

2: The Two-Step Process of Growth

After learning about the importance of self-reflection and contemplation, Rabbi Shafier dives further into the *Mesilas Yesharim* by outlining the Ramchal's two step process to growth. Bringing contemporary sources to illustrate the timeless wisdom of the *Mesilas Yesharim*, Rabbi Shafier discusses a fascinating study of human memory and the frightening implications this has on how we view ourselves and others. It's a captivating shiur that is guaranteed to change how you see yourself and the world around you.

In the last session, the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us that the basic system that a person needs to incorporate is to look at themselves from a distance. The first step has to be a person has to be *misbonen*, a person has to contemplate what's the true good, what's the true bad. A person had to cleave up the world into separate camps and use an objective standpoint to create the sense of what's proper, what's good and only after I really have that in concrete terms, then to take my own day, my own actions and to say where in fact it fits in, but it has to be two steps.

It has to be first looking at what's right, what's good, what's proper, what's not. Then asking myself where do I fit into this?

And the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us the reason for this is because we human beings are very, very prone to becoming biased and prejudiced in our way of thinking. We like to think of ourselves as purely logical but the simple reality is that we're not and subliminally, slightly below the threshold of consciousness, many, many things influence our thinking, our biases, our prejudices, our way of viewing things, and that's all of Madison Avenue, that's all of advertising, and the simple reality is that when I look at myself, I'm wearing goggles.

Just like those goggles that invert, turn the image upside down, when I'm looking at myself I'm blind and therefore I have to step away. First I have to look from an objective standpoint, and only once I've created my sense of morality can I then I apply it to myself.

And if you'd like to see a classic example of this concept, I'll share with you a little rule. How do you win any argument? Here's a simple method to win any argument that you'll ever engage in, would you like to know what it is?

Very simple. Don't do it. Don't ever engage in an argument because you'll never win. Any argument invariably what happens is I become more entrenched in my position, you become more entrenched in your position and while the debate clubs might be popular in high school, in college, in the real world they don't influence one another and you have to understand why.

The *Orchos Tzaddikim* explains that it's human nature. If I'm going to come strongly upon you, if I'm going to attack you, you're in a defensive mode, you're going to punch back. The more vehemently I argue my position, the more automatically you're going to feel the opposite and arguments don't work not amongst friends, not amongst political opponents they don't work because very simply they defy human nature.

Human nature is such the more strongly I'm presenting, the more strongly I'm pushing my agenda, the more you're going to resist. And the simple reality is that while we like to think we're logical and we can debate and be purely objective, we're not and when it comes to me, I am absolutely *pasul lu'edus*, I am completely nullified as a witness because I have no objective standpoint and therefore I have to first step away, ask myself what a person should be engaged in, what they should be involved in, what's the right way, what's the right path and only after I've created that very clear sense of morality, of propriety, then I could apply it to myself.

But the *Mesilas Yesharim* explains that there's another step involved also. He says that this weighing, this constantly looking, this constantly analyzing my actions and asking myself are they for my betterment or not, that is the *middah* of *zehiurus*.

Zehirus mean to be watchful, to be careful and the first step as we discussed last time, was first create a sense of morality, a sense of what's good and what's not and then apply it to myself. But he explains that there are two distinct time periods that this has to occur during:

"*bushas mysah*" and not "*bushas mysah*" meaning even after I created a very clear sense of what's right and what's proper, I then have to look at my own actions in two separate time periods. One is *bushas mysah*, when I'm engaged in life and he explains what that means "*shelo yaseh shum msyah mibli sheyishkos bumoznei yosei yediah*" not to engage in any action, without first weighing it in the scales of this single question, are these actions good for me, are they for my betterment are they for my detriment?

And this requires a tremendous amount of training of practice, to almost have scales in front of my eyes, with which I weigh every action before I open my mouth, before I engage, before I do something, I train myself to think is this that I'm going to now do, for my betterment, for my detriment, will I be pleased with these results two years from now, five years from now, ten years from now?

And that's the training that takes years and years of work and it's something that we slowly engage in, slowly begin the process, but ultimately the goal is not to do an action, not a single action without that single question being asked, is this for my betterment, is this for my detriment?

But again, explains the *Mesilas Yesharim* that's only half the equation. That's *bushas mysah*. But even if I've trained myself and even if I've reached that very lofty level where I do not act before thinking, there's no impetuosity, there's no just reacting and then later asking should I have, shouldn't I, even if I get to the level where I'm really, really carefully weighing every action, every engagement that I have with any other human being, there's another step in the process that also has to happen and that's I already explained, "*shelo bushas mysah*" not in the heat of the moment.

I have to step away, "*sheyaleh lufanav zichron kol mysov*" I have to bring up a memory of my actions, "*vuyishkol osom kumochei mozei mishkal zeh*" and then have to reweigh them in his very same scale.

Meaning, I have to stop my activities, stop my business, review my day and use this very same scale of measure, are these actions for my betterment, are they for my detriment? And then he explains, to see what I should strengthen and what I should get rid of. But it's a two-step process, one *bushas mysah*, training myself to always see and always ask myself is this good for me, but in addition to that, I have to step away and I have to do a reckoning, I have to look at my actions, I have to weigh them and I have to review my day, my weeks, my months, I have to review them and then again apply the same scale.

And I'd like to focus on why it is that we human beings must do both. You see even if I train myself to really ask myself this question all the time, and even if I'm really alert, and even if I'm always conscious, and I'm completely in the moment, and I'm really focused on the ramifications, the results, I still will fall prey to many, many mistakes, and many, many flaws.

And I would like to explain to you why. Everyone has advice for young married couples and it seems that everyone's an expert about marriage and apparently they all have what to say and my wife and I when we were first married, were also in that new married mode and everyone felt it was their obligation, their *mitzvah* to provide us with the advice.

And one of the pieces of advice that we received when we were first married was one of the worst pieces of advice that I could ever give to a married couple and that piece of advice was don't go to sleep in a fight. If you get into a you know, an issue, you said, he said, she said, talk it out. Keep, keep talking out, kill through it, don't go to sleep in a fight make sure that you talk it out and talk it out.

And here's what I personally discovered, if in fact I maybe said something that was a little bit insensitive and my wife felt something, anytime we talk it out, what happened was all that happened was I would get more irritable, I would get more heated, I would get more tired and cranky and the longer I stayed up, the worse it became. Yet almost invariably, if I'd go to sleep, in the morning when I woke up, I didn't even remember what I was upset about, my wife as well didn't even recognize what the issue was and what we both discovered was an interesting phenomena.

And that is in the moment, in the heat of the moment, it seems so egregious, it seems so bad, it seems so horrible, but that's only because I'm drunk, that's only because my emotions are impacted, it's only because I'm hurt, it's only because my emotions have been set off and because my emotions have been set off, I view things in a vastly different way than I would if I would cool down.

And this concept of being drunk and having the sense of my emotions coloring my thoughts and my scale of measure, is a very real part of being a human being. And no matter how good you are at being alert, being conscious, being ever aware, you have emotions, and even if you caught every detail, the bottom line is you're going to feel things in the heat of the moment that when you step back and from a dispassionate standpoint, you're not going to feel the same and therefore it's pretty obvious why the *Mesilas Yesharim* explains to us that if you want to grow, if you want to accomplish, you have to have two time periods.

Bushas mysah, when I'm in the heat of the moment I have to always ask myself, to train myself to ask is this for my betterment, is this for my detriment. But then I have to step away, at the end of my day and I have to analyze my day, I have to look back, review, because only from that objective standpoint I'm going to be cool, calculated, I'll be able to look at what I did and I'll be able to step away from the blinding emotions and then in fact I might have some clarity.

So that's pretty obvious. But here's a very simple observation that the *Mesilas Yesharim* is explaining to us something that's far more profound because you see even when I cool off, I am going to have a very real problem and I'll explain to you what that is. Have you ever had a conversation with a person and somewhere in the midst of the conversation you said wait a minute, that's not what I said. And the other person said yes it is, no it's not. Yes it is, no it's not, yes it is. And you wish you had a tape recorder because it just wasn't what you said. But the other person clearly heard it.

And interestingly enough, this kind of thing happens on a regular basis to us humans. And I'd like to explain to you why because we have a sense of our memory that has no connection to reality and I'll give you an interesting example.

Two psychologists, Nicosin and Adams wanted to prove how memory works. And they came up with a pretty interesting experiment, and you could try it on your own and see how you fare at it. I want you to imagine in your mind's eye a US penny. Imagine a penny and I want you to list the details of the penny. Now just for the record, there are eight distinct details of the penny, including Abraham Lincoln's bust, which way he faces, the words 'In G-D we trust' the epunimumum ????? (12:19) the various features of the penny.

So I want you to either draw it or in your mind's eye name the eight features of the US penny. Now the odds are very, very good that you won't be able to do it because only five percent of subjects studied can name all eight features. But here's the interesting part, you've probably looked at a US penny thousands of times, I mean you've held it in your hand, you've looked at it, you've passed it. How's it possible that you can't conjure up in your mind's eye exactly what that penny looks like?

And I believe that this underscores one of those interesting features of memory. And that is that we human beings have very good memories for the gist, the general concept, what basically happened. But the details we don't. And very, very few people remember details well, in fact no one really remembers all the details.

And I'll explain to you how this became very apparent. Almost a hundred years ago, there was a German psychologist who became the director of Harvard psychological lab, when psychology was first beginning as a field and his name was Hugo Wintersberg. Now he was a very, very intelligent fellow and he had an uncanny memory, almost infallible. As a matter of fact, in his own description, over eighteen years he had given over three thousand lectures in a university level and not a single scrap of paper with notes, completely *bal peh*, completely by heart. He had

over three thousand lectures on a regular basis that he would give and flaw, almost flawless memory.

But in 1907 something happened to him that was very, very interesting. When he was on vacation, his home was burglarized and he reported it to the police and the police asked him for an eye witness report. And his unfailable memory served him very well. He reported exactly the details, exactly which window was open, the basement, exactly where on the dining room table was left the clock, that they buglars had tried to take, the candle wax exactly where it was spotted etc. etc. etc. very vivid, very clear details.

And the only problem was that he was dead wrong. You see it wasn't the basement that the burglar had entered, it was actually the lower level floor. It wasn't the clock on the table, it was actually on a totally different part of the house. And the candle wax was on the top floor, not the middle floor where he'd clearly remembered it.

But here was the ironic part, in his mind's eye, he saw every detail and he began studying memory and he made a number of interesting discoveries and some of his discoveries have remained to this day. And in his book he wrote, he wrote a book called 'On the Witness Stand' essays on psychology and crime, and he describes how he began studying memory. He describes studying all the various crime reporting situations and all of the memories that people had and invariably he found tremendous gaps.

As a for instance, he describes that there was a lecture being given in a university by Proffessor Franz Valence and in the middle of this lecture, a student gets up and starts arguing vehemently with the professor and the professor argues back. Another student stands up and defends the professor, before you know it the two students are fighting, a gun is pulled, shots ring out and the

entire classroom bursts into bedlam and then Valence says stop, this has been a psychological experiment, it's really just a test of your observation skills.

Then he broke up all the students into three groups and he asked them to recount what they had witnessed. And what he found was almost every student recounted the details in a vastly wrong manner. Meaning they reported students saying things that they didn't say, reported the gun shooting in a way that it didn't shoot, but they saw it clearly.

Their mistakes were clearly, clearly misreading of the situation, but it wasn't little things. They attributed the wrong actions, to wrong people and they were testifying, ready to swear to this and what Winterberg found was that time after time, this is what people do. And science now explains to us why it is that we human beings have a very difficult problem remembering things.

You see there are three, three rules of memory. The first is that we remember big picture things, the gist and not the details. And if you think about it, it should be obvious. You see we think about memory like a video camera. If you have a video camera that films a scene, it takes in all of the details and afterwards you watch the details. That's how we think of our memory, how we take in all of the details, and if you have a very good memory, you just slip back all of the details. Well here's the problem, at any given moment there are eleven billion data bits of information that are coming at my sense.

My mind is challenged with filtering out billions and billions of bits of information that I can't possibly process. The executive function of the mind, allows me to focus on one point, to listen to a conversation and ignore the noises and ignore the sights, ignore the things around me.

But when I pay attention to something, everything else is filtered out. But when I incorporate it into my memory, it's not the full scene that I actually incorporate into my brain, it's but a

thumbnail version of it because if I try to incorporate all of that data, imagine a one hour scene in the park, the birds and the trees and the voices and, the amount of data that would be coming in, would overwhelm my brain, would fill up everything that is in the space between my ears and there is no way I could ever remember it.

What my mind does very subtly is, filter out a tremendous amount of information only focusing on very, very small details, arguably the details that are important to me, but then it then codes it, not as a video scene, but much more like a thumbnail on your computer, if you've ever seen a thumbnail picture on your computer, it's very, very tiny, you know you could see it but if you blow that picture up you see it's missing huge gaps, huge pieces of information, when we actually encode things into our memory, we only remember that thumbnail version, that's all that sticks.

But here's an interesting part of it, see it's not just that we had big picture, good gist memory and poor detail memory, which is why most people can't identify a US penny, there are two other features to memory that become even more interesting.

You see what happens when we conjure up a memory, is almost invariably we add to it. As an example, Eric Niser, who is a professor of psychology, was very much interested in studying how memory forms. And he had an ideal opportunity when in 1986, the challenger, the shuttle, exploded and everyone was riveted on the news.

So that day, he asked the students in his class to write down exactly what they had experienced where they were, how they found out about it, all the details of what had been going on in their day, when they heard the news, how they heard it and etc. and he had them write it down in very clear detail.

Then three years later there were still forty four of the students who were still on campus ,and he asked them to recall the events and he explains that not a single student recalled the event entirely correct, but even more than that, things were completely made up.

For instance, one student who wrote clearly in her diary that she was chatting with friends at the cafeteria, when she was asked three years later what happened, she describes well some girl running down the hall screaming “The space shuttle just blew up, it blew up” but in her written account, that wasn’t at all what happened.

Another one who had heard the news from classmates and that’s exactly what was written in the handwriting of this person, when he was asked three years later described it as, well I was sitting in my freshman dorm room with my roommates and watching TV and then a newsflash came on and we were just shocked.

But the problem is in his writing, there was nothing about that, it wasn’t how he heard about it. He had heard about it from some other students in a class, it wasn’t watching a TV, it wasn’t in a freshman dorm.

An the stranger part was that when the students were confronted three years later with their own written testimony and it was clear that the way they had heard about it was vastly different than the way they described it, their reactions were very, very unusual. As in yes that’s my handwriting but it still remember it the other way. I remember the girl running down the hall screaming “The challenger just broke up.” I remember sitting in my freshman dorm room, I remember seeing the newsflash.

And you see this is another funny little quirk about memory, it’s not just that we remember big picture details, it’s that when it’s encoded, it’s encoded in very, very small thumbnails and when

we bring up that picture, we add details to it because you see in my brain it's so unfinished and so unformed the way I memorized it that it doesn't serve much use. So almost by definition I have to add context, I have to add setting and when I bring up that image, suddenly I re-see it.

But here's the most interesting part about it you see the third rule of memory is that when we bring up those images, we believe them more than we believe anything else. You see, when I replay it in my mind's eye and I see the TV screen flashing with the news, I see it. So I believe it. It's not just that I didn't see it that way, it's because when I brought it up, I now encoded, after encoding it one way, I now brought it up, and I now see it in a different manner, I now believe it and it's real and it's very hard to get that new image out of my brain.

And if you'd like to see a classic example of this, it's a little bit frightening. In the United States of America there are seventy five thousand police lineups per year. Now police lineup is a situation where there was a crime and they have to identify the criminal, so they'll take five or six people who look similar and they'll ask the person who was either mugged, injured, whatever it may be, to identify is it this one or that one, or that one, who was the one who perpetrated the crime.

And police lineups are considered very reliable, they're used in court and people are sent to jail for them because it's considered an eye witness report that's very reliable. But here's the interesting statistic, twenty to twenty five percent of identifications in a police lineup are dead wrong. And they're dead wrong because they have to be wrong why? Because police explain that often they don't have the five or six different people who look kind of similar, so they'll use what they call fillers, it might be a police detective, it might be a criminal that they'll take out of

the jail, but it's someone who absolutely, completely was not on the scene of the crime, couldn't have been on the scene of the crime.

And twenty to twenty five percent, those fillers, the ones who weren't there, didn't do the crime, are identified as the criminal. And what Winterberg pointed out almost a hundred years ago is that these are the three interesting features of the human memory:

Number one, we're very good at the sort of big picture, the gist of what happened, we're very bad at the details. But it's not just that we're bad at the details, when we have it encoded in our brain and we bring up the picture it has to be that we add details because the picture itself is too raw so we add details of context that we sort of feel are right and it feels very right and the most damaging part is the fact that once I play it in my brain, of course I believe it because I see it.

And the reason why so many people will misidentify a suspect in a police lineup is not because they're bad or evil or even careless, it's because they see someone who looks kind of similar, in their mind's eye there's an image of that person and it's kind of vague, and that person over there looks pretty similar so they peg him, that's him. I got it. And as a matter of fact in mock trials, they found that fifty percent of the time they misidentify the suspect because our detail for very, very fine things really isn't there, but it feels right, we conjure up that image and once I bring it up I believe it.

And I believe that's why the *Mesilas Yesharim* explains to us that you have to have a two tiered system, *bushas mysah*, you have to always train yourself to ask that question, are these actions for my betterment, are they for my detriment, are they going to help me?

And it requires a lot of training to be in the moment and constantly ask yourself that question but that's only half of the battle. The other half of the battle is after the fact, I have to step away I

have to take off my goggles of bias and prejudice, when my emotions are cooled down, then I have to revisit the situation.

You see the reason why I remember the conversation the way I remember it, isn't necessarily because it happened that way, but just because that's the way I brought it back in my mind's eye. And no matter how vividly I hear the words that you said and no matter how clearly I see that scene, it doesn't mean it's real.

What Winterburg explained over a hundred years ago and seems to be a very real part of our existence is we could see things in our mind's eye, they could be so real but they never happened. They never happened because my memory takes in the big picture and then when I bring it up, I fill in the details not intentionally, not with any ill will, but I have to fill it in because otherwise it's too raw and once I fill it in, it plays in my brain and it becomes factual.

And one of the great secrets to growth in life, is to regularly train yourself to stop as quickly as possible. You see if I get into a fight with you and I let that play out in my mind for a few days, maybe for a week, those images become more entrenched, more entrenched, I become more right, you become more wrong and then it becomes very difficult, almost intractable for me to erase those memories from my mind, the egregious thing you've done to me.

And the more quickly you're able to step away, allow your emotions to cool, and sort of review it and ask yourself is it really exactly as I felt it was? Is it really exactly as I saw it? And what you typically find is there's plenty of blame to go around but your memory of the event often isn't accurate.

And *zehirus* which is the first rung in the ladder means training myself to be "*misbonen umefakeach*" to become wise and to contemplate my actions, my ways, where am I headed, what

am I doing, what am I engaged in, but it's a process that's a lot more difficult than it sounds. It sounds easy, just put the brain on on, number one the brain typically isn't on on. And it requires really stepping away from my personal bias and first creating these systems of what's right, what's good, what's proper, but after I have those systems, I have to look at myself, look at my day, look at my time spent and ask myself where do I fall in, what camp?

And that's where the difficult work comes in:

Number one I wear goggles of bias and prejudice.

Number two I have emotions and the minute my emotions are engaged, I am drunk. I am completely drunk and my sense, my feelings, are so engaged that I'm no longer objective and I can't view them properly. I have to train myself to step away, and look from the outside when I'm a little bit cooled down and then I have to understand that my memory of the event might well be fallacious, might well be invented, I have to review it and I have to train myself to view things differently.

It's a process that takes an awful lot of time but this is the *Mesilas Yesharim's* explaining to us, it's that two-step process, training myself to always ask myself are these actions good for me or not? And then after the fact, not *bushas mysah*, reviewing my actions, reviewing my day, stepping away from the emotions and trying to get as clear a picture and then asking myself, what could I change? What could I improve? What should I be *muchazek*?

The more a person does that, the more they're objective and the more they're able to grow and accomplish and reach their purpose for which they were put into the world.

In the first *perek*, the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us that the sole reason that Hashem created us is to afford us the opportunity to grow, to accomplish, we're put in this world for a few short years, this is the gym. We're here to change ourselves forever we are what we shaped ourselves into.

In the second *perek* he explained to us that the first rung in spiritual perfection is *zehirus*, watchfulness and what that means he explained to us, is "*sheyisbonen viyfakeach*" that a person should become wise, a person should contemplate his actions and his ways, asking himself one key critical questions, are these actions for my betterment or are they for my detriment? Will I be happy with the results two years from now, five years from now, ten years from now? Where am I headed? What am I accomplishing?

And this *middah* called *zehirus*, the first rung in the ladder of spiritual perfection the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us that it's something that you have to have two time periods focused on, one is *bushas mysah*, when I'm in the heat of the moment, when I'm living my life, I have to have these scales constantly in front of my mind's eye, I have to see this question, am I going to be happy with the results of this action. Is this for betterment? Is this for my detriment?

And you have to train yourself to constantly see that question, to look at life that way and to have that always in front of you.

However, the *Mesilas Yesharim* explained to us there is second time period, *lo bushas mysah*, not in the heat of the moment. I have to step away and from a cool, calm, dispassionate position I have to look at my actions, look at my ways, I have to analyze, I have to carefully look at them and we explained the reason why because when I'm in the heat of the moment, I get drunk with

emotion, I miss cues, and I certainly don't have the clarity that I will when I step back and I look at it and I analyze my ways.

And this system of what we would know as *cheshbon hanefesh* of analyzing, requires constant vigilance and constant application. And now in this session the *Mesilas Yesharim* opens with these words, he says "*vudavar hedyunu chachameinu zichronom livrach*" this concept *Chazal* taught us. Where did they teach us this? When they said, the *Gemara* in *Eruvin*, "*noach lo lu'adam shelo nivra yosser mishenivra*" it is better for man not to have been created than to have been created "*vuakshav shenivra*" now that man is been created "*yufashpesh bumav*" he should introspect on his actions "*viykud amrei*" there's another version of the *Gemara* that says "*yumashmesh bumav*" he should look through his actions.

And the *Mesilas Yesharim* explains to us the difference. He explains that *pishpush* means to look at all of my actions and ask myself which are good, which are proper, which should I delete. To look at the actions themselves. But then there's another process called *yumashmesh* within the activity itself, asking myself are my motives pure, are they really proper.

Yes I did this, but were there impure parts of it, could I have done it better and both of this, this *pishpush* and the *mishmushhaev* to be done and this is what *Chazal* tell us.

And if we think about what the *Mesilas Yesharim* is sharing with us here, I find it rather profound. He's quoting for us a *Gemara* in *Eruvin* where the *Gemara* opens up with one of the most jarring statements a human being could ever envision and that is that you'd be better off not being born.

And we spend a good amount of time in session twelve of this series, discussing that *Gemara*, but today I want to focus on the conclusion. After *Chazal* sort of brought us to sobriety, after

they brought us to the reality that life is serious and you have a lot of work to do, what's their message, what's their sage advice, analyze your actions as the *Mesilas Yescharim* explained to us, go over your actions on their particular, on each individual action, go over them, review them and this is the sage advice that *Chazal* give us.

Now if you think about this, I find this rather troubling and I'll explain to you why. Imagine you were charged with giving a mission statement to humanity or imagine that you were going to record for prosperity a statement of how to live your life. What would you give as advice?

So I'd imagine most of us would say things like, live large, plan, live for the beyond yourself, give to others. I would imagine maybe we'd even say things, learn *Torah*, work on your *middos*, do *chessed*. We have big, big picture issues and we'd have beautiful big ideas to share with the world. But that's not what *Chazal* say, after bringing us to this jarring reality, that we'd be better off not being born, *Chazal* says so what should you do? Carefully analyze your day, analyze your actions.

If I were writing that statement, I would say something like, create huge goals, realize you have a few short years, think of what you can accomplish, change the world. But that's not what they said and this is rather perplexing and to really focus on this I want to quickly review what we discussed in session twelve and that is this *Gemara*.

This *Gemara* explains to us that actually there's a *machkoles Beis Shammai* and *Beis Hillel* for two and a half years they were arguing is it better for man to have been created or not have been created and they voted as one entity they all conclude it is better for man not to have been created and in *Maggid Mesharim* the *Beis Yosef* explains that the *malach* visited him and explained to him what this *Gemara* was saying, what it was teaching us.

And explained the *Maggid*, the *malach*, to the *Beis Yosef* that all of the *neshamos* before being put into this world, into a body are in what we would call almost a holding pen. And Hashem send a *neshamah* down into this world and all the *neshamos* see when that one *neshamah* comes back brilliant, shining like the sun in midday, tremendously accomplished, changed himself into a tremendous, tremendous person for eternity and every *neshamah* when seeing this says, I too want to go into the world, let me into a body, put me into the world to accomplish as such.

However, some *neshamos* come back not quite as grand, some come back a bit misformed, some come back crippled, some come back misshaped and some don't make it back at all. And when the parade the *neshamos* come in front of the rest of the *neshamos* and everyone there gets to see the results, they see the gravity, they see the danger of this world and as one unit all the *neshamos* say it's too risky, count me out, I don't want to be born.

Hashem in His infinite wisdom feels that it's worth it for those who succeed, for those who reach the heights, they accomplish so much and for eternity they're so great that it's worth everyone doing it, everyone has the opportunity and for those who actually succeed it's worth it and therefore Hashem created the world.

But what the *Gemara* is sharing with us is the perspective of the *neshamos*. From the *neshamos'* perspective, yes it's great if you come back like looking like a *malach*, but not everyone does and it's just a little too risky, "*noach lo lu'adam shelo nivra*" it's too dangerous, I don't want a part of this world.

Now if that's the perspective that the *Gemara* wants to share with us, that yes this world is a tremendous opportunity, you could come back like the sun in midday, but it's very risky, let's revisit that question.

What is the advice that they're giving us? What's their advice? And the *Mesilas Yesharim* speaks it out even further, the "*klal hadavar*" the rule is a person should always look at his actions to clean up all of his habits, not to leave himself any bad *middos*, surely not to leave an *aveirah*, to study your actions and your ways and clean up every individual act to perfect your *middos*, leave yourself with no bad habits, no sins, and again, let's reask the question:

If this *Gemara* really is presenting the mission statement of humankind, I would image there's a lot better focus and that is change the world, seize the moment, go out there, look what you can accomplish, you're put into the world change it, build it, make something. But it's not at all what *Chazal* say, review your day, look at your actions, perfect yourself.

And the question is why?

And to share with you what I believe the answer to that is, let's focus on a very interesting phenomena. Time magazine was once the leading magazine when magazines were still thick and quite popular and at the turn of the century they were going to publish their century end magazine and they were going to put the man of the century on the cover. Every year, Time magazine has a man of the year and this was the end of the twentieth century so they were going to put forward the man of the century.

So they had a meeting of all the editors, and they decided to choose the one individual who had the greatest impact on the twentieth century and the problem is that it was almost unanimous that the single individual who had the greatest impact on the twentieth century, was a man by the name of Adolf Hitler. He changed the world

Now Adolf Hitler's face would not sell many magazines so Time had to change the parlor game. No longer could it be the man who had the greatest influence on the century, but rather the man who had the greatest influence for the good.

And so again, the editors went back, looked, thought and they concluded Albert Einstein and in fact the man of the century on Time magazine's cover is in fact Albert Einstein.

Now I find that very eye-opening, why?

Because let's ask ourselves the question where is Albert Einstein today?

So I'd like to share with you, I'm not a hundred percent sure but it might be in *gehinnom*. But one thing for sure, not the front row of *Gan Eden*. How do I know that? Because repeatedly Einstein said the following: This myth about my being religious is completely not true. This myth of my being religious is a falsehood. He says if anything I have admiration for the structure of the world as far as science can reveal it, but I do not believe in a personal G-D.

He says, I believe in a god of Spinoza, who reveals himself in the orderly, the ordinary harmony of the world, but a G-D who concerns Himself with the fate and actions of human beings I don't believe in.

So here's the point, even if you'll tell me that he was a *tinok shenishba* which is questionable, he was for a short while religious, he kept kosher and he kept *Shabbos* as a thirteen year old, his parents certainly weren't so maybe you'll tell me he was a *tinok shenishba*, he's not held accountable, okay, I'll grant you that nevertheless the front row of *Gan Eden* he's not sitting in.

If anything it's way, way in the distant back. So here's the question:

He changed the world, he brought the twenty first century into the reality that we experience today, he revealed to science the absolute bedrock basics and Time magazine when looking at him described him as the man of the century, the single human being who had the greatest impact for the good, how's it possible that he's not in the front row of *Gan Eden*?

And the answer to this question really is based on a very interesting mistake that science makes, and human beings make particularly. And that mistake is as follows:

You know G-D is good, but only when it comes to some things. So for instance you know there is disease in the world, man has to find the cure. There are rivers to be forded, bridges to be built, oceans to be crossed, that requires man, man has to do it. I mean, G-D is okay you know, if things are you know, like the easy stuff like elephants and giraffes, creating mountains and rivers, but you know the real hard stuff like rocket ships and satellites, only man can do that.

And I believe this really underscores one fundamental mistake. And that mistake is the mistake that I called Columbus discovered America but he didn't invent it. You see Columbus set sail on those ships and he uncovered something that was there, he discovered America. Christopher Columbus did not invent America, he did not make the continent, he found something that was there and science and all of its brilliance uncovers but a very small tip of the iceberg of G-D's wonders. G-D wrote the laws of quantum-mechanics, G-D wrote the laws of physics. Everything in this world is G-D and anything that man uncovers, is man uncovering that which Hashem created.

But it really cuts a little bit deeper than that. I heard from my *Rebbi*, the *Rosh Yeshivah zatzal* in the name of his father that all of technology, when mankind discovers something, really man is making a mistake, Hashem wanted certain wisdom, certain understandings to be revealed at

certain times in the course of human history and Hashem makes that understanding accessible and available.

The person who will discover it is one of the people at the forefront of the discovery process but it's only because Hashem wanted that information out, wanted that knowledge to be understood by men and Hashem has an exact sequence as to when He will allow what knowledge to be understood and Hashem maps it out throughout the ages so when Galileo makes his great discovery, when Newton uncovers a law of fundamental nature, it's because Hashem wanted that information out, any person there would have been the one to discover, he happened to have been there, but it's Hashem revealing a small inkling of His great wisdom, each step of the way.

And what that means in plain simple terms is, Hashem doesn't need man, not to ford those rivers, not to build those industries, not even to discover planets, and even more than that, if Hashem wanted, Hashem could have made the human very differently, Hashem could have made it that the human being runs on energy much like the sun. now it's very unlikely that the sun is going to burn out too quickly, science estimates five million, five hundred million years, I don't know and believe me they don't really know either but here's the point, the sun pumps out unimaginable amounts of energy as in to the extent that a one inch square, a postage stamp size, emits so much energy that if you took that amount and brought it to the earth, everything within a sixty mile radius would erupt into flames, the sun is a constant energy ball, constantly pumping out energy and for our intents and purposes, it's endless.

And Hashem could have made energy endless, Hashem could have made the world very differently, and Hashem doesn't need man to solve the crisis's, the world's problems as a matter of fact, Hashem doesn't need anything and certainly not man to make the world better.

And that underscores the key point. Hashem created the world in a very particular way. Hashem made the world in a manner, exactly perfectly suited for human condition and Hashem put me into this world to grow, Hashem put you into this world to accomplish, but Hashem doesn't need us to change the world and Hashem doesn't need us to build buildings, to ford rivers, and more than that, Hashem is perfect and everything that Hashem created in the world is perfect and Hashem made you and I in a state of imperfection, given one job, not to change the world, but to change me. Not to shape the world, but to shape me.

I was put into this body, with a certain temperament, I didn't create my set of character traits, whether it be anger or envy, arrogance, laziness, there's a certain start point and my job is to take this imperfect human being and perfect it, grow, change it, make it different and that's why Hashem created the world, that's why Hashem created us.

And Hashem gave us a mission, not to change the world, to change me. To make myself great by changing the essence of me.

And there's one more mistake that people often make. You ever had people say oh she's so kind, what a *balas middos*, he's so humble, it's very impressive. Now it might be true and he might be a tremendously kind person, she might be very humble, it might be true but here's the question, where did they start and where are they now?

You see in the world to come, I'm not measured even by my character traits, it's a much more demanding and much more exacting standard. Where did I start, where did I end up? Meaning to say, people are born with very different start points.

If you imagine on a scale of zero to a hundred and imagine a person that on terms of scale of anger, one person might be a seventy, another person might be a thirty. In terms of arrogance, one person might be a fifty, the other person a thirty.

And each of us start at different points and much like a key that there are values and peaks, each of us have different start points and the only question they ask me when I'm done my job here, is how much did I change? If I do have good character traits, if I am kindly and humble and sweet, that's not the question they ask, they ask me where did you start, how much did you change, how much did you grow, how much did you accomplish?

And we're very judgmental I can tell this person's a *tzaddik*, this person isn't, but here's the great difficulty, I don't have a clue because I don't know their temperament, I don't know their nature, and there's only one judge and that's Hashem. Hashem took that *neshamah* put it into a body and that body had a given temperament, that temperament was so much anger, so much jealousy, this type of boldness or introversion and now that human being is tasked with the greatest mission on earth, change the essence of you, shape yourself, mold yourself, don't change the world, change you.

And I believe that's exactly what the *Mesilas Yesharim* is sharing with us. A person has to look at his actions, look at his day, look at what he does and ask himself, what's good, what's right, what's proper and I have to be focused on this ultimate goal, shaping me.

Should I be focused on others? Absolutely. The *Torah* is very specific and very exact, but I have to understand that I was given a mission. The mission is self-perfection. Obviously being self-centered, acting as if you're the only human being on the planet, is not perfection and isn't self-perfection.

Hashem is perfect and Hashem is the *metiv*, the ultimate giver and everything that we experience in this world is only because Hashem wants to share His good with others, so if Hashem is perfect and my goal is to be more perfect, I have to be more like Hashem and a big part of that is learning to give, learning to feel other's pain, learning to look out for the benefit of others.

But you see that's all part of the goal of perfecting I. Hashem put me on the planet, Hashem wants me to grow and accomplish and a huge part of that is being dedicated to others but it's not because I'm saving the world and not even because I'm saving the Jewish nation. Hashem doesn't need me to save anyone. Hashem created the world, Hashem runs the world and Hashem gave us a mission to grow and accomplish, to change the essence of me.

And the way I do that is by carefully looking at my day, carefully looking at my actions, reviewing, asking myself what's good, what's right, what's proper. First I have to stop and cleave up the world into good and bad, I have to recognize that the way people perceive this world isn't correct and the way people get so lost up in the world is because we are human beings, so the first thing I have to do is cleave up the world into its camps of good and bad, what's the *tov* that I should be grab onto it and hold it, what's the bad.

Then I have to bring that to my world, and I have to ask myself where do I fit into, which category, my actions, my days. And I have to use both systems, I have to *bushas mysah* I have to always have that question in front of me, is this for my betterment, is this for my detriment, is this going to help me, is it going to harm me?

But aside from that I have to stop, look at my ways. I have to step away from the fray, and I have to with cool, calm dispassionate viewpoint look at what I've done and ask myself what's good, what's right. I have to be *mufashfesh*, I have to go into the action itself. I have to look at all my

actions in general, and each individual action I have to take away. I have to pick it apart and this process is exactly what *Chazal* are telling us.

What the *Mesilas Yesharim* is sharing with us is that *Chazal* has a wisdom and a vast, vast viewpoint. “*noach lo lu'adam shelo nivra*” if you understand this world is a tremendous opportunity, it's an incalculable opportunity but the stakes are high.

If you accomplish, you hit the stars, but if not, you'd be better off not being born. And after jarring us to our senses, *Chazal* give us the formula to success, put the brain on on, pay attention, analyze, during the moment, *bushas mysah* always train yourself to ask is this for my good, is it for my bad. But you also have to step back and you have to have a cool, dispassionate look at your day, at your time, at your actions and you have to ask yourself the same question and only when you do both of these, when you train yourself in the heat of the moment and then when you step back as well, can you have hope that you're heading in the right direction.

What the *Mesilas Yesharim* is sharing with us is that this is the secret to success. And this is the secret to success because Hashem put me here for this goal, to change the essence of me. Should I be focused on doing as much for the world as I can? Absolutely, my nation, my people, others, that's a huge part. But again, it's only within the context, that's what Hashem wants, Hashem wants me to perfect myself, to be more like Hashem and I have to step back and ask myself not what did I accomplish because at the end of the day every outcome is up to Hashem, there's only one area that I control, my choices.

Did I use my time well, did I attempt, did I analyze, did I scrutinize, did I really put in my best effort? The outcomes are up to Hashem, the only thing I control are my own actions, and the *cheshbon hanefesh* that we're constantly charged with making is asking myself am I headed in

the right way, are my actions appropriate and that is the great secret that *Chazal* revealed to us and that's what the *Mesilas Yesharim* is explaining to us, *bushas mysah*, not *bushas mysah*, in the heat of the moment and then also stepping back afterwards to analyze, to scrutinize, asking myself are my actions for my betterment for my good, am I serving Hashem properly.