

Calmness – *Nichutah*

The words of the wise are stated gently.

In being good, do not be called evil.¹

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Nichuta is one of the last middot considered in *Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh*. We may find it at first surprising to encounter it so near the end, after so much effort already has been expended in transforming ourselves from mere selves into souls. We might expect it nearer the beginning, after *seder* or *menuchat ha-nefesh*. In fact, we may at first not understand how to distinguish it from *menuchat ha-nefesh*. Therefore, we begin by reminding ourselves that *menuchat ha-nefesh* is concerned with maintaining our ability to embrace the future in the presence of the other person despite the interference of inconsequential events. In other words, as we have explained, it is an extension of *seder* into the dimension of time. *Nichuta* is different and more difficult.

We might re-contextualize *Nichuta* best by understanding it as if it were translated as disinterestedness. That is, the final two middot on our list, *nichuta* and *prishut* represent two dimensions of Mussar consciousness achieved as a result of sustained work through the entire list of middot so far undertaken. Both dimensions involve expressions of disinterestedness. *Nichuta* disinterestedness is expressed as engagement to distinguish it from disinterestedness expressed in separation, or *prishut*. *Nichuta*, then, describes a mode of action of the person who has done the midda work and has succeeded in transforming his self into a soul; how does that person act in the world and how does she maintain the presence of that soul as she interacts with people and in situations of every kind? The answer to this question is, ultimately: through *prishut*. *Nichuta* is a station on the way to *prishut* or a preliminary form of *prishut*. In stating it in this way we already begin to foreshadow how *prishut* will be understood. That is, not in the conventional sense of separation, but in what might be better called radical disinterestedness. *Nichuta* is the first stage of disinterest, properly understood. As we have seen some middot are the *kibbush* expression of what is expressed in a different midda as *tikkun*. Thus, *nichuta* is the *kibbush* expression of *prishut*. If *prishut* will be understood as radical

^{1 1} Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 171.

disinterestedness, then *nichuta* can be understood as disinterested engagement.

Disinterestedness is not to be understood as indifference. On the contrary, especially in relation to the midda of *nichuta*, disinterested engagement is engagement with the other in which the needs of the self have been contained and expressed as the desire of the soul to serve the other. Far from indifference, disinterestedness is engagement unfiltered by the yetzer hara.

Thus we return to the statement for Chesbon Ha-Nefesh above: “The words of the wise are stated gently. Why does the midda of *nichuta* begin with a consideration of the words of the wise? Because we understand that a wise person is one who has already succeeded in constructing his or her soul out of a self. The mussar definition of wisdom is thus: the person who has succeeded in creating a soul for herself. That said, the soul is always in flux and only continued vigilance and heightened vigilance can maintain it. The wise person seeks naturally to do good in all of her interactions with other people and in all situations in which those interactions take place. In doing that good it is important not to do evil. In other words, the very fact of our wisdom draws the attention of others to us and we must be sure that in acting for the good we do not cause evil which would not only impact the state of our soul but also influence others’ perception of our spiritual practice. Reminding ourselves that we understand the word good to be a place-holder for bearing the burden of another, and evil as acting to efface the other, then acting with wisdom requires that in acting for the other we do not manage to efface him. In simple terms this means that how we speak, how answer, how we express ourselves even through body language, must be done with the gentleness of wisdom. This draws others to the goodness we are acting out and helps them, in fact, to recognize and call it goodness.

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Now that we have re-conceptualized *Nechuta* as “disinterested engagement” we must explore how this unfolds in our lives. Once again the central idea to keep in mind is that of self and other. “When we engage in the world” we conventionally understand the meaning of the “we” in that statement, or more accurately, the “I” implied in that sentence to be synonymous with the self, with our self. Yet it is the radical nature of Mussar to teach that there is another way to interact with others and that is by

understanding the “I” as a soul rather than as a self. Since we already know that a soul is precisely the state of individual being in which the self has been contracted to open a larger and larger space for the other within that state of being, this way of encountering the other in the world requires, by definition, that the other is encountered in the world through the eyes of that other. Specifically, in the context of this *midda* that means that when we attempt to act to bear the burden of the other all self-righteousness must be absent from that act. When the other is present as part of our vision then the self is not the actor, rather the soul is the actor in that visioning process. Once we have envisioned our actions from out of the soul we are no longer concerned with what profit for the self is in those actions. That is the disappearance of self-righteousness. Thus it is self-righteousness, the expectation of self gratification and reward, which is the evil that is latent in all of our attempts to do good and it is that evil that *Heshbon HaNefesh* warns against in its definition of *Nechuta*.

The “solution” to this problem is, once again, in an act of *kibbush*. We have spoken before about how certain *middot* are precisely *kibbush middot*. That is, that in fully enacting certain *middot* we find ourselves in areas of action which are restraining or constraining in nature. The relationship between *kibbush* and *tikkun* requires more clarification at this point. Whether it manifests itself in a *middah* that is amenable to both *kibbush* and *tikkun*, or as in this case, in a *middah* that is entirely concerned with *kibbush* or in one entirely concerned with *tikkun*, the basic principles are the same. *Kibbush* is defined as the act of restraining, constraining *shrinking* the “space” in our personal identity taken up by self so that there is more “space” within that identity for the other. IN our tradition, this phenomenon is expressed in narrative in the *kabalistic* idea of *tzimzum*. That is, we imagine that the universe itself was created by the Divine act of constraint of the Divine identity in order to make room for the other than Divine, namely the created universe. Similarly, we experience the “creation” of our soul in the act of *kibbush* akin to *tzimzum*. Just as the narrative of creation has as its goal the transformation of the pluralistic Universe containing God and the material world such that a mutuality of concern and service results in the establishment of a pluralistic unity adhering to reality, so too, in the individual, the transformation of the self into a soul, a pluralistic unity comprised of the self and the world of others, is the goal of Mussar practice, truly the

goal of Torah. This then is the subject of *tikkun*. The *tikkun* attached to the specific subject of *nechuta*, is, as we've mentioned, enacted by the next *middah* we will consider, namely, *prishut*.

Thus, we return to *nechuta*. How do we cultivate “disinterested engagement”? First of all, by cultivating engagement! *Nechuta* enjoins us to engage with the world, with people, with politics, with community, with all the machinations of everyday life. However, it teaches us to engage in that world in such a way that in pursuing good we do no evil. We now understand that pursuing the good absent doing evil is a matter of pursuing that good in such a way as to remove the inevitable desire for praise and reward that our *yetzer hara* seeks for the good that we do. This requires an act of *kibbush*. We must first recognize the desire for praise and reward that wells up in us as we pursue the good. Then we must recognize that this desire is emerging from our *yetzer hara*. Then we must recognize that the *yetzer hara* always reacts out of *pachad* or fear therefore we must ascertain what it is we are afraid of? Finally, we must judge the legitimacy of that fear and on the assumption that it is unfounded, that it represents, typically, a childish desire to be recognized, we push it out of our way and allow the needs of the other to fill the space left within us in its absence. In doing so we will, in fact, experience a joy or pleasure, far greater than the one we sought from praise and reward. This joy will, in turn, lead us to begin to contemplate the possibility of *tikkun* that awaits us through the *middah* of *prishut*.