

1: The Goggles of Self-Deception

In this jaw-dropping class, Rabbi Shafier lifts the lid off the advertising industry, subliminal messages and the myriad of ways in which our thoughts, opinions and desires are subtly swayed and manipulated. How do we reconcile these influences when trying to impartially judge ourselves and grow? Join the third perek of the *Mesillas Yesharim* and learn how to live a more honest, authentic life against the backdrop of the pulls of the twenty-first century and become the very best version of yourself.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* began by explaining to us that the root of our religion, *yesod*, the absolute foundation of everything that we do, is that it should become clear and truthful, it should become absolutely vivid and clear why Hashem created us, why we're here, what life is about and further the *Mesillas Yesharim* in the first *perek* explained to us that the sole reason why Hashem created us is for us to grow, for us to accomplish in this world. We were put into this world, the gym, to accomplish in the few short years that we have here and then to enjoy for eternity that which we accomplished.

When my body's put into the ground I separate and forever I am what I shaped myself into. And with that perspective, the *Mesillas Yesharim* framed for us life and what we're doing here, every situation in life is a *nisoyon*, is a test, we either overcome, we grow or the opposite but every action, every interchange with another human being, every thought that I have makes an indelible imprint into me and who I am is what I shape myself into during the short time we call life.

And then the *Mesillas Yesharim* explained to us that while this life has a very focused purpose, Hashem also gave us a system to grow, ultimately that's the *Torah* but the *Mesillas Yesharim*

really spends the rest of the *sefer*, delineating and mapping out for us the steps of growth and he explains that he does this according to Reb Pinchas ben Yair's *bryсах*, a step of spiritual perfection, the first rung on the step is *zehiurus*.

Now *zehirus* we spent some time explaining is for a person to be careful. But as the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us what that means, for a person to be "*misbonen*" contemplate, "*umefakeach*" and become wise, "*al masav uderachav*" on his actions and his ways. A person has to stop, a person has to think, a person has to look at his actions, his ways and ask himself this key, critical question, are they for my betterment or my detriment, will I be happy with the results two years from now, five years from now, ten years from now, where are my actions leading me to.

And the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us that if a person doesn't do this introspection, if a person doesn't stop and analyze, look at his life with critical eyes, he's like a blind man on the riverbank, the odds of him succeeding are infinitely small. The odds of a person actually accomplishing his mission on this planet, unless he stops, analyzes, looks at his life and asks himself these key critical questions, are almost nil.

And that is the first rung, for a person to contemplate, for a person to become aware, for a person to look at their life and ask themselves are my actions, are my ways helping me or not?

And now in the third *perek*, the *Mesilas Yesharim* opens up with the actual more what you'd say almost the practical application. Okay, how do I utilize this system? And he explains "*hinei ratza lufakeach atzmo*" if a person wants to become wise to himself "*shtayin heim hahashkafos tzrichos lo*" he has to have two separate perspectives, two separate outlooks.

“*Ha’ahas*” the first, “*sheyisbonen*” he should contemplate, “*al hatov hamiti*” what is the true good “*sheyivchar bo adam*” that a man should select “*vuhara hamiti sheyanus mimenu*” and what is the true evil, the true bad that he should escape from?

First step is to look at the world, look at the world and look at actions and ways and clear them into two separate camps, this is good and this is bad. This is what a person should be doing, this is what a person should be avoiding.

And the very first step is to look at life, to look at people’s ways, to look at situations and clear them all into two separate camps, one is the good and one is the bad.

“*vuhashniyah*” after you’ve done that, “*al hamasim asher oseh*” then to look at my actions, “*liras im heim buchlal hatov oy michlal hara*” then to see if my actions are in the category of the good or the bad. Two distinct perspectives, first of all without me involved, just looking at life, looking at situations, what should a person be doing, forget me, what should a person be involved in, what should a person’s goals be, what’s good, what’s bad, what’s right, what’s proper, what’s improper?

Before I look at myself, I have to look at the general situations, general behaviors and I have to decide what’s good and what’s not. And only after I’ve done that, then I look at my actions, and see into which camp do they fit.

Now it’s very clear that the *Mesilas Yesharim* is telling us that this is a two-step process, you can’t just do it in one fell swoop. You can’t just look at yourself and say hmm what am I doing right, what am I doing wrong and just begin fixing yourself up. And there’s a very important reason why if you try to do these two together, it will fail.

You see the one thing that we human beings constantly forget is that we're incredibly biased, we are incredibly prejudiced and the minute I try to look at my life, my actions, my ways, I become *passul lu'eidus*, I become invalid as a witness, I lose my objective sense and I no longer can see clearly.

And as much as we may intellectually recognize that, I don't think we really take stock. I think what the *Mesilas Yesharim* is explaining to us is you must do two distinct processes, number one without you involved in the equation, look at life, what's good, what's bad and then after you've created these lists, these groupings, then ask yourself are my actions in the good or the bad?

And let's sort of ask ourselves is it true? Maybe I could do them altogether, why can't I just look at my ways, look at my actions and just see what's good, what's bad and be done?

And I think this underscores exactly that point that we think of ourselves as logical, objective human beings and we are incredibly biased and incredibly prejudiced. And let's focus on one sort of manifestation of that.

Subliminal refers to thoughts just below the threshold of consciousness. Subliminal impacts, subliminal effects are things that we're not aware of but that happen all the time. If you go into a restaurant or you look at a menu of a restaurant, you'll see incredible descriptions, almost like poetry: crispy cucumbers; velvety mashed potatoes; slow roasted beets on a bed of aiguille.

Now I want to ask you a question, have you ever seen limp cucumbers? Have you ever seen mushy mashed potatoes? Does anyone think that those descriptions are going to make a difference in what a person orders? Those are not. And not only do they make a difference, studies show that they make a distinct difference in the amount of actual orders that will occur in

a restaurant, but more than that, when they describe using these poetic descriptions, the consumers rate them as much better tasting.

And we don't think about the amount that we're influenced, that we're affected by subliminal things but they happen all the time.

There's a book called *The Hidden Persuaders* that details example after example. Let's take one. In his book they describe that they wanted to do a study about laundry detergents. So in this study the subjects were given three different boxes of laundry detergent.

Now unbeknownst to the participants in this study, the detergent was identical in all three boxes, the only difference was the coloring on the box. One was predominantly yellow, the other one was blue and the third box it had blue with splashes of yellow on it. And here's what the study found out.

In the reports the subjects overwhelmingly favored the detergent in the box with the splashes of yellow. Now interestingly enough not once did any of the subjects mention that the reason why that detergent was superior was because of the coloring on the box, in fact they adamantly denied that the box had any influence yet it had a distinct influence, they determined that that detergent cleaned better, smelt fresher, was better, without realizing all the while that the influence of the coloring of the box, shaped their reality.

And this simple reality that what we experience is hugely influenced by subtle things that we don't pay attention to, that we're not quite aware of, is a major part of the human condition.

They've even done functional MRIs. Now functional MRI is something that actually can measure deeply within the brain what parts light up and they've given participants in a study two different wines, one was moderately priced and the other one was a very expensive wine and

they found that the part of the brain that's normally flashes, when one experiences great pleasure, invariably lit up when these participants drank the wine that was much more expensive.

Now you may assume that's not that unusual, because after all these participants appreciated fine wine and one was a very expensive bottle and the other one was just moderately priced. The only problem was it was the identical wine.

The only difference being the bottle was packed differently and they were told it was a very expensive wine, but it didn't just shape their experience, you could measure physiologically, that part of the brain lit up. And it was an interesting study done in MIT, economics is not something that you think about in a school like MIT but they have a course, Economics 70 and in this course they decided to study something very, very subtle.

One day a representative from the college comes into the class and says the professor isn't here this day instead we're going to have a substitute but because we try to measure things, we want to determine how he's perceived, how he's received by the students. So this representative of the college gave each student in the class a bio of this professor and the students were told that after the class they would be asked to rate the professor, the substitute teacher, to get a general sense of the presentation.

The only thing the students weren't told was that there were two copies of the resume, of the bio that they would be given out. They were almost identical, except for one part, the beginning of the bio read as follows, it said:

Mr so and so, the substitute is a graduate student in the department of economics, social science, here in MIT, he has three semesters of teaching experience in psychology in Albert College. His

first semester teaching Economics 70, he's 26 years old, a veteran married, people who know him consider him to be a very warm person, industrious, critical, practical and determined.

That was the resume, that was the bio, that half the class read. The other class got an identical sheet of paper with one subtle change. Instead of saying the words 'a very warm person', it described him as a rather cold person. The two sheets of paper were identical, the bio was identical except one described him as a rather cold person, one described him as a warm person.

Then the substitute teacher came in and he engaged the class in a discussion of the material that they had been learning up until that point and it was a very lively discussion back and forth etc. and then after the lesson, the students were asked to rate the professor.

The group that had gotten the sheet that described him as very warm, clearly loved him. Their descriptions of him was, were good natured, considerate of others, informal, social, popular, humorous, humane. The other group, who had gotten the same bio with those few two words difference, rather cold, described him as self-centered, formal, unsociable, unpopular, irritable, humorless and ruthless.

But again, the same teacher, teaching the same class, engaging with them and only subtle difference, one group was subtly influenced without it being aware of it, by the words 'a very warm person' the other group were influenced by the words 'a rather cold individual'.

Now you may say that's well and fine but not you and I. There is no way that we would be influenced by such subtleties. The only problem is that is exactly what happens to us every day of the week. And that is what's known as Madison Avenue, that is the entire advertising industry, that is billions upon billions of dollars that are being spent to sell you, but you see they're not selling you on why their product is superior, better, faster, more reliable.

Do you ever notice how many of the brands sell based on a sports star, or some pretty model, or Gaterate, the Olympic sponsor?

Why do brands spend billions and billions of dollars to get a sports star or a rock star or some media famous person to hold up their bottle of Gaterate or shampoo or whatever it may be?

And it's a very subtle star association without realizing it, without thinking about it, that brand becomes more important. It holds a new place in my mind. Without my being aware of it, if I see that shampoo bottle being held by such and such person and I respect that person or know that person to be famous, subtly there is a transference of the star power to that product and if you don't think it works all you have to do is study the western civilization's marketplace.

And whether we recognize it or not, we are incredibly influenced by many, many subtle things. And I believe that the greatest revelation that a human being could ever come to is the revelation that I too am a human being and I am hugely influenced. And the greatest influence of anything above and beyond anything else, is my sense of me. and I don't like doing things wrong, I don't like being held countable or guilty of doing the wrong thing and there's this ever-subtle capacity of I to shape and mold reality to fit my needs, my desires.

And I believe that almost all of us and really it's all of us, have two *Shluchan Aruchs*. There's the *Shulchan Aruch* for the rest of the world, that *Shulchan Aruch* was written by the *Beis Yosef*, that has very exact laws and very exact ways of doing things and then there's the separate *Shulchan Aruch* for me. And even though I may not recognize it, and even though I don't realize it, in my mind's eye, in the courtroom of my mind, I invariably find rationales and reasons why what I do is okay, and it's alright and it's not so bad.

For you it wouldn't be acceptable but you have to understand my situation, my background, what I've been going through, what I'm involved in, you have to understand. And as much as we don't want to admit it to ourselves and as much as we don't recognize it, we are incredibly biased and incredibly prejudiced and again, the biggest bias of all is I.

My benefits, my good, and certainly I don't want to wear the label of doing something wrong or bad and hence I am effectively blind to seeing my flaws. As a matter of fact if you'd like to know what it's like trying to look at yourself, there was a study done to analyze the function of vision.

They took goggles and put them on the people involved in this study and the only thing unusual about these goggles were that the glass inverted everything they saw. So everything they saw was completely upside down. So the ceiling which was used to be on top, was now on the bottom, the floor which used to be on the bottom was on the top and the participants in the study had to negotiate life in wearing these goggles.

Now needless to say it was very, very difficult. Try eating a bowl when you can't find the spoon, you can't find, it's up and down, and it took a while. Interestingly, after a number of weeks, almost every participant in this study performs flawlessly. But not because they learned how to sort of navigate an upside down world, but because without realizing it their subconscious inverted the image back so that instead of the ceiling now looking like it was the floor, suddenly their subconscious mind flipped the image so that despite the fact that the goggles were flipping it, their brain flipped it back so that now they were navigating perfectly until of course when the goggles were taken off and again, now the world was upside down because their subconscious brain took a while to adjust and once it adjusted they got back their sight.

But that's an incredible function of the subconscious mind and what we don't realize is that when I look at me, I am wearing goggles but those goggles don't just invert, they make everything that I look at, everything that I'm involved in, everything that I do, right, good and kosher.

And if you say not me, I'm sorry to tell you, that as long as you are amongst the human race, you are subject to this bias, you are subject to this phenomena.

What the *Mesilas Yesharim* is explaining to us is, if you try to look at your own life, you are absolutely invalid. You are absolutely blind and you'll never see what you do wrong. You have to step away from the fray, and you have to step away from your life, you have to look at my generation, people living in my time, a person about my age, about my situation, what should he or she be doing? What shouldn't I do, what's right, what's wrong, what's good, what's proper and only after I've from an objective standpoint, analyzed the right way to act, the right way to speak, only then can I then do the difficult work of looking at my actions and say mmm, wait a minute maybe that's in the wrong group.

But if I try to just look at my own day, my own life, I will invariably see what's wrong. But that's not that I'm going to see what I do wrong, I'm going to see wrong, and everything that I look at will be okay, and while I may see some slight flaws, I'll never have the clarity of vision because I wear the goggles of self-deception that the nature of the human condition.

But really it's much worse than that. If the problem is my sight, and if the problem is my being able to view my actions, there's an element of I that makes it much, much more difficult and that's the moment that I am emotionally involved.

Let me give you an example:

I was a high school *Rebbi* for many years and as a *Rebbi*, I had the bad habit of coming late. Now I used to beat myself regularly for it, I used to yell at myself it's *bittul Torah*, I had good reasons, you know during breakfast I'd be talking to the guys, or whatever, I wasn't just hanging out, but the bottom line is I would start *shiur* on a pretty regular basis, somewhat late.

Reb Baruch Rotz who was then a good friend of mine, still is, and he was my boss, he was the *menahel*, very gently and very politely once said to me, you know maybe it would be better for the *shiur* if you could start a little earlier.

Now you have to understand I was coming up from breakfast, beating myself up for being late and he said those words to me and as he gently, softly said those words to me, there was a feeling inside, a *chutzpah*, you're telling me, you're telling me to be on time, you're telling. And I couldn't believe myself, but that was what was happening.

There I was a nanosecond earlier, telling myself how wrong it was, until somebody from the outside who gently, politely, and who had a right and should have been telling me, told me and suddenly I was rejecting it wholesale.

And if you'll say well maybe that's me, I'm hypersensitive, I'd like to share with you it's every human being on the planet. And if you're not sure that I'm right, just ask a married person this question:

Your spouse, and I don't care how good or bad their marriage is, the person who you're married to now, today, is that the same person you dated? Is that the same person you were engaged to?

And I challenge you to find me a married person who answers in the affirmative. Now *Baruch Hashem* I'm very happily married, I love my wife, she's not here to complain so I think she also

loves me, I think we have a very good marriage, and I would also like to share with you that the person I'm married to had no connection to the person that I was engaged to. And I don't just mean now because it's many years later, I mean within a short time after the marriage.

And how is that every human being, has such a clear knowledge that this is the person and they know them so well and they're married just a few weeks, or a few months, a year or two for sure and suddenly they come to the recognition that they didn't know this person at all.

And Rav Dessler in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* writes that each person is plain drunk, plain drunk, and really that's exactly what it is. And the more that a person says I'm only going to marry the person who I know very well so I'm going to go out for a long time and I'm really, really going to know them, the more they say that, the drunker they are and every person comes to that conclusion it might be six months, it might be a year, it might be two years after they're married they say oh my goodness, I didn't know this person at all.

But how's it possible? And the answer is because I was wearing those goggles of self-deception but not just blocking my vision, effecting my emotions and once my emotions start rising, I become completely embroiled, completely *passul* and what I think I see, I don't see at all, I become drunk.

If you'd like a *mashal* to this and by this I mean going out, and I mean life in general. Imagine that I have the following task, I have to buy a case of wine and I say listen I don't want to just buy a case of wine, just blind, I'm going to taste it first. So in fact I taste it and it tastes very fine but I say, that's not quite enough maybe that's the first taste but maybe the second taste doesn't taste as good. So I take a second taste and I say it's not quite enough, I have to finish the first glass.

And the first glass I say isn't enough, I have to finish the entire bottle. After I've finished the very first bottle, and I'm at the bottom, then I'm ready to make my decision, I say yes, the case is fine and I purchase that case of wine.

What are the odds of my having made an intelligent choice after I drank that bottle of wine?

The answer is zero. Why? Because I'm drunk. You can't drink an entire bottle of wine and think that you're still objective, think that you have your full rationality about you. After you've drunk that bottle of wine, you are drunk. And that is any situation where I get involved and I means me. Me whether it's anger, or jealousy or happiness or joy, likes or dislikes, you said the nicest words, you said the not nice words, the most subtle things in the world affect me and suddenly I become bias, I become prejudice, and again it doesn't just affect my sight, it affects my innards so even if I try to step back, and even if I try to analyze and say well maybe I'm involved, maybe I'm *nogeah*, I'm prejudiced, my emotions will blind me, will stop me from seeing, and hence I find myself in a very, very difficult situation.

If I was tasked with growing, with accomplishing, and if I know that I'm like that blind man on the riverbank and I have to very carefully study my ways, I'm blind. My eyes don't work because I'm wearing goggles, my emotionality makes me drunk, what are the odds of my being able to look at my actions, look at my ways and say this I should correct, this I should reinforce.

And explains the *Mesilas Yescharim* there's only one way to do it, you have to stop, take yourself out of the picture and cleave up the world into its good and bad. Find people who do what's right, what's proper and say ah I get it, that's what a person should be involved in, this is what a person should avoid.

You have to look at other people, you have to look at situations, and you have to develop a very keen sense of what's right and what's wrong and only after you've done that do you then look at yourself and you ask yourself into which camp do my actions fit?

And this can't be done once a year, not even once a month, it has to be an ongoing constant situation. I have to constantly be asking myself what's right, what's good, what's proper, what should a person be involved in. I have to take myself out of the fray, be objective and ask myself what's good, what's right, what should a person be involved in and only after I've done that, can I then do the difficult work of asking myself is what I'm doing proper? Is what I'm doing wrong?

What the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us is that *zehirus*, the very first step on the rung of self-perfection is watchfulness, being careful, vigilant. Asking myself are my actions for my betterment or for my detriment, analyzing, scrutinizing, but the *Mesilas Yesharim* uses the words, wise "*sheyisbonen umefakeach*" to contemplate and to become wise, but the only way to do that, is this two step process. First to have to take myself completely out of the picture, I have to look at things from a very objective standpoint and I have to ask myself what's the "*tovah amiti*" what's truly good. What should a person be involved in? What's worthwhile to do?

And I have to look at what's wrong and what's bad and I have to see what a person should run away from. And you need situations that allow you to see things clearly. One such situation is if you're at a funeral and you hear the way they talk about the *niftar*, listen to the words that matter, listen to the words that count and see for yourself where you wanna be.

There are many, many exercises that a person has to do, because to develop a very keen sense of what's right, what's wrong, what a person should be involved in, requires a lot of work. A

funeral is one way to do it, reading biographies of *gedolim* is another way. Looking at people who succeed, or who fail, and asking yourselves where did they go wrong.

And the most difficult job we human beings are tasked with, is studying the human being and looking at the human being with very critical eyes and after I see the folly of the human race, after I see the foolish things they do, teaching my tongue to say the words 'and I too am a human being' because it's very easy to see others' mistakes, the next step is where the work comes in, to say to myself 'and I too am a human being' and then to look at my ways, look at my actions, correct them and on the flipside, to see people who succeed, people who reach great heights, people who have fine *middos*, people who learn tremendous amounts, people who accomplish worlds and ask myself what's their secret, what's their recipe?

And then finding within my own day, within my own time, ways to adopt those ways to change it. But it's contemplating, it's looking, number one stepping away, looking at the '*tova amiti*' and the '*rah amiti*' and then analyzing myself and asking myself which camp do they fit, and then designing the plan to change and grow so that I end up accomplishing what I was put on the planet to do.