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Take a Spiritual Accounting

Imagine if a corporation conducted business without keeping track of its accounts and made no effort to chart profits and losses. The whole endeavor would be destined to fail!

The Sages note that this is exactly the approach many people take in their personal lives. When asked whether or not it is important to be a good person, virtually everyone will nod in the affirmative. Most people would also agree that to be a truly good person one should not be satisfied and complacent with one's current "level of goodness" but must continue to grow and improve. Yet one finds very few people keeping track of their growth and character development. We may check the status of our mutual funds each week, though we are far less likely to tally up the number of kindnesses we

performed during the same period!

The Sages say that every person must regularly do "Cheshbon Hanefesh" – a spiritual accounting. For example, if someone is trying to refrain from speaking *Loshon Hara* (gossip), he should keep track of the number of times he speaks *Loshon Hara* during the day. The power of this exercise is so great, that if a person performs a *Cheshbon* for 80 consecutive days, they will assuredly become a new person.

This idea of monitoring one's progress is built into the Jewish calendar as well. The final day of any time period is considered an ideal time to conduct a review. For example, during Elul (the last month of the Jewish year) we are expected to analyze the previous year's doings.

Similarly, the last day of each Hebrew month is called *Yom Kippur Katan* ("small Yom Kippur"), in which we are enjoined to review the month's activities. Also before the start of each Shabbat is an opportune time to analyze the events of the week.

This concept of a spiritual accounting plays an important role in this week's Torah portion, *Pekudei*. A major theme in the Parsha is how Moses gives an accounting of the materials used to build the Tabernacle.

But why was there a need for an accounting of how the materials were used? Could not Moses have been trusted to keep things above board?

Various answers are offered to this question; among them how this emphasizes the need for all charity collectors (no matter who they are) to make an accounting to their donors.

Another explanation is that an accounting of all the materials revealed the miraculous nature of its construction – since the gifts the people gave

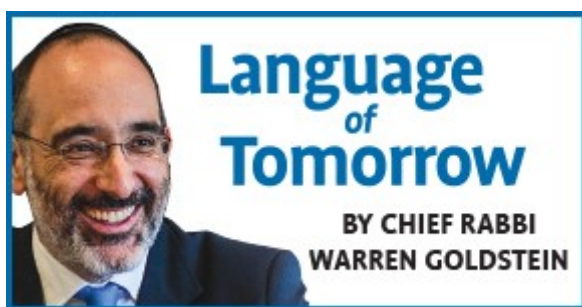
were exactly what was needed!

The Chassidic masters offer another explanation: Moses' recounting of how the materials were used is consistent with the aforementioned principle that, at the end of an important period, one should take an accounting of one's actions.

The construction – and completion – of the Tabernacle was a truly fantastic event. Never before had a human project been so blessed by God. While in the past, the Almighty had performed great miracles for the Jewish people, He had never placed His blessing on something the nation itself had built. With the completion of the Tabernacle, however, the Almighty rested His cloud of glory upon the structure.

Given the incomparable holiness of this event, it is evident that everything associated with the Tabernacle must be in perfect order. A *Cheshbon*, therefore, was a quite necessary part of the construction process!

It should be a necessary part of the construction of our own lives as well.



What Does it Mean to Be Personally Accountable?

Accountability is crucial for any high-functioning society - and for any high-functioning human being.

From a societal perspective, those in positions of power and responsibility are expected to be accountable to the people they serve, and not to advance their personal interests at the expense of the greater good. And, at the level of the individual, accountability is particularly powerful. Personal accountability builds trust, improves performance, promotes responsibility and inspires confidence.

When you are accountable to someone or a group of people for doing what you said you would do, you engage the power of social expectations and achieve things you wouldn't otherwise achieve.

This week's parsha, Pekudei, deals with a powerful act of personal accountability on the part of Moses (Moshe). The parsha begins: "These are the accounts of the *Mishkan* which were accounted through the instruction of Moshe."

We know that after God issued the instructions for building the *Mishkan*, Moshe embarked on an extensive collection campaign. The materials required to assemble the *Mishkan* were considerable - gold, silver, bronze and all kinds of valuable materials were needed. Yet Moshe's campaign was enormously successful, to the point where people had to be actively told to stop bringing their donations.

Parsha Pekudei goes on to record Moshe's detailed account of all the funds that he collected - an itemised register of all the various materials that were donated, their quantities, and how they were used in the construction of the *Mishkan*. In addition, Midrash Tanchuma makes the point that even though a person as great as Moses was beyond suspicion, nevertheless it was necessary for him to give a full account to

the people. This set a standard of accountability and transparency for all future generations of leaders to follow. In fact, the Code of Jewish Law sets out a number of transparency and accountability measures governing the collection of tzedakah, and the Vilna Gaon cites Moshe's example as the precedent for these laws.

But the Torah's principles governing the misappropriation of resources don't only apply to those involved in public service. There are lessons here that are relevant to every one of us in our personal lives. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein says that just as Moshe had given an account to the people for how the money was spent, so too do each of us have to give an account to God for all of the blessings He gives us.

We all enjoy countless blessings, whether it's good health, material resources, loving families, a roof over our heads, unique talents and abilities, or even simply the gift of time - of life itself. The question is, what do we do with these gifts God has given us? Do we use them to serve our own ends, to seek personal gratification and earthly pleasures? Or do we use them as God intended - to fulfil His commandments, to help others, to make the world a better place?

A crucial dimension of accountability before God is acknowledging when we have made mistakes and when we have done wrong. This is what the mitzvah of what *teshuva* - repentance - is all about. The Rambam, in his Laws of Repentance, defines the process of repentance and sets out its various components: regretting the mistakes of the past, desisting from that wrongdoing in the present, and resolving not to return to this course of action in the future - and

then confessing before our Creator.

This fourfold process of *teshuva* is an immersive journey of personal responsibility and accountability. But at its heart, the mitzvah of *teshuva* is also intensely creative. It is, in fact, the most vivid and powerful manifestation of our role as God's partners in creation. For what we are doing through *teshuva* is recreating the self.

Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik (On Repentance - The relationship between repentance and free choice) explains that there are two kinds of *teshuva*. He draws this out from the structure of the Rambam's Laws of Repentance. The Rambam discusses these laws in the first four chapters. Then, in chapters five and six there is a curious digression in which he discusses the principle of free choice - before returning to the subject of repentance in chapter seven, in which he writes poetically and beautifully about *teshuva* and its transformational and spiritual mechanics.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that this unusual structure is in fact a comment on the central importance free will plays in driving transformational *teshuva*. Sometimes repentance can be driven by factors such as fear or guilt, or adverse circumstances. This repentance certainly takes effect, but its impact is more muted. There's a reluctance, a reactivity, that holds back *teshuva*'s true transformative power. On the other hand, *teshuva* that is driven by free will - in the sense of a deep, internal desire to change proactively - becomes truly transformational.

Rav Soloveitchik further explains that this higher level of transformational repentance needs to address not just one's specific negative

actions, but the character traits and worldview in which those actions are rooted. Doing so leads to the complete recreation of the personality, and this is the transformational repentance described so poetically by the Rambam in chapter seven. The more prosaic repentance is described in the first four chapters.

Teshuva is an extraordinary gift. Literally "to return", real *teshuva* is to change the past and return to a state of innocence. If we come before God openly and honestly, and make a full account of our mistakes; if we regret them, and resolve to correct them and demonstrate that our desire to improve ourselves is real, then we actually emerge from that as new people - as if the past is erased.

The Talmud (Yuma 86b) says that if we repent out of fear then we rectify the deeds of the past and are absolved of our misdeeds. But we can go even further. The Talmud continues that if we do *teshuva* out of love of God - the highest and purest motivation - we retroactively transform the wrongdoings of the past into mitzvot and merit!

This is the incredible creative power of *teshuva*, which is truly a gift from God. It gives us the opportunity to change the past and recreate our present and future selves.

The Talmud further states that *teshuva* brings redemption to the world. It is the ultimate act of creativity. It is a supernatural force, and when we exercise it, we become God-like in our creativity. The Midrash says that God created many worlds and destroyed them before He finally created this world. Rav Soloveitchik learns from this Midrash the imperative to emulate God in this very respect. As we live our lives, we make mistakes, we create "worlds"

that shouldn't have been brought into existence. But we have the ability, and the responsibility, to recreate. And if we do it right, we can even raise something pristine and beautiful from the ruins. We can transform the very foundations of our existence.

Ultimately, this is what true accountability means. Being responsible for the lives we have built for ourselves, acknowledging our missteps, and resolving to transform those misdeeds, is the ultimate creative act.



Wisdom of the Heart

In general, the head is perceived to be the seat of wisdom and intellect, while the heart is the source of emotion. And yet in an intriguing piece of Torah, these polar opposites are woven together with the repetition of the phrase *chacham lev* or 'wise-heart' a total of seven times, when referencing the leaders and builders of the tabernacle.¹ The question, therefore, is what is the meaning behind this unique phrase?²

Academic pursuits are generally considered intellectual. Subjects like mathematics, philosophy and science are typically explored in the theoretical cognitive realm. Even fields of study that can have practical application on a day-to-day basis often do not actually affect the manner in which one lives or the character that

one represents.

Judaism in its truest sense, however, requires a combination of cerebral, behavioural and spiritual rigour. It requires a commitment of heart, mind and practice. Whilst those endowed with great knowledge may be deemed knowledgeable, the manner in which they conduct themselves will ultimately be the yardstick that defines whether or not they are a *talmid chacham* - a scholar of wisdom. The fact that this title requires the practical application of wisdom, not just the theoretical knowledge, differentiates it from almost all other academic or intellectual pursuits and offers insights into the deeper meaning of the term '*chacham*'. To be a *chacham lev* therefore, is to be an academic of thought and action - someone with the ability to harmonise considerations, feelings and practice. It is not just about one's regular intelligence or IQ, but one's emotional intelligence or EQ.

The archetypical Jewish prayer, the *Shema*, states, '[the Torah] that I command you today, should be on your heart.'³ The obvious question is why the Torah should be *on* one's heart, rather than *in* one's heart? If the Torah is of such great importance, one would assume it ought to be internalized, rather than situated outside of one's very being. This subtle difference may add depth to our understanding of the term *chacham lev*.

Every person in some shape or form is touched or moved at different moments in their life. It may be a definitive milestone with family or friends, a breath-taking view, an intense musical moment or a powerful encounter - everyone feels moved at least once. Judaism views these inspirational moments as gifts - opportunities that God, so to speak, places upon our heart.

Once placed upon our heart - acceptance is up to us. The daily declaration that the Torah is placed *on* one's heart - rather than *in* one's heart - is a constant reminder of our responsibility to become an active player in the process and the need for us to recognize and internalise these unique spiritual gifts rather than letting them pass us by.

If we return, therefore, to the verses recounting the building of the Sanctuary, we can now understand the meaning behind the repetition of the description of the 'wise-hearted' people. True wisdom is not merely intellectual talent, but an emotional appreciation, not the superficial exposure to moving moments, rather the ability to notice the sacred and invite it into the day-to-day. All of us on numerous occasions are faced with both knowledge based content and experiential emotional moments. In order to earn the title of *chacham lev* - wise-hearted, it is upon us not to simply notice or learn, but to synthesize these unique experiences simultaneously into our heads, hearts and daily lives. It is thus our responsibility to truly live that which we learn. And perhaps this is the reason that those words of the *Shema* are written inside the *tefillin* that are worn daily during the Morning Prayer services, with one piece next to our heads and one piece next to our hearts and hands, neither of which can be worn in isolation. We are born with many blessings - a good brain, a kind heart and capable hands - but it is up to us and only us, to successfully weave together our intellect with our emotions and express it through our actions in order to earn wisdom of the heart.

SUMMARY:

We identify the head as the seat of intellect, and

the heart as the source of emotion. Wisdom can generally be attributed to those who refine their intellect and kindness generally attributed to those who work on their hearts. In that context, when the Torah unusually and repeatedly weaves these two concepts together in its use of the term wise-heart it leaves us wondering what deeper underlying message it might behold.

1. *Exodus* 35:25; 35:35; 36:1; 36:2; 36:8.
2. This question is also asked by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, *Emek Hadavar* 31:6.
3. *Deuteronomy* 6:6.



Why Do It?

This week's Torah portion begins with a few verses about Shabbat, and then the entire remainder deals with the building of the Tabernacle. From this juxtaposition, the Sages derive that one cannot build the Tabernacle on Shabbat. One might think that since the Tabernacle is a means through which an individual attains a deeper relationship with God, the building of it overrides Shabbat. But this is not so. Why?

I think the reason is that "building" is ultimately a mundane act. And when we involve ourselves in the mundane - no matter for what meaningful purpose - we can too easily and quickly forget why we are doing it.

A nurse can take blood all day long and turn into a blood taker - not someone who is helping

save human lives. A volunteer in the Third World, helping dig ditches for irrigation, can become a ditch digger, not a person contributing to the development of a nation. And someone building God's Sanctuary can come to look at himself as merely a builder.

Shabbat is the day to stop and remember. It is a day to stop doing what we are doing and remind ourselves why exactly we are doing it. If the answer is a good one, then Shabbat will help infuse meaning into the week. And if the answer is not a good one, then Shabbat will (hopefully) help steer our lives toward more meaningful accomplishment.

If we don't stop on Shabbat and refocus, then even the building of God's Tabernacle can lose its meaning to us. All the more so, the myriad other tasks we might find ourselves involved in. We vitally need that perceptive - every week, without exception.

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