

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Ki Savo

“HEAR AND LISTEN, [CHILDREN OF] ISRAEL: TODAY YOU HAVE BECOME A NATION...” (DEVARIM 27:9)

THE PARASHA DISCUSSES the covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people, and the blessings that will result from the Jews’ observance of the *mitzvos*, or, G-d forbid, the curses if the opposite occurs. The S’forno (ibid. 9 -10) explains that to ensure that B’nei Yisrael listen to Hashem’s will, there are two components necessary in addition to the covenant of blessings and curses: B’nei Yisrael need to picture in their minds, and to focus on understanding the idea, that today they have become a nation of servants of Hashem.

**In this way, abstract, intellectual points can be brought to the level of the emotions**

A basic understanding of the concepts of *mussar* surely includes the fundamental element of *tziyur chushi* – vivid imagery. As Reb Yisrael Salanter taught, a powerful and essential technique which appeals to the senses, and thereby triggers an emotional awakening, is to imagine or paint a mental picture of the idea under study. In this way, abstract, intellectual points can be brought to the level of the emotions, which are more potent and decisive in determining our behavior. In fact, one of Reb Yisrael’s closest students, the Alter from Kelm, is quoted as having said: “The difference between a righteous *tzadik* and a wicked *rasha* is their ability to visualize – to make a *tziyur chushi*.” If a person is able to make the rewards of Gan Eden and the punishments of Gehenom a real picture before his eyes, he will never sin. The more real and concrete we can make these truths before our mind’s eye, the more they will influence our actions. If so, why did Moshe command the Jews to visualize and also to contemplate? Wouldn’t the second ingredient be unnecessary? If the Jews can create that vivid picture in their minds of being servants of Hashem, shouldn’t that be a powerful force to direct all their actions onto the proper path?

**Apparently, it is not enough**

Apparently, it is not enough. A person can see the most powerful images before his eyes and arouse his emotions into a religious fervor, but if he doesn’t take the time to think, to process and to apply what he has seen, it will not have a proper, lasting impact. After one has piqued his emotions, he needs to use his intellect as well, to think about the lessons to be learned and their application to his daily life. The Torah tells us how the nations of the world also heard and saw the miracles in Egypt and at the Red Sea, and yet they were not affected by them. They trembled, shook and were frightened to the core of their being, but there was no permanent result that changed them for the good. Why? They didn’t contemplate and think about what they had witnessed, and how it should affect their behavior.

**How does this apply to my actions today, tomorrow and for the coming year?**

As we draw closer to the Days of Judgement, we need to be preparing ourselves with the emotional method of *mussar* study known as *mussar b’hispaalus*, which includes using vivid imagery and the repetition of inspiring texts with an moving melody. As we kindle our emotions to feel greater devotion to serving our Creator, let us not forget the essential step of intellectually processing that emotional fervor: What should I therefore do differently? How does this apply to my actions today, tomorrow and for the coming year? If we use these powerful tools to improve ourselves, we will see a real change in our behavior, and merit a favorable judgment for a year of health, *nachas* and continued growth as a servants of Hashem.