Hassidut – Spiritual Torah
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CULTIVATING AN UNDERSTANDING HEART – לב מבין

***Bnei Machshava Tova,* Entry 8 – בני מחשבה טובה, אות ח'**
The Piaseczner Rebbe – Rav Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira

For many, the term **"understanding heart" – *לב מבין* –** conveys an impossible reality, a contradiction and even nonsense. How can a heart understand? Isn't the domain of understanding and reason found in the mind? Actually, what may be a surprise to many, the Jewish tradition, introduced this phenomenon within our very Biblical and Talmudic texts.

After King Solomon assumes the leadership over the nation of Israel, we read in I Kings 3:5, "…HaShem appeared to Solomon in a dream at night and God said 'Request what I should give you.'" Many err by assuming that King Solomon, being referred to as the wisest of all men, must have asked for wisdom. In fact, he did not. Perhaps he already possessed enough wisdom to request something much more important. A few verses later, in 3:9, King Solomon answers, "May You grant Your servant an **understanding heart – *לב שומע* –** to judge Your people, to distinguish between good and evil…" King Solomon intuited that he could only fulfill his Divinely granted mission as the anointed King, with God's presence intact and revealed, if he were able to hear God's people with his heart, understand them with his heart and judge them with his heart.

In the Talmud, tractate *Chagigah* 3b, the Rabbis discuss the verse that directly precedes the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. In Exodus 20:1, introducing the Ten Commandments, we read, "And God spoke all these words saying." The Rabbis were concerned how we are to hear "these words," by what means are we to discern and to discriminate between two opposites as defined by Divine Law. Their answer is, "Make your ears so they resemble that of a funnel, (receiving the words at once and then slowly allowing them to pass through) and acquire for yourself an **understanding heart – *לב מבין*.** In fact, in modern Hebrew, the Rabbinic term for funnel also means the outer ear – *אפרכסת*.

We understand from these two sources the high value Jewish tradition places on bringing understanding into the heart, considered by most as a cerebral activity occurring solely in the mind.

From this perspective I would like to share the Piaseczner's teaching on cultivating the spiritual practice of manifesting an understanding heart, whereby thoughts and feelings integrate into a harmonious blend. This is part of cultivating a higher consciousness, a consciousness whereby we sense the Divine Presence in a visceral, immanent and palpable way – a *מחשבה טובה*.

שני דברים נחוצים לנו ושניהם חסרים לנו. התרחבות ושכלול המחשבה, וגם התעוררות והתרגשות. באמת שניהם שהם אחד הם.

There are two things that we vitally need, yet both of which we lack. One is that our mindfulness, our meditative awareness, needs to be broadened and improved; the other is that we need to experience inspirational awakenings and emotional openness of the heart. In truth, these two are one.

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כי בשעה שאחד עומד ח"ו מתוך צרה, ומתפלל לה', אין דמיון ומחשבה חסר לו. האם בשעה שאיש ישראל מתלהב בימים נוראים מחשבה חסרה לו? לא.

When one prays during a time of suffering or great distress one does not lack any imagery or concentration. Likewise, when a Jew prays passionately on the High Holidays, does the person lack focused concentration ? Of course not.

בשעה שמתלהב ומתעורר הוא, בלא שום מחשבה, יש לו מחשבה, הוא חושב ומרגיש לפי מצבו, ומצב התלהבותו. ורואה שכסא הכבוד נשתלשל אליו, והוא עומד לפני ה', בהתרגשות יתירה ומפאר אותו. לא את המלך שנסתר ורחוק ממנו אלפי פרסאות מפאר ומשבח, רק את ה' אשר נגד עיניו ואומר: "לך ה' הגדולה והגבורה וכו'" (דברי הימים א', כט,יא) וכן מתפלל: "אבי, אב הרחמן, עשה לי כך וכך, ועוד זאת, ועוד זאת, עשה לי."

When a person is truly moved and inspired, he does not entertain any this-worldly thoughts. Instead, with a higher consciousness, all that he has in mind, all that he feels, is in accord with his situation, the situation of spiritual passion. He sees the Throne of Glory brought all the way down to his level and that he now stands before God; and deeply moved, he praises God. He is not praising and lauding some king hidden from him, thousands of miles away, but God who is right before his eyes. He quotes the verse, "Yours, HaShem, is the greatness and the might (1 Chronicles 29:11), and then he prays, "My Father, compassionate Father, help me in all that I need, with this, and further with this and even further with this, help me."

רק שמחשבה זו שיש בשעת התלהבות, אי אפשר לו להשיגה ולתפסה אח"כ, כיון ששוב במחשבה גופנית הוא בא להבינה. ובמחשבה גופנית זו רק מחשבה בעלת ציור ודמיון יכול לחשוב, ולא זולתה. כל התרגשות והתלהבות הישראלי, מין התגלות הנפש חוץ מגופה היא. ולמה תיגע לריק להבין את פעולותיה במחשבה גופנית.

However, this consciousness that a person experiences during a time of spiritual passion is impossible to comprehend and grasp afterwards, since once again he employs his lower this-worldly consciousness to understand it. But thinking in physical imagery can only analyze physical concepts, composed of form and image, and no other. The emotional awakening and impassioned state that any Jew experiences is actually a type of revelation of the spirit, independent of the body. Therefore, why toil in vain trying to understand a spiritual experience by using thought limited to the physical world?

מחשבה טהורה תלויה בהתעוררות והתלהבות, וההתלהבות במחשבה טהורה, כי **אילמלי** היה יכול האיש לרכך את לבו ולהתלהב תמיד, היתה מחשבתו יותר נקיה, **ואלמלי** היתה לו מחשבה נקיה, היה יכול להתלהב ולהתעורר יותר, בכל עת וזמן שמכשיר את עצמו לו. לכן **בשניהם** צריך הישראלי, לעבוד ולגדל את מחשבתו והתעוררות התלהבותו.

Pure mindfulness depends on inspiration and fiery enthusiasm, and fiery enthusiasm depends on pure mindfulness. Their existence is one of mutual interdependence. **For if** a person could soften his heart and always feel emotional stirrings and spiritual passion, his mindfulness would be increasingly pure and he would already begin to think more clearly and with enhanced focus. **And if** a person possessed pure mindfulness, with a mind that is relaxed and alert, he would be able to attain the state of fiery awakening, to feel deeply and profoundly moved more often, whenever he chooses. So, in order to nurture our connection with the Divine, a Jew needs to cultivate both of these: Expansive mindfulness and feeling passionately with increased emotional awakenings, organically as one.

אמור מעתה לא לבד בענין התרחבות המחשבה צריכים לדבר, רק גם איך לעורר את התלהבות הלב. נחפש עצות ותחבולות, וה' יאיר עינינו ויעזור לנו שנוכל סוף כל סוף להרים את עצמנו מעל גבול הזוהם שהשקענו בו עד צווארינו.
Therefore, we must discuss not only how to broaden meditative thought, but also how to awaken the flame of the heart. Let us seek out ideas and strategies, and may HaShem enlighten our eyes and help us so that in the end we will be able to raise ourselves up and beyond the lower consciousness, from the muck in which we are plunged that now envelopes us up to our necks.

והנה אם להתחיל בראשונה בהתעוררות של קדושה אין ביכולת האדם, נשוב נא אל דרכינו לרדת אל תחתית גופו של האדם ומשם להעלותו. ונתחיל נא בהתעוררות גופנית. **כי באמור, כל התעוררות אפילו אם גופנית, היא מפתח לנפש**.
If we are unable to begin our spiritual journey by awakening holiness directly, let us fall back on our approach of descending to the lowest point of a person's physical self and raising him from there. Let us begin with the emotional awakening of excitement, regardless of how mundane the situation that gives rise to the excitement may be**. For, as has been mentioned, every awakening, even if derived from within the physical experience, is a key to the soul.**

כל התרגשות דבר מדברי העולם פותחת ניצוץ מנפשו, אבל בין כך נתגלה הנפש מעט. לכן נשתדל ונוציאה יותר, ונתרפק עליה בדברי אהבה ויראה ומחשבה טהורה לה'. וכיון שכך שגם התרגשות גופנית פותחת ומגלה מעט את נפשינו, כבר יש בידנו במה להתחיל. ובמה לדפוק על פתחי לבבנו, לקרוא אותה מחוץ לשערי הברזל אשר אסורה שם, "פתחי לי אחותי רעיתי" (שיר השירים ה,ב), "לכי עבדי את ה' עבודה טהורה, התרגשי והתפעלי באמונה אהבה ויראה אליו ית'.
Every feeling that is connected to something of "this world" opens a spark of our soul, but with this our soul becomes revealed a little bit. Let us then consciously draw her out even more. Let us endear ourselves to her, greeting her with words of love, awe and pure God directed mindfulness. Since this feeling based on physicality, a simple daily event, has opened and revealed our soul a bit, we have something to begin with and we now have in our hands an access point to the soul. Employ whatever sensation you are feeling. With this feeling, visualize knocking upon the door of our heart, summoning her from behind the iron gates where she stands imprisoned. "Open for me, my beloved, my friend" (Song of Songs 5:2). "Come forth to be in service to the Divine with purity, become excited with passion, become enthused, with faith, love and awe of the Blessed One."

למשל, כל איש עבר עליו כבר דאגה של עצמו או זולתו שנוגעת לו כמו שלו ח"ו, אשר בכל עת שזובר אותה ומצייר אותה בדמיון חזק, כאלו היא לנגד עיניו, לבו מתרכך ומתרגש, אף בוכה.
For example, we all have worries about something in our own life or about someone who is deeply important to us, God forbid. When we bring these troubles to mind and imagine them vividly, as though they stand before our eyes, our heart melts with emotion, and inside, we even weep.

צייר אותן גם אתה לפניך. והיה כאשר רק תתעורר בהתעוררות ושברון לב, תעלה על לבך, "ולמה לי לשבור את לבי ולבבות לריק? הלא ה' לפני? ואני עומד עתה לפני כסא כבודו ית', אבכה לפני ה', שומע קול בכיות."

Bring these thoughts up deliberately. And when your heart is aroused and broken, consider, "Why should I break my heart and weep for nothing? Isn't God before me? I am standing before the Throne of His Glory. And so, I will cry to God, Who hears the sound of weeping."

ובמחשבה ודמיון של עצת הראב"ד ז"ל הנ"ל, תחזק יותר ויותר, איך עלית עתה לפני כסא הכבוד, לפניו ית', וזכות נתונה לך להתפלל ולהתחנן. ותראה איך תפלה מועילה תעלה לך על ידי זה.

Then, utilizing the advice of the Ravad regarding thought and imagery (as taught previously), increasingly visualize stronger and stronger, that you have ascended and are standing before the Throne of Glory, before the Blessed One, where you have been given the privilege to pray and plead. Then you will see what meaningful prayer you will experience as a result of this visualization.

ומן מרירות והתרגשות זו, יעלה אל תפלה רצויה בנ"ל, **לא התעוררות לא מחשבה יחסרו**, אף לא אמונה אהבה ויראה לה'.

Now, having immersed yourself in these bitter feelings, you will ascend to a worthy prayer, **one that does not lack feeling and thought**, as well as not lacking faith, love nor awe of HaShem.

The cultivation of the understanding heart – לב מבין – now becomes the bridge from the lower consciousness to the higher consciousness. In summary, the "lower consciousness," is where one may be subject to the physical demands in the world, within the limitations of the five senses, leaving very little chance to sense the presence of the Divine. The "higher consciousness," occurs when one's mind does not become closed and one's heart does not become dulled, the space where instead of being subject to the natural forces in the physical world, one actually senses the Divine Presence in them. By realizing that this is not only when we pray and practice mitzvoth, we can actually become aware of the presence of God at all times in all places.

Translations based on: "Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work", Andrea Cohen-Keiner and "Experiencing the Divine: A Guide to Jewish Spiritual Practice & Community", Yaacov David Shulman and Yiscah Smith's understanding.

Yiscah is a Jewish educator, spiritual activist and podcaster (*Authentic Jewish Living with Yiscah*) who addresses the spiritual practice of encountering the Divine spark within, the foundation of authentic living. She teaches Jewish meditative practice and spiritual texts at Pardes and at Applied Jewish Spirituality. Yiscah provides as well spiritual mentoring to individuals seeking an awareness of the Divine spark within.

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