

## Session 2: The Foundation of it All



In this captivating class Rabbi Shafier gives a detailed outline as to why our understanding of the World to Come is so central to our *Yiddishkeit*. The Mesilas Yesharim places great emphasis on the importance of making the World to Come real to us right now- in this essential class Rabbi Shafier gives us practical guidance on how to make this fundamental concept more relevant to our lives.

### ספר מסילת ישרים - פרק א

יסוד החסידות ושרש העבודה התמימה

#### Mesilas Yesharim - Perek 1

The foundation of piety and the root of perfect service [of G-d]

הוא שיתברר ויתאמת אצל האדם מה חובתו בעולמו  
is for a man to clarify and come to realize as truth what is his obligation in his world

ולמה צריך שישים מבטו ומגמתו בכל אשר הוא עמל כל ימי חייו.  
and to what he needs to direct his gaze and his aspiration in all that he toils all the days of his life.

Really the greatest *mussar sefer* written in the past five hundred years is the *Mesilas Yesharim*, the *Vilna Gaon* said he would go by foot all the way, miles and miles to Amsterdam to learn by the Ramchal if he were alive today, and it is considered the most definitive, the most clear,

understanding of why Hashem created us, what's life about, what our direction is supposed to be in this world.

And the *Mesilas Yesharim* opens up with one fundamental line, it says “*yesod hachassidus vushoresh ho'avodah hatemimah*” the foundation, the root, the bedrock of everything we do as Jews, has to be one understanding, why did Hashem create us, what's life about, what are we doing here in this planet?

And the *Mesilas Yesharim* explains Hashem is the *metiv*, Hashem is the ultimate giver. Hashem wants to share of His good with others and Hashem created everything that exists, strictly to give to man. We were put into this world to grow, to accomplish, but this isn't the purpose, this isn't the end all and be all, this is the place where we work, we grow, we reach our level of perfection and when we're done our job here, I leave this earth, I go to the world to come and that's where I enjoy forever what I accomplished in this world.

Two worlds, this world, the world to come, this world is the place we grow, we accomplish, change the essence of me. The world to come's the place where I enjoy it.

But here's the question, *Mesilas Yesharim* doesn't say that this is an important concept, he doesn't say that this is one of the thirteen tenets of faith, *yud gimmel ikrim*, it's much more than that, it's the foundation, it's the underpinning, it's the bedrock of everything that we do, as if to say if you don't get this, if you don't understand this, you're not really practicing your religion. Something similar, to Judaism, something close, but this is the underpinnings, this is the foundation of everything that we do.

So here's the question, why is this so basic? Why is the world to come so fundamental. Let's say I wasn't aware of it, let's say I didn't focus on that. I know that Hashem wants me to keep the

*Torah*, I keep all the *mitzvahs*, I keep everything the *Torah* says, but I don't know that Hashem created us for the world to come. I don't know that's why Hashem put me on the planet, I miss that class. What would be lacking and what would be so fundamentally lacking that the *Mesilas Yesharim* seems to imply that we wouldn't even be practicing the religion?

And I believe that there are a number of reasons why this is in fact the very root, the foundation of everything we do. And let's begin with the first reason. If a person doesn't understand that I'm here to grow and accomplish and that there's a world to come, the very first thing a person will not understand is the *Torah*. The *mitzvahs* in the *Torah*.

Let me give you for instance, take a nice kosher steak, eat it, make a *brachah* before you do it, you're fine, you're good. Another occasion, take a nice cool glass of milk, make a *brachah*, drink it, you're fine and well.

Take those two together, cook them, bleemo, it's forbidden. Why? The meat's kosher, the milk's, what's the problem? Why is *bassar bechalav* forbidden?

Here's another one. Wool coat, wonderful, keeps you warm it's nice, it's fine. Linen coat, fine and well. Mix wool with cotton, fine, linen with cotton, fine. Wool and linen, no good. It's a *lo sasei*, forbidden, why?

And if you search through the *Torah*, it's true you'll understand some *mitzvahs*, I guess character trait development, *bein adam luvchavero*, between man and his fellow man they'll make sense, but a full half of the *Torah* you will not get, it'll make no sense whatsoever.

However, once you understand one perspective, then everything takes on a whole different light.

Let me share with you that perspective:

Every once in a while you hear somebody say something like it was so strange it was *Shabbos* or it was *Rosh Hashanah* and I had this, this spiritual experience I mean it was so strange because here I am this physical entity, temporarily having this spiritual experience.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Whether it's *Shabbos*, whether it's *Yom Kippur*, whether it's a weekday, you are not a physical entity, temporarily having a spiritual existence. You are a spiritual entity, temporarily having a physical experience.

You see before I was in this body, I was under the throne of glory, Hashem took me, the *neshamah*, put me into a particular family, into a particular body and said this is your life, lead that life, accomplish, grow, reach the heights that you can. But I am the guy inside, when I'm done my job, the body's put in the ground and I separate. But you see I'm not the body, I'm not the arms, the legs, the head, the chest, I'm the one inside and I am completely spiritual. My body is physical.

I am the one who thinks. I am the one who feels, I am not the body and I am utterly completely spiritual. And once you understand that you're now in the ball park of understanding the *Torah*.

It is true that meat and milk cooked together probably isn't dangerous to my health and probably won't increase my longevity in any natural sense. But you have to understand Hashem did not give us a *Torah* merely as a guidebook for healthy living. The *Torah* is the ultimate guidebook of spiritual perfection, it teaches us, it guides us, it molds us, in becoming the great human beings we can be.

But it's me, it's the spiritual part, not the physical. And once you understand that, you're in the ballpark of understanding the *mitzvahs*. It may take a while and not every *mitzvah* is clear and obvious, but once you understand that I am spiritual, then you understand that the *Torah* is a

system of spiritual perfection and then you can learn and understand why in fact *basar buchalav* damages you, how in fact *shatnez* won't allow you to reach your potential.

But until you get that step, until understand you that I am spiritual, nothing makes sense. Once I understand there's a world to come, once I understand that I'm put into this body for a few short years, I'm temporarily having a physical experience, then you could go to the *Torah*, understand, begin opening your eyes to understand what in fact the *Torah* wants from us, how it helps us grow. You're beginning at least to understand the *Torah*.

So without the world to come, the first thing you won't understand is the *Torah, mitzvahs*, anything involved in.

But there are other things you also won't understand. And let's start with the second one.

Hashem has no limits. Hashem has no physicality, no corporality, that means to say no limits in any physical sense. And because of that, one of the problems that you and I should have is, we should have no ability to recognize Hashem, relate to Hashem, define Hashem, anything that I understand is based on its limits. A tree is tall, oh it's a tall tree because it's a hundred and fifty feet tall. But Hashem is not tall, Hashem is infinite.

An elephant is heavy, it weighs far more than does a giraffe, fourteen thousand pounds is heavy, because of the limits of the elephant I recognize the elephant.

But Hashem is boundless, limitless, beyond any human recognition, beyond any human definition, Hashem is everywhere at the same time and nowhere because Hashem has no limitation so therefore how could I relate to something that's so outside of my frame of reference, how could I relate to Hashem, how could I understand Hashem on any level?

And the *Rishonim* explain to us that Hashem wants us to recognize Hashem, Hashem wants us to have a relationship with Hashem as much as we can. Hashem wants us to serve Him, obviously. And the way that we understand Hashem as much as we can, is by the way that Hashem manifests Himself in this world.

By studying the way Hashem shows Himself, in this world, that's how we see the Creator. When we look at the vastness, the complexity, the harmonious systems in nature, I see my Creator. When I see Hashem running the world and orchestrating the world, I see the nature of Hashem as Hashem shows Himself in this world.

The *Chovos Halevavos* explains to us that if you'd like to understand the *middah*, the trait with which Hashem created the world, and runs the world, He explains, take the most merciful, kindly, loving human being you could ever imagine. Imagine that human being whose heart just overflows with compassion, with giving kindness, with love, take that love, multiply it ten thousand times, ten thousand, ten thousand times and you don't begin to have a small little iota of an understanding of the almost infinite love that Hashem has for any one of His creations.

Any understanding of the love that we have is in a limited fashion. Human love, Hashem's love is infinite and any compassion, any mercy, any love that we've ever experienced, pales by dramatic, dramatic expense compared to Hashem, there is almost no comparison.

And we're supposed to recognize that, we're supposed to see the love, the kindness of Hashem, by studying this world.

Well here's the problem, if you look about the world we live in, there's a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, there are orphans and widows and there's divorce. There's sickness, there are a lot of rough spots in this thing called life and if I don't understand the world to come, I should look at

this world at say, I don't know, it doesn't seem that G-D is very kindly. There are headaches, there are migraines, there is cancer, there are people wracked in pain whether it be physical or emotional. If Hashem is so loving, so kindly, so giving, why create pain, why create suffering?

And if I don't understand the world to come, I have no clue to answering this, but not just I don't have a clue, there is no answer. If Hashem created us for this world and this world only, explains the *Mesilas Yesharim*, Hashem did a horrible job, a terrible job because there are so many features in this world that shouldn't be there, serve man no benefit whatsoever.

And explains the *Mesilas Yesharim*, if a thinking person will look at this world, immediately he'll understand that it is impossible that Hashem created us for this world, because this world will make no sense. But once a person has a world to come perspective, then all of these questions take on a whole different light.

And as a *meshal*, a parable, to understand this. Imagine the following. Imagine that you're invited to a very exclusive health club, you've never been there but you know the basic layout. On the right side is the gym, on the left side is the spa. The gym has all the equipment that you need to get in shape, the nordalister, the treadmill, everything you need to get yourself buffed. The other side, the spa has a steam room, a sauna, massage chair, everything you need to just relax.

Any case it's been a very stressful week and you decide that you're heading right to the spa. But when you walk into the health club, by mistake instead of turning left, you turn right, you find yourself in this room with all these red faced people grunting and sweating. What is all this equipment here? Whoever designed this spa, did a terrible job.

Explains the *Mesilas Yesharim*, there is this world and the world to come. This world is the gym. We were put into this world to grow, to accomplish, to be challenged, to change the essence of

me. When I'm done my job here, when I've reached whatever level of perfection I'm capable of, I leave this earth and then forever I enjoy, I go to the spa, forever I enjoy what I accomplished. But two worlds, each with its plan, each with its purpose. This is the gym, the world to come is the spa.

Once you understand that, you look at life with vastly different eyes. It'll be many situations in life that will be difficult, that will be painful and many situations in life you will have to make a choice. You'll either transcend, rise above it, or shrivel up, but choose you must. There is no auditing the class, no sitting on the sidelines and many, many situations that you're going to go through, are specifically handcrafted to help you grow, help you become a different human being, not to help your biceps become bigger, not to help your cardiovascular system, but to change the essence of you into a more giving, more kindly, more humble, more loving individual.

To be more like Hashem.

And once you understand that there's this world and the world to come, life itself, fundamentally makes sense. You may not know the answer to every situation, but the question doesn't really begin because we're not rated by how much money we have, how comfortable our settings were in this world. This is the gym, we're here for a plan, here for a purpose, here to grow and when I'm done my job, I enjoy forever what is waiting for me.

But once I understand the world to come, then I can look at this world and see the mercy, the kindness, the love that Hashem manifests in this world and I can understand that everything that Hashem created and everything that Hashem does, is for the best.

I may not recognize the why behind it now, I may not wish to be in this situation, but I know that my Creator is far wiser than I, I know that my Creator has my best interest at heart, and if you'd like to understand it in a parable, in a *mashal* form.

Imagine a mother who walks her six year old for the second chemo treatment. The six year old holds the mother's hand. The six year old already went through one chemo treatment and she knows what it means to be nauseous for days on end. She knows what it means to start losing her hair. She knows that this is a very, very painful experience but she takes her mother's hand with full confidence, Mommy loves me, Mommy knows better than I.

When I recognize the purpose in creation, I recognize I may not know the why and I may not be happy with it, but Hashem is far wiser than I, Hashem is guiding me, everything that Hashem does is for the best and I go with a confidence, I go with a tremendous amount of trust and I can see the mercy, the kindness, the love that Hashem manifests in this world.

With the world to come I could recognize Hashem as Hashem manifests Himself. If I don't get the world to come, I cannot relate to Hashem, I cannot understand Hashem. If I don't see the world to come, number one I won't understand *mitzvahs* in the *Torah*. I won't understand spiritual growth because I won't recognize myself as spiritual.

But number two I won't recognize Hashem because I'll see a world of bitterness, of poverty, of pain, and I'll never understand Hashem on any level.

However, there is another reason why we need to see *olam haba* right in front of us and there's another area that we'll never understand until we really focus on the world to come.

A number of years ago I was speaking to a young man and he said to me that he was brought up in a secular home and when he got to college he began thinking about life and he had a question that was plaguing him. He asked everyone he could, any man of learning, any person of intelligence, he asked this question, he asked it to the college professors, he asked it to anyone he could find and he couldn't find an answer.

The question was why have a kid? Why have children? But not in a selfish sort of they're expensive, and they take away my freedom sort of way, uhuh, much more fundamental. Why have a kid when it's really not nice to that child. There's so much pain in the world, so much suffering. Why do that to an innocent baby just because you want a child, you want somebody to play with. Why do it to the kid, it's not fair, it's not right. Why have a child?

And he explained that he asked this question to everyone. And he couldn't find an answer.

So I said to him, I hear. And there are two answers to your question. There is a wrong answer and a right answer. Because it was Friday night and he was at my *Shabbos* table, I asked him which one he wanted to hear first. He said he didn't care which one, so I told him, fine. Let me tell you the wrong answer first. Here's the wrong answer.

How good is Hashem at doing that which Hashem does? Fair question. How good is Hashem at doing that which Hashem does?

So if you're not sure the answer to this question, just look out at the world. You'll see harmonious systems, you'll see complex, complexities upon complexity. Open a science textbook, open a physics textbook, open a biology textbook, you'll see a world replete with wonder.

When you look at a tree, when you look at an ocean, when you look at the sun, the stars, the moon, you see that G-D is very competent. G-D is very capable, and G-D is very good at doing that which G-D does.

With that being said, here's an observation. What would it be like if G-D created a world for one purpose. Imagine that G-D would have created a world for one purpose and one purpose only and that purpose is for you to have pleasure. Now G-D is very good at doing what He does, He's very capable. Imagine He created a world with just one purpose for you to have unending pleasure. Could you imagine what life would be like there?

Wiffs upon wiffs, flavors within flavors of unending, unstopping pleasure and you don't get tired, you don't get fatigued, just unending pleasure. And I explained to this young man that Hashem did create such a world, that's the world to come. This world is the gym. The world to come was created for a very specific purpose. This world was created to grow, to challenge us, to allow us to reach our potential.

The world to come was created for one purpose, to allow us to enjoy that ultimate reward. And it's maybe true that you'll suffer in this world, but how long is it? Seventy years, ninety years, a hundred and twenty? But then it's over and for eternity you enjoy unending, unmitigated pleasure. So I said to this young man, if you suffer here, for a few short years, it's so worth it for the world to come. And I said to him that this is the wrong answer, absolutely the wrong answer to your question. It happened to be true, and is worth suffering, it's worth suffering tremendous pain because Hashem is very good at doing what He does and the world to come is so infinitely pleasurable that it's worth it but that's the wrong answer to your question.

I asked him would you like to hear the right answer to your question? At that point I think I had him curious and he said yes, I would like to hear the right answer. So I said to him, the right answer to the question is, that when you understand life, when you understand why you're here, there's an inner joy, an inner happiness, and life itself is beautiful.

When you don't understand life, when you live your life any purpose other than that which your Creator put you on the planet for, you're going to be unhappy, unfulfilled, you're going to feel an emptiness at the core of your essence and life itself stinks. But why does it stink because you and you are not in harmony. You're created for a purpose, you're created to grow and to accomplish. You're created for a very specific purpose and if you live your life in accordance to that, there's an inner peace, a joy, a harmony, but if you live your life for any other reason, there's an inner emptiness.

It's sort of like taking a fine, surgical instrument and using it to pry open a window, it does a lousy job and it dulls the blade. Hashem created you to grow, to accomplish, Hashem gave you a *Torah* as the rulebook, the guidebook. When you live your life in sync with that, there's an inner joy, there's an inner happiness, it's true that there are moments in life that are not so pleasant, there is pain, there is suffering.

But if you are living your life, properly, there's an inner joy. You see Hashem wants us to enjoy our stay on this planet, here, it's not the purpose, it's not the end all and the be all, but Hashem is a *metiv*, Hashem is a giver and Hashem created so many features in this world, strictly for us to enjoy. But to do that you have to be at peace with yourself.

When you're growing, when you're accomplishing, there's an inner sense of joy and happiness and with that you look at the sun rising in the morning and you say, wow, to be alive.

So if you find these people who cannot answer this question, why bring a child into this world, it's because you're right in their world, life stinks and it's not worth it. But if you understood and you were using it properly, this world here, would be replete with joy, with happiness, you'd be loving life.

Again, it's not the reason Hashem created us, but Hashem wants us to enjoy and there is an internal love of life and if you want to know why to bring a child into the world it's because Hashem wants that to be. But your child won't suffer provided you guide your child properly. But of course if you don't, who knows.

And so in fact the third reason why if a person doesn't understand the world to come, he's going to be lost, is because he won't understand himself. He'll never be happy. If you don't understand why you're created, you'll never be able to do what your Creator created you to do and you and you are going to be in disharmony and guess what? You're going to be empty at the core of your essence and all the money, all the luxuries, everything that you might have, is going to leave you empty.

So if you don't understand the world to come, number one you won't understand the *Torah*.

Number two you won't understand Hashem, number three you'll never understand yourself and you'll never be happy.

But there's a fourth reason. There's a fourth reason that's arguably more important than the first three. If you don't recognize the world to come as the reason for our being here, and you don't focus on that, there's something so fundamental that will be lacking from your existence.

And to share that with you, let me share with you an observation.

I was a high school Rebbi for many years and I would teach eleventh graders. These fellows were sixteen, seventeen years of age, came from fine *frum* families and a big part of my job as a Rebbi was obviously to teach the fellows how to learn. But maybe a bigger part of it was to teach them how to live, to teach them about life.

And I designed a *mussar* sort of curriculum and every year I would begin it and every year I would typically begin with one single question, I would look at these fellows and I would say, gentlemen, tell me something, why don't you sin? Why don't you sin? But I don't mean little sins, I mean big deal stuff, murder, pillage, do every, why don't you do really major sins?

Now these were good fellows and they would say Rebbi, c'mon, Hashem will be angry with me, I don't want Hashem to be angry.

At which point I would say, fellows, listen up, throughout the thousands of years of mankind's existence there have been many wicked people and they flourished, they've done quite well. Don't worry about Hashem, do what you want, why should you work hard, don't worry about it.

At which point, the fellows, at least one or a number would say Yep, that's true, now but my *neshamah* is going to burn, I don't want my *neshamah* to burn.

At which point I would say to the fellow, aha, you're telling me that there are many things you're going to do and many things that you're not going to do, all for the sake of your *neshamah*. You listen to me, you do what you want, do exactly what you want, why should you work hard so your *neshamah* should have a good time in the world to come, you take care of you and let your *neshamah* burn.

Now I would always say that standing by the door and no one was allowed to leave before I said the answer. But what is the answer to this question?

Reb Yisrael Salanter explains that we make one fundamental mistake. We think of death as something like I don't know, blackness, being asleep. Who can know what death is like?

Explains Reb Yisrael Salanter you're making a fundamental error, probably the biggest error of your life. If you'd like to understand death it's quite simple. Imagine I walk in the room and I take off my coat, I walk in, I'm in the room, explains Reb Yisrael Salanter, that is death.

The body is the coat, I take the coat off and I separate, but it's me, the guy inside, the one who thinks, the one who feels. I, the same me who wakes up in the morning, the same me who goes to sleep at night, I, the one inside, leave this body and forever I am what I shape myself into.

Would you like to know why the world to come is relevant? Because if it's not, why keep the *Torah*? If you think well Hashem is going to punish me, don't worry about it. Again, many wicked people have done alright, it's true, you're right, you'll probably have a better time in this world and Hashem takes care of people who keep the *mitzvahs*, you're right, but it's not going to get you out of bed in the morning. And it's not going to drive you and it's not going to motivate you.

The fourth reason why *olam haba*, the world to come is so foundational to everything we do, is because it's a single greatest motivating force. At the end of the day, all of us are motivated by self-interest, that's the way my Creator made me.

I would like to be others centered, I would like to do things because Hashem told me to do it and because it's the right thing. Fine, but right now, my name is not *Avraham Avinu*, I am a human

being, and where I am right now, if it's in my interest, and my benefit, I'm going to do it and more than that, if it greatly impacts me, and greatly affects me, I'm going to do it even more. There is no single thing in the world that will affect you forever as much as understanding that you were put on the planet to grow, to accomplish and forever you'll be who you are in the world to come.

But you see that concept, is the single greatest motivating force. If a person doesn't have the world to come in front of them, if it's not a part of their operating day, number one, nothing in the *Torah* makes sense. The *mitzvahs* are whatever, okay some of the *mitzvahs*, *chessed*, *tzdaka*, I get it, some of them make sense. But a full half of the *Torah* and certainly learning *Torah* makes no sense and certainly so much emphasis on things that really don't benefit my body in any sense.

But once I understand that I'm the guy inside, I'm spiritual, and the *Torah* is the system, the guidebook of spiritual self-perfection, now I'm in the ballpark of understanding the answer. Now let me learn, let me see how is it that *bassar vuchalav*, meat and milk cooked together damages me. How is it that *shatnez* affects me.

But if I don't recognize that I'm a spiritual entity and I think of myself as a physical entity, every once in a while having spiritual experiences, well guess what, the *Torah* is not relevant and it sure won't make sense.

Number two I'll never understand Hashem. I'll look at a world and I'll see suffering and there is suffering and there is pain and there are orphans and widows and I'm supposed to feel that pain. And if I don't understand the world to come, how could I relate to the fact that Hashem orchestrates every activity on the planet.

One of the basics of our *emunah* system is knowing that Hashem is intimately involved in running of the world, everything. Everything that happens. And how could I make sense of pain, of suffering? But not just pain and suffering, clearly designed, orchestrated pain, where I see the hand of Hashem bringing a person to that situation.

When I understand the world to come, it fits into a pattern, I get it. There will be many situations that are strictly for my growth not here, but they change the essence of me to challenge me in different ways and I get it.

But if I don't see the world to come clearly in front of me, I won't understand it and the world that I live in, screams out that the Creator is cruel, mean, indifferent, but surely I'll never understand Hashem.

I want to understand the *Torah*, I want to understand Hashem.

And the third element that I'll never understand is, I'll never understand me. I'll never understand the complexity of me. I'll never understand why sometimes I'm so into things, and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I'm talking to my Creator right here in the middle of *shmoneh esrei* and some days I just don't care.

How do I understand me? How do I make sense of my anger, my jealousy, my? How do I understand, how do I relate to me?

And more than anything how do I understand what I need to be happy? To be fundamentally joy filled, to have a sense of life, of loving life, of being alive. And if I don't understand the world to come, I don't understand growth, I don't understand what I'm here for, I'm surely not growing and guess what? In that case life stinks and dillah.

But the minute I understand the world to come, the minute I understand that the *mitzvahs* are designed by Hashem to help me grow and I put my life on track, I start changing, I start growing, I reach an inner sense of peace. Life still has moments that are not so pleasant, that's part of life, but at the core of my essence, there is joy and there's happiness.

And more than anything, when I see the world to come in front of me, I wake up in the morning with drive, with energy, let's go. Twenty four hours to change myself and change the very world I live in. And I am hugely motivated to keep every *mitzvahs*.

It's understanding the *Torah*, understanding Hashem, understanding me and it's the greatest motivator. But you have to dwell on it, you have to think on it. It's the foundation of everything we do, it's the bedrock but it requires an awful lot of thought, an awful lot of contemplating.