



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

THE ME IN THE MIRROR AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-WORTH

MODULE II
SHMUZ SOURCE SHEET



“ People pursue success not only for the money and fame, but because they are really searching for self-respect. They want to wake up in the morning and say “I am somebody,” and truly believe it! What they are really after is being a good/great person. But it’s very easy to confuse being successful with being a great person!”

ANONYMOUS



While being given respect (fame) by others they still may not feel genuine self-respect. How does the Hebrew language reflect the essence of self-respect?

“ In Hebrew the word respect is **kavod**, and it comes from the root **kavade**, which means heavy, substantive.

HEBREW KAVOD AND KAVADE



Question: What does the concept of heaviness have anything to do with respect?

A person who is “heavy” and has genuine self-respect doesn’t have to advertise his or her accomplishments; they speak for themselves. They and their accomplishments are real and substantive -- they carry “weight” with all those around them. The goal in Judaism is to “really” be good (of substance) not just to look good.

Question: Why do people seek to look good at all costs, many times putting less effort into actually being good?

Question: Are there areas in your life where you invest a lot of effort to look good? Why?

Question: Are you putting enough focus on being good/great?
What steps can you take now to be a better person?

A WORD ABOUT TRYING TO BECOME BETTER:

Many people feel a sense of despair when it comes to the prospects of change in life. Perhaps they have been following a certain path for a long time. Even though they may agree that they would like to improve, the mountain seems too high to climb.

Consider the following source:

“Decisions of free choice are limited to the meeting ground between the positive and negative forces within an individual. For example, many people might be negligent in speaking derogatorily about others, only because they are accustomed to it and are oblivious to its severity. The very same people however would never consider stealing or murder, because their education has ingrained in them not to do so, to the extent that they have no inclination to do such thing. **While each individual's struggle may be over a different decision**, it is important to note that **each person's struggle is qualitatively the same**. Regardless of a person's level, his struggle to choose **right over wrong, in his own unique circumstances**, is the same. **(In that moment and at that point.)**

The zone of free choice is dynamic. As a result of a good decision, a person raises his moral level, so that those areas which were previously the battleground between his positive and negative inclinations are now incorporated into the zone of his good side and will no longer present a conflict. This is the principle that “One mitzvah leads to another mitzvah” (Pirkei Avot 4:2). The converse is also true....

MICHTAV M'ELIAHU, R' ELIAHU DESSLER. VOL. I., P. 113 YOUR POINT OF FREE WILL

Question: How does Rabbi Dessler's understanding of our free will even out the playing field of choice for us?

- We are only responsible for the free-will decision in front of us at the time in our “zone of free will,” no more or less. We are truly running our own race in life.
- Every free will battle won just makes us stronger to take the next step.

Question: What step(s) can you take now that are in your zone of free will to become a better person?

One last point that should give us a lot of encouragement. Many people are weighed down by a history of bad choices and don't think their current decisions will make much of a dent in our track record. Introducing the mystical power of “teshuva” – repentance:

“I have wiped away your willful sins like a cloud and your errors like a **mist** – so return to Me, for **I have redeemed you**.”

THE PROPHET ISAIAH 44:22

Question: Do you find anything odd about the tenses used in the verse?

The verse from Isaiah describes G-d's erasing our past mistakes, imploring Israel to come Home. Notice that G-d redeemed us (in past tense) even before we actually return; that's how eager He is to have us do teshuva! The Money is in our bank account, before the check is even cashed.

When you combine G-d's eagerness and support for us to become better people, and His reasonable, limited expectations for us each day, there is reason to be optimistic about truly changing for the better. Living a life of striving for incremental growth is the key to self-respect and healthy self-esteem.

EXERCISES:

Take an inventory of your life, work, personal, health etc.

Question: What improvements can you think about making in your life?

Question: What is the decision in front of you in each area right now?



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SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Many people in this world walk around with low self-esteem. We need to remind ourselves on a daily basis, that we are all children of G-d and have enormous potential. G-d returns our souls every morning, testifying to His faith in us, on a daily basis. This truth is the bedrock of healthy self-esteem, and we must refer to it and reinforce it constantly.

Yet, there is another component to our self-esteem beyond our G-d given intrinsic worth, that we need to develop, and that is self-respect. This is a knowledge born not from who we are, but from what we undertake to do with our lives.

SELF-RESPECT IN THE TORAH

Dennis Prager, author, syndicated talk radio host and founder of Prager University, surveyed teenagers and asked them “what do your parents want most for you in order of priority”:

1. To be good
2. To be successful
3. To be smart/do well in school?

Overwhelmingly the majority of kids felt that their parents wanted them to become successful, then smart and lastly, good. Prager surmised from the attitude of the kids, that had there been a few more choices, being good would have slipped even further down the list.

Parents were shocked to find out being good meant so little to their children, and dismayed to realize they hadn't properly transmitted that value to them.

For sure there is nothing wrong with being successful or making a lot of money, however **it's very easy to confuse being a successful person with being a good or great person.**

Question: Why are Jews so driven to be successful? What do you think?
Does it have anything to do with our desire to be good?

People pursue financial success not only for the money, but because they are really looking for self-respect. They want to wake up in the morning and be able to say “I am somebody!” While they may not feel “genuine self-respect” they are often given respect by **others**.

SOURCE 1: HEBREW KAVOD AND KAVADE

In Hebrew the word respect is **kavod**, and it comes from the root **kavade**, which means heavy, substantive.

Question: Do you think the concept of heaviness has to do with the concept of respect?

A person who is “heavy” and has genuine self-respect never has to advertise or publicize his accomplishments: they speak for themselves. It’s real -- just like weight.

In Ethics of Our Fathers the Rabbis make the following comment about respect and honor:

SOURCE 2: ETHICS OF OUR FATHERS CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 1

Who is the honored person?...

You would think the answer is fairly obvious: those that people give honor to, or in our terms, the one who is famous. Yet the Mishna continues:

SOURCE 3: ETHICS OF OUR FATHERS CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 1 CONT.

Who is the honored person? The one who honors others.

Question: One would think the “honored person” is the one whom others respect?
Why do you think the Mishna takes the opposite approach?

Though counter-intuitive, the Mishna’s statement encapsulates the view that if your focus is on others (worrying about their honor and not your own) and what you can do for them, you will gain genuine self-respect. **Simply put, the goal is really being good, not looking good!** If you are good, you will look good. It’s a guarantee. If you are a good, wife, mother, friend, child, colleague, you will have genuine self-respect.

However, if one runs after honor, which a lot of people do, guess what? As the Talmud says:

SOURCE 4: TALMUD ERUVIN 130:B

Honor runs away from those who pursue it, and runs after those who run away from it.

Question: Why do you think this is an iron-clad rule in life, at least over the long haul?

Ultimately, honor seeks and finds real righteousness, no illusion!

LOOKING GOOD VS. BEING GOOD

It’s not cool in our society to be good; looking good maybe, but being good? Good seems nerdy, boring and certainly flies under the radar, while being successful and looking good has an immediate allure. Success doesn’t necessarily translate into self-respect though, because it’s not always based upon achievements that have any enduring value.

In other words, if you focus on doing things because they are right, good and true and build up others, you will become a respected person. **It’s a pity that people spend so much time chasing external measures of success longing for self-respect while often compromising the very areas of their lives which will generate the most real self-respect.**

A WORD ABOUT TRYING TO BECOMING BETTER

Many people feel a sense of despair when it comes to the prospects of change in life. Perhaps they have been following a certain path for a long period of time. Even though they may agree that they would like to improve, it seems very unlikely to happen.

Well, I would like to offer some consolation and encouragement to these people, of which I include myself. First, we have to know what we are responsible for at any given moment, to judge ourselves fairly. Consider the following source:

SOURCE 5: TALMUD BAVLI, BERACHOS 33B WHAT'S IN OUR HANDS

Everything is in the Hands of Heaven except
for the fear of Heaven.

הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים

Question: It seems that the “fear of Heaven” is in our hands. What does that mean?

The “fear of Heaven” is a euphemism for the “fear of G-d,” commonly understood as the free will that we have to choose good or bad.

SOURCE 6: TALMUD BAVLI, BERACHOS 33B WHAT'S IN OUR HANDS

Everything that is placed on a person is decreed by G-d. For instance, [whether the person is] tall, short, poor, rich, smart, dull, light, or dark is all decreed by Heaven. **But [whether a person is] righteous or evil is not decreed by Heaven, but is entrusted to the individual's choice.** He has two paths in front of him, and he needs to choose to fear Heaven.

כל הבא על האדם ביד הקדוש ברוך הוא כגון ארוך, קצר, עני, עשיר, חכם, שוטה, לבן, שחור, הכל בידי שמים הוא, אבל צדיק ורשע אינו בא על ידי שמים, את זו מסר בידו של אדם, ונתן לפניו שני דרכים, והוא יבחר לו יראת שמים

Free will is indeed bestowed upon each one of us. But it seems like a daunting burden, given all the obligations that we are required to fulfill.

Let's take a look at a fairly contemporary source (1960's) which offers an authentic perspective on this statement of the Rabbis, that is quite hopeful and encouraging:

**SOURCE 7: MICHYAV M'ELIYAHU, RABBI ELIYAHU DESSLER. VOL. I, P. 113
YOUR POINT OF FREE WILL.**

Decisions of free choice are limited to the meeting ground between the positive and negative forces within an individual. For example, many people might be negligent in speaking derogatorily about others, only because they are accustomed to it and are oblivious to its severity. The very same people however would never consider stealing or murder, because their education has ingrained in them not to do so, to the extent that they have no inclination to do such thing. **While each individual's struggle may be over a different decision, it is important to note that each person's struggle is qualitatively the same.** Regardless of a person's level, his struggle to choose **right over wrong, in his own unique circumstances, is the same. (In that moment and at that point.)**

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Question: How does Rabbi Dessler's understanding of free will even the playing field for all of us?

We are only responsible (at any given moment in time) for the free willed decision that is in front of us, where our positive and negative inclinations are in conflict. For each one of us this point is different. We are truly each running our own race.

Though this very encouraging position doesn't absolve us from our responsibility to one day fulfill all of the Torah's directives, it does remind us that getting close to Hashem is like being on a ladder, and what matters most is that we are all climbing (though we may be on different rungs at any given point in time).

A second hopeful idea is the proper perspective we must have on the past and the possibility of spiritually rewriting our history through the miracle of "teshuva" – return.

Our tradition is anchored on the concept that we can always change, and that G-d is eagerly awaiting this to happen:

SOURCE 8: THE PROPHET ISAIAH 44:22

I have wiped away your willful sins like a cloud and your errors like a **mist** – so return to Me, for **I have redeemed** you.

מְחִיתִי כָעָב פְּשָׁעֶיךָ וְכַעֲנָן חַטֹּאוֹתֶיךָ
שׁוּבָה אֵלַי כִּי גִאֲלֵתִיךָ:

The verse from Isaiah describes G-d's erasing our past mistakes, imploring Israel to come Home. Notice that G-d redeemed us (in past tense) even before we actually return; that's how eager He is to have us do teshuva! The Money is in our bank account, before the check is even cashed.

When you combine G-d's eagerness and support for us to become better people, and His reasonable, limited expectations for us each day, there is reason to be optimistic about truly changing for the better.

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

Each of us is a diamond in the rough. We have a lot of intrinsic self-worth and real value. We have infinite spiritual potential and power within and we are card carrying members of a People that has literally transformed the world in which we live. We should get out of bed in the morning feeling great about this!

Yet though we are worth so much, we are all still diamonds in the rough; the more we polish the diamond and improve the diamond, the more valuable it becomes. The more we care about others and do good, the more the natural beauty of the diamond is able to shine out. We need to walk around feeling we are individually worthy, and part of a special group with a very meaningful calling. And from this healthy place of self-worth, we can begin to build lives that generate true self-respect by focusing on becoming great people – based upon a lifetime of good acts!

EXERCISES

1. If we review the different areas of our lives, how much of our emphasis is on looking good and how much on being good?
2. How much are we focused upon ourselves and how much upon others?
3. Pick a few areas of life. Try to come up with your unique point of free will in each area.