

## ***Prishut* – Separation**

*Strengthen yourself so that you can stop lewd thoughts.  
Draw close to your spouse only when your mind is free, occupied only with thoughts of  
fulfilling your conjugal duties and procreating.<sup>1</sup>*

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In the preceding *shiurim* on *nechuta* I have already indicated that the definition for *prishut* that I will be offering is: “radical disinterestedness.” This is a difficult, complex and challenging *middah* that assumes that the person working on it has worked through all of the 12 *middot* that we have covered from the beginning. Such a person does not have to have achieved a spiritual transformation from, say *zaddik* to *hasid*, however he should have begun to create a personal identity that is no longer defined in terms only of self, but rather in terms of self and other, namely a soul. *Prishut* requires a soul to grapple with it. Like *nechuta*, *prishut* directs our meditation on our actions as they are undertaken to serve the other. Unlike *nechuta*, in *prishut* the struggle to remove any stain of self-righteousness, any desire for praise or reward is no longer the issue. Rather, the energy of *kibbush*, restraining the *yetzer hara* provides us with an experience of perfect satisfaction such that what the *yetzer hara* craves is not reward or praise but precisely “invisibility.” What the self desires for its satisfaction is not to be noticed!

In that light we approach not only *Heshbon Ha-Nefesh* and the definition of *prishut* we find there, but also much of the literature including *Mesillat Yesharim* regarding this *middah*. The context in which each of these great sages approach this *middah* is related to issues of intimacy, sexuality and marital fidelity. On the surface this seems distant from the context I have taught. Yet, I have learned from each and all of these masters regarding this *middah* and, as has been the case in the past, I am endeavoring to broaden and explain in more contemporary language the lessons they have taught. To put it bluntly, matters of sexual intimacy are the last bastions of self-absorption that even the most assiduous Mussar practitioner has difficulty avoiding. Sexual intimacy requires making the self vulnerable in a way that is different and more radical than almost any human act. In this state of vulnerability, naked and exposed, the *yetzer hara* emerges at its strongest in order to protect us. The form this “protection” will

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<sup>1 1</sup> Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 177.

take will vary widely from person to person. It can be as seemingly benign as craving praise and reward for our sexual performance, a violation of *nechuta*, to the much more serious and unfortunately not uncommon imposition of ourselves in place of the other, the effacing of the other by our desire, which results in various forms of sexual oppression. These forms of sexual oppression, as I have said, are exaggerated in those people who are often precisely striving to achieve the type of “invisibility” we are discussing. The danger of attempting to achieve radical disinterestedness before one is prepared spiritually to do so can result in a *yetzer hara* reaction with serious consequences. Thus our sages focus their attention on sexual intimacy in regard to the *middah* of *prishut*, almost defining it entirely in those terms, because it is in that sphere that it most often appears as a challenge to those on the spiritual path.

While it is true that it is still appropriate to understand the arena for assessing our behavior in regard to *prishut* is still connected to sexual intimacy, and, in fact, given the sexual oppression that is exhibited in and through the channels of contemporary popular culture, it is most certainly still an appropriate area of *heshbon*, it should not be understood as being limited to that arena. On the contrary, in a broader sense, it defines an arena for assessing our relationships with others: the often equally intimate relationship of care giving. In care giving an intimacy is also established and a vulnerability exposed within which our actions may be judged in terms of *prishut* or “radical disinterestedness.” In turn, the arena of care giving can be expanded to include not only instances in which we are actually caring for another person who is dependent upon us for that care, but to our relationship as care giver to every other person with whom we are in relationship. This wider understanding of giving care is, in fact, infinitely extended such that *prishut* is the *middah* that describes our relationship to the Infinite Other upon whose care we depend and Who depends upon our care. This is expressed in the fact that the word *prishut* itself is a rabbinic rendering of a concept of separation that appears in the Torah not as *prishut* but as *kedusha*. It is of interest that the same focus on both our caring for others generally, and concern for care in sexual intimacy is found in the book of Leviticus, the biblical book most associated with the concept of *kedusha*.

“Radical disinterestedness” is not an action but a consequence. We do not and cannot will ourselves to be “radically disinterested.” Rather, the work that we do in creating for ourselves, or better out of ourselves, souls results in the attainment of “radical disinterestedness.” It is the proof, if you will, that we have indeed succeeded in creating a soul, and more importantly, that we have succeeded in maintaining it. Therefore, we must understand *prishut* by reviewing yet again the steps that are involved with this task, the task of life itself: the task of transforming our personal identity from self to soul.

We begin by remembering that we are not responsible for our own creation. Rather, we come into being beholden to another, indebted, as it were, to the other. In being, our consciousness is formed as the expression of the tension between our *yetzer hara*, our drive to preserve our self, and our *yetzer tov*, our equally indigenous drive to serve the other to whom we are beholden. Therefore, what we know as “our identity” is the “place” where this tension is enacted. When this “place” is filled entirely by the *yetzer hara*, our consciousness is totally self-absorbed. Were it to be filled entirely by another, we could not exist. But when it is filled with the *yetzer tov* it is not filled by the other but by service to the other and this service to the other turns out to fill the deepest desires of the *yetzer hara* through the joy it affords us. The self does not disappear but is most deeply engaged through its service to another such that as a self it becomes invisible, or radically disinterested. Disinterested *in itself*. It no longer craves praise or reward, it no longer *thinks of itself* per se, but is fulfilled invisibly by the service of the other. This is the accomplishment of what we have also called *tikkun*. The soul of such a person now holds both self and other. The self fills the place of consciousness invisibly and the other fills the place of consciousness proper.

The process by which this *tikkun* is achieved is the work of *Heshbon Ha-Nefesh*. Our meditation of each of the *middot* in turn contributes to the creation of an inner-environment in which this transformation can occur. The first and most fundamental *middah* to which we return again and again is *seder*. The mundane work of arranging the details of our life such that we can begin to be available, can begin to create that “space” in which the service of the other can take place is never finished. Even as *seder* helps us

achieve inner orderliness, *menuchat ha-nefesh* helps us to achieve orderliness in the face of external experiences. As these two *middot* begin to create the outline of our *nefesh*, our soul, *savlanut* prepares us to suffer what at first appears to our *yetzer hara* as the invasion of the other. We learn to suffer the other. This is extended through the *middah* of *nikiut* by which we signal our welcome to the other through the pleasantness of our physical appearance. This *middah* constitutes our assumption of dignity in the world. Next we learn that in order to truly serve the other we must only and always act with forethought. This is the domain of the *middah* of *haritzut*. This *middah* leads to the imperative to act with alacrity once we have engaged in appropriate forethought: the *middah* of *zerizut*.

These first *middot* prepare the ground, as it were, for our profound engagement with another person. The *middah* that initiates that true engagement with the other is *anava*. Through the work of this *middah* we transform the threat that the other initially presents to our *yetzer hara* into the love that we feel for a teacher, by seeing every other person as our potential teacher. Learning to appreciate everyone we meet as a teacher requires that we learn to communicate with them only after reflection upon the good our communicating can do. This is learned through the *middah* of *shtika*. The combined affects of our work on these *middot* culminates in the *middah* of *zedek*, the *middah* that begins to actualize the very existence of our soul by enacting the Torah commandment to love our fellow as ourself. In doing so we have re-defined the concept of our personal identity, the concept of our “self,” such that it is now understood as being the self and the other embraced in the same spiritual space. When we can speak out of the pluralistic unity that now constitutes our identity, we are said to be speaking truth, *emet*. Speaking *emet* leads us to make the difficult changes in our way of living through *zedakah* that force us to put the material needs of the other ahead of our material desires. This is accomplished through the *middah* of *kimutz*. The accomplishment of this second set of *middot* brings us to the work of *nechuta* and *prishut* that we have been lately exploring. In these *middot* we begin to experience the joy of *tikkun* that is the goal of our work. We learn that in working through *prishut* we are enacting *kedusha*, holiness.