accurate perception of reality.¹⁵ They are inspired by revealing the truth behind the false veneer of appearances (“getting the real scoop”). Truth may be found in all sorts of places—in books, in conversations with people, or simply by studying the world around them—and so life, for them, is an odyssey of uncovering and assembling small fragments of truth to discover the largest possible picture of “the Truth” to the best of their abilities.¹⁶ Yaakov-*neshamos* tend to think in synergetic ways, and therefore they like cobbling together perspectives

15 *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, vol. II, *Parashas Lech Lecha*, p. 164.

16 The Gemara in *Chullin* 91b, quoted by *Rashi* on *Bereishis* 28:11, speaks about the episode when Yaakov went to sleep in Beis El and dreamed of the ladder going up to the heavens. As he was about to put his head down, the rocks that Yaakov put around his head for protection fought to have his head rest on them, when, ultimately, they fused into one. The *Gur Aryeh* explains that the idea being expressed here is that the physical world, which seems like disparate pieces, is crying out, so to speak, to be unified by a person like Yaakov who can reveal that greater Truth in which they all are part of a larger reality. This is why, he goes on to explain, Yaakov is metaphorically referred to by Chazal as the “middle rod,” which unified the beams of the *Mishkan*. Rav Moshe David Valli, the *chavrusa* of the *Ramchal*, further elucidates that the word for beam is שִׁקְרָה which is the same letters as שִׁקְרָה (falsehood). He explains that life is a process of gathering and putting together pieces of information that misrepresent the truth when they are out of context, but when they are rearranged and reconstructed in their proper context, form the big vista of Truth.

(in addition to facts) in order to arrive at a more complete vision of reality.¹⁷ As a result of all of this, their sensitivities are generally centered around whether what is being conveyed is a complete, authentic, and honest expression of reality and of themselves.¹⁸ When “Yaakov-*neshamos*” walk into the same room with the “Avraham-*neshamos*” and the “Yitzchak-*neshamos*,” they will likely think to themselves something to the effect of, “What’s *really* going on here?” or “What is the most appropriate thing to do here given all of the varied factors?” or “How can I help these people see the truth that they seem blind to?”¹⁹

Aligning ourselves with our *shoresh ha’neshamah* empowers us to make choices that leverage our strengths, be more self-aware of why we tend to see things from a certain perspective, and ultimately to be happier people. Life always looks brighter and feels lighter when we can express ourselves more fluidly.²⁰

17 As a young man, Yaakov is called “יֹשֵׁב אוֹהֵלִים—dweller of tents” (*Bereishis* 25:27), which *Rashi*, based on *Bereishis Rabbah* 63:10, specifies as “the tents of Shem and Ever.” The *Gur Aryeh* asks why Yaakov would bother going to Ever if Shem was known as a greater sage. Yaakov was not satisfied to learn in only one tent—one *beis midrash*—even if it was the *beis midrash* of the *gadol ha’dor*. He had to learn in both of the major schools of thought in order to synthesize both perspectives into a complete and coherent picture of Truth.

18 As we see in Section V, part 7, Yaakov saw to it that Shimon and Levi received rebuke not only for their hotheadedness but for their inauthenticity, with the words “כְּלֵי חַמְסֵי מִכְרוֹתֵיהֶם—a stolen vessel is your trade” (*Bereishis* 49:5).

19 None of this is in order to put ourselves or others into boxes. No one likes being “put in a box”—for good reasons. A “box” is a superficial, restrictive, and narrow way of looking at something as majestically layered and vast as a *neshamah*. Rather, these are sketches of the “roots” of these *middos* as the Torah presents them. The critical distinction is that a “root” describes the root motivation of a person but does not limit the myriad different ways that this motivation may manifest itself in every person. A person who wants to help others can choose to do so in innumerable ways. Similarly, someone who feels a profound sense of gratitude to Hashem can look very different from someone else with an equal sense of indebtedness. And finally, one individual may seek the truth in one area of life and in one way, and another may seek truth in a totally different area of life and in a totally different way. These roots are so deep that they lend themselves to the broadest spectrum of people. A “box,” on the other hand, is an overly simplified categorization. It describes the static, outer appearance, but not the organic, dynamic way a person comes to be who he or she is. Our *shoresh ha’neshamah* is the deepest lens through which our soul experiences life. How we express ourselves in response to those motivations can manifest itself in many, many ways, as we have begun to see.

20 *Gur Aryeh* on *Rashi, Shemos* 15:1.

Finally, as we have done throughout this book, we want to draw attention here to how this idea not only helps us understand ourselves in isolation but also allows us to relate better to the people around us. “Seeing the world through different lenses” is often responsible for people “speaking past one another,” making it difficult to understand the other person. In modern terminology, “seeing the world through different lenses” generally refers to cultural or political differences that affect our perceptions of values. From the words of Rav Dessler, however, we can refine our understanding of this phrase. The more we understand that it is possible for people to see the world in such radically different ways, even when we share the same culture or even the same parents, the more we will be open to hearing what people are trying to communicate when their *shoresh* is different from our own.²¹

Our Souls as Lenses

Our discussion of *shoresh ha'neshamah* revolves around how different people perceive and interpret life differently. As we noted already, we often refer to this as “seeing the world through different lenses.” Indeed, Chazal refer to the distinctive ways that different prophets perceived their prophecies as due to their distinct *aspak-larios*, their “lenses.”²²

The challenge with a lens is that it is so close to the eye of our perception that it is exceedingly difficult to have the perspective

21 Psychological projection happens at the level of *shoresh ha'neshamah* just as it infamously does with negative traits. Take, for example, a woman who sees the world through the lens of *Yirah*—as “fulfilling her duty.” It might be hard for her to understand that someone else might be motivated primarily by *Chessed*, since this is not the way that she processes her own life. She might suspect that “really this person who helps the needy in the community sees it as her duty” when, in fact, this other person is driven by a simple desire to help (i.e., the *middah* of *Chessed*). It is understandable that we interpret the actions of others as motivated by that which motivates us. This is worth contemplating. Our *shoresh ha'neshamah* impacts our personal worldview from the deepest of sources. Understanding the depth of our differences can be extremely helpful in helping us address certain persistent communication problems that we encounter with people we love but cannot seem to figure out.

22 *Yevamos* 49b.

necessary to identify what makes our lens unique. How can we see “the soul which sees but cannot be seen”?²³

Later, at the end of Section IV, we will study one technique, which involves noticing which traits we admire in others in order to see our own reflection. Here, we introduce another technique that focuses on the subtleties of our language to reveal the person behind those words.²⁴

Rashi alerts us to an interesting nuance: When Yitzchak blesses Yaakov, he speaks first of the curses that will befall those who curse him before he addresses the blessings that will come to those who bless him.²⁵ The mercenary Bilaam, in his inadvertent blessing to the Jewish People, inverts the order: “Those who bless you will be blessed, and those who curse you will be cursed.”²⁶ The content is the same, but the order is different. Is there a difference of perspective between Yaakov and Bilaam underlying their different presentations of the same message?

Rashi, as explained by Rav Dessler, is teaching us that there is. A selfish, physically oriented person like Bilaam focuses on the deterioration of the body over time and the resultant inability to enjoy physical pleasures. This perspective unconsciously programs him to place blessings before curses. On the other hand, a giving, spiritually-oriented person like Yitzchak has the perspective that the challenges of youth give way to the blessings of old age and the World to Come, so naturally he will mention the bad before the good.²⁷

23 *Berachos* 10a.

24 Section VI will outline areas specifically within Jewish life that simultaneously help us discover ourselves as well as offer us opportunities to implement those discoveries. Although the two strategies mentioned here are Torah-based, they can be employed independently from Torah and mitzvos. This said, when we reflect on our speech and our praise with respect to areas more within the realm of *kodesh*, the insights will naturally reflect deeper parts of who we are.

25 *Bereishis* 27:29.

26 *Bamidbar* 24:9.

27 See *Rashi* on *Bereishis* 27:29, and *Michtav Me’Eliyahu, Parashas Toldos*.

From here we learn that if we carefully study *the way* we speak, and, even more effectively, *the way* we write, we will see patterns between the lines that can reveal deep insights about *the way* we see the world, which is the lens through which we interpret what we experience. If an Avraham-*neshamah* and a Yitzchak-*neshamah* go out to lunch together and someone asks them afterward, “How was lunch?” they could describe the same events using quite different language. The Avraham-*neshamah* may open with a description of the waiter’s friendly disposition, the general mood of the other people in the restaurant, and what a pleasant chance to catch up with a friend. The second person will likely not linger in a description of any of those points. Rather, the Yitzchak-*neshamah* may mention the perfection with which a certain dish was executed by the chef, or focus on a certain intense point of discussion in their conversation. How we organize our thoughts, and which areas we describe in more detail, suggest that the one composing these thoughts is seeing the world through a certain, unique lens.