

The Martyrdom Mixup

Excerpted from the Avodah Alive guidebook



When we work on ourselves, what areas are we supposed to attack first? The easier ones, or the harder ones?

If you'd answer, "the harder ones," you're probably among the majority.

We tend to think the harder battles rank higher on Hashem's priority list. Maybe because we think it shows we care more about Hashem's will. Maybe it's because of "l'fum tzaara agra" – Chazal's dictum that reward increases according to exertion.

This approach poses a challenge to us, though. If we see avodas Hashem as the need to constantly push ourselves to our utmost limits, we'll end up with a very negative association with avodah. We'll get resentful and overwhelmed.

If we want to dedicate more time and focus to working on ourselves, we need to learn to do it more sustainably. We need to realize heavier really isn't better – lighter is. And that when we take a lighter path, we trigger a natural process of growth.

Does that sound a little heretical to you? Take a look at just a few of the sources assuring you it isn't.

Like this parable from the Dubno Maggid.

There once was a merchant who came home from an overseas buying trip. He walked off the ship, told a porter where to find his bags, and hired himself a carriage home.

A few hours later, an extremely sweaty, winded porter knocked on his door. "Here are your things," he panted.

The merchant shook his head. “Can’t be. I’m a jewelry merchant. My bags are light and easy to carry. They wouldn’t have made you so exhausted.”

Avodas Hashem isn’t meant to be heavy, overwhelming. It’s meant to be light and pleasant. Really. And turning ourselves into people who are constantly engaged in avodah means we need to turn ourselves into people who enjoy avodah.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz takes this idea a step further. He asks: where do Chazal refer to the concept of “she’ifos,” spiritual aspirations?

The automatic answer many of us would give? The famous statement of Tana D’vei Eliyahu (25): “Masai yagi’u ma’asai l’mama’asei avosai?” – “When will my deeds come close to those of my great forefathers?” We’ve been taught that setting our eyes on the highest levels of greatness we can fathom motivates us to reach for our own greatness.

Rav Yeruchem, however, has a different view on how she’ifos work. He points to the Midrash in Koheles (1:13) that states: “One who has a hundred wants to make from the hundred two hundred and one who has two hundred wants to make from the two hundred four hundred.”

We’re used to understanding the negative connotation here: look how greedy we humans are, never satisfied with what we have.

But Rav Yerucham understood it as an all-encompassing remark on human nature. Which includes the observation that she’ifos don’t become ours through taking on big, glamorous goals from the outside. She’ifos come from within our own personalities.

We have all seeds of greatness inside us. He who has 100 wants 200. If we identify our existing seeds of greatness, we’ll naturally move to nurture them.

Sustainable avodah doesn’t mean starting as big as we can, everywhere we can. It means slowly building ourselves up in one area, then another, then another. Beginning with the steps that align most closely with our nature, and gradually layering from there.

That’s how avodah becomes “light and pleasant.” And how concrete, lasting growth is achieved.

For example: if we want to work on kavana in davening, we need to find a section of davening – one bracha, one short set of pesukim or lines – that we already connect with. One that already inspires easy kavana when we’re in the right mood – or that already feels especially interesting to us.

We’d start by focusing or learning about just that passage. We’d find it engaging, fulfilling. We’d feel great about it. We’d even enjoy it. And that would naturally cultivate a desire to work on another piece of davening.

Say we’ve chosen to work on seeing the good in our loved ones more. We don’t need to start with that complicated sibling. We can start with a relative or friend we like a lot, and put a little extra effort into noticing and complimenting their good points.

We’ll get into the swing of this new behavior. It’ll start coming more naturally to us. We’ll start tasting the deliciousness of making someone else happy and strengthening our relationships.

Which will motivate us to pick another subject, and another – until tackling that exasperating sibling doesn’t seem so hard anymore.

As the Midrash Koheles is teaching us, growth from within creates its own momentum. It does require effort, of course, but in a lighter, more pleasant way – because as we grow in our avodah, so do our interest and desire.

So let’s allow ourselves to give this 100→200 approach a try. To stop forcing ourselves automatically into difficult stretches, and start with the small steps we connect with best. So we can truly internalize that avodas Hashem isn’t meant to be grueling. That it’s meant to be pleasant, engaging.

And that a life focused on avodah, where small successes regularly fuel bigger ones, is within our reach.