

Nikiut (Cleanliness)

*Let no stain or ugliness be found in your possessions or in your home,
and surely not on your body or clothes¹.*

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The *middah* of *nikiut* might be better understood as dignity. In the second section of these *shiurim* on this *middah* we will deal with the idea of *nikiut* or dignity as regards the interior life of a person, but it would be misleading not to focus here on how seriously and profoundly our tradition takes the idea of *nikiut* or dignity as regards the exterior life. In *Heshbon Ha-Nefesh* this concern is explained in a two-fold way. First, that as the soul absorbs the plethora of sensations that comes to it from the outside and gains mastery over them, *nikiut* emerges as one of the essential elements of this mastery. In this sense, *nikiut* is an extension of the *middah* of *seder*. Second, Rav Mendal points out, our appearance can either repel people from us or draw them near to us and that we know this because, in fact, we are drawn near to or repelled by people depending on their appearance. A dirty and disheveled appearance might repel us, despite the fact that the person from whom we are repelled might be a great sage or other worthy individual. If we are repelled by such a person how much more sensitive must we be not to repel others who might benefit from coming into contact with us? If we take this a step further we will recognize that it is precisely our concern to bear the burden of the other which compels us to take *nikiut* seriously by, on the one hand, not being repelled by those who are dirty or disheveled, recognizing our obligation to respond to them as the people they are under the dirt and dishevelment, and on the other hand assuming the responsibility ourselves not to cause others to be repelled from us.

Yet this emphasis on exteriority can lead us into deeper regions of thought. In our *shiurim* on the previous *middot* we have been concerned with the formation of the soul. We have learned that the soul is comprised of a *yetzer hara* and a *yeter tov*, and that the contraction of the *yetzer hara* or the “self” clears the space for the *yetzer tov* and its subsequent embrace of the other as part and parcel of the make-up of our soul. Thus we learn that ultimately as souls we are made-up of both self and other. The *middah* of *nikiut* must now be considered in this process in so far as it addresses the fact that the always-

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Cheshbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 141.

developing soul only exists within an actual body and that only through the actions of that actual body can we know anything about the soul. We have spoken about the pain that occurs when the self is constricted to allow the other to be embraced into the *yetzer tov*. In this context *nikiut* is an externalization of the constriction of the self. Just as the soul contracts to reveal the *yetzer tov* that stands ready to embrace the other, so also *nikiut* represents the contraction of the self through attention to cleanliness of appearance in order to reveal the externalization of the *yetzer tov* that stands ready to greet/embrace the other. Thus uncleanness is an expression of *yetzer hara* or self-absorption and cleanliness is an expression of *yetzer tov* or service of the other. More importantly, these two actions or dimensions of our development are not separate. The contraction of the *yetzer hara* and our attention to our appearance are mirror images, if you will, of the same, simultaneous action. The welcoming of others that we signal through a clean and neat appearance is a reflection of the same and simultaneous expansion of the *yetzer tov*.

We immediately recognize a risk, perhaps identify an irony: attention to the outer facets of our appearance is more conventionally associated with self-absorption than not! The idea of preening, or adopting an obsessive or ostentatious concern with our appearance does not suggest to us the values that we associate with either the scholar or the sage. This precisely points out the importance and difficulty of *nikiut*. We have seen that each of the *middot* take their place of importance in negotiating between *olam hazeh* and *olam haba*, while at the same time they present potential difficulties in our practicing them correctly. In the case of *nikiut* the importance is clear: the externalization of the contraction of the self in the creation of a soul by which the other is *actually* made to feel welcome in the embrace of the *yetzer tov*. The difficulty now presents itself: even as the soul is revealed by the contraction of the self, we have learned already, that there is pain involved in this contraction; a pain that must be suffered. The *middah* of *savlanut*, patience or sufferance precedes the *middah* of *nikiut* for a reason: Impatient with the pain of contracting the self people sometimes apply the salve of obsession or ostentation of appearance. Thus, *nikiut* must be concerned not only with clean and appropriate appearance, but also with balanced and modest appearance. *Nikiut*, then, means more than simple cleanliness, it means appropriateness. More specifically, it means ascertaining the appropriate external manifestation, culturally conditioned to a certain

degree, of an internal contraction of the self and the revelation of the place within us for another.

It is this process, the process of ascertaining the appropriate external manifestation of an internal contraction of the self that impresses upon us the understanding of *nikiut* in what we would call dignity. At its heart, *nikiut* requires that we recognize that the process of creating a soul for ourselves, so to speak, is the highest action of our consciousness, the reflection of the pursuit of the Divine as it is manifest in our lives. The manifestation of this process requires that we treat, not ourselves, but the process of creating our souls, with the highest esteem. *Nikiut* is then one of the manifestations of a complex *middah* that we will explore in much more detail below, the *middah* of *kavod*, or honor. Dignity is the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed and is accompanied by a formal reserve or seriousness of manner, appearance, or language appropriate to the cultivation of a place for the Divine within us. When we confuse the dignity of ourselves with the dignity of the process of creating a soul we pervert *nikiut* from cleanliness to ostentation. When we differentiate between the two not only do we master *nikiut*, but we begin to create the elements of *kavod* that will serve us later in our spiritual development.

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While *nikiut* is concerned with external appearances first, it also refers to cultivating cleanliness or dignity internally as well. What does this mean? What are the “stains” or instances of “ugliness” that can mar the “appearance” of the inner life or soul? Our inner life is, first and foremost, defined by thoughts. ugly thoughts, thoughts that stain the soul, must be understood as those thoughts which precisely serve the self at the expense of the other. When our minds and hearts combine to produce thoughts which aggrandize ourselves as against producing a sense of obligation to welcome the entry of the other, when our thoughts guide us to close that space that we’ve described as the *yetzer tov* in favor of the *yetzer hara*, then we have sullied our soul. Such interior uncleanness is quite often concretized by the use of unclean language, even when that language is not outwardly articulated. The presence of such language in our mind or on our lips is always a sign of uncleanness despite the fact that it is so ubiquitous as to be considered inoffensive. When we refer to others or the situations for which we hold

others responsible with obscene or scatological language, whether spoken or thought, we are participating in the uncleanness of the soul. Such participation can occur, of course, even without the use of such language, but the use of such language is an undeniable sign of such uncleanness of spirit and should not be ignored even if it seems unavoidable.