

RABBI SHOLOM M. RUBASHKIN



SOLID

FOUNDATIONS

*Eight Torah principles to provide
clarity, strength, and emotional well-being*

SOLID FOUNDATIONS

*Eight Torah Principles to provide
clarity, strength, and emotional well-being*

WHEN ASKED TO DISTILL the source of the clarity and strength that carried me through the ten years of my *nisayon* with focus, inner peace, and even joy,¹ I point to eight principles of Torah and *avodah*.

Together, these principles provide a Yid with the truth and clarity that are the foundation of emotional well-being and dispel the numerous confusions and distortions which are at the root of emotional distress.

The eight foundations are:

1. Neshamah
2. Emunah
3. Bitachon
4. Kavanah haBriyah
5. Torah
6. Mitzvos
7. Teshuvah
8. Simcha

¹ This was even noticeable to those around me, to the point of being my defining characteristic. One of my fellow Jews in a place called prison told my family of a conversation he overheard between two guards not long after my miraculous release. “Who is the guy that got a commutation?” one of them was asking the other. Searching for a way to describe me, the other guard didn’t use any physical characteristics or even a memorable anecdote to identify me. “You know the guy who was always happy?” he said. “That guy.”

When they are properly understood and applied to real life, these foundations ensure that a Yid will enjoy emotional well-being no matter what he experiences or faces in life, good or bad.

They are the keys to clarity, a compass to guide him through any storm. They keep him centered on Hashem and cognizant that Hashem is the source of all *brachos*, protecting him from the false pride that undermines his connection to Hashem. They invigorate his life and provide the foundation for good *middos*.

They insulate a Yid from the influence and perspectives of the world around him and the many emotional struggles that flow from them, so common in those around him, like low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, trauma, etc.

IT'S NOT MY PURPOSE here to list all important principles or to establish the truth of these principles. The intended audience for this writing is *frum Yidden* for whom that should not be necessary, and many *seforim* and books have been written for that purpose for those that might need them.

Instead, I'm simply identifying—and highlighting aspects of—those principles that enable us to shoulder our burdens, face our challenges with clarity and strength, and live our lives with dedication, energy, and enthusiasm.

This purpose has also dictated the order of my list. The foundation of all foundations is obviously to believe in and know about Hashem, as the Rambam puts it in the opening of the *Yad Hachazakah*. Here, however, since we're discussing the practical application of already recognized and accepted principles, we will start with the topic of *neshamah*, which is the practical start that sets us on the right track.

Writing about the fundamentals of Torah and Yiddishkeit, where the wrong word or even the smallest nuance can have drastic implications, is always a task undertaken with trepidation. I beseech Hashem to guide my pen to express the truth of Torah.

1. NESHAMAH

At my core, I am a *neshamah*. That changes everything.

AT THE START of our *tefillos* each morning, we say, “*Elokai, neshamah shenasata bi, tehorah hi*—Hashem, the *neshamah* You have placed within me is pure.” This *neshamah* is the essence of who we are and should define us. Letting other aspects of our being define us causes many problems, particularly when we face adversity.

Our bodies and *neshamos* are integrated and seem to be one entity, but in fact they are two distinct and separate entities, with different functions, rooted in two very different realities.

The body² is a native of the natural world. Its instincts, perspectives, and desires are shaped by the rules that govern it and the values that derive from it. When it faces a problem, it interprets it and responds to it based on the natural order of the world.

The *neshamah* is from a different reality, the world of holiness and truth. Its instincts, perspectives, and desires are shaped by the truth of Torah and the values that derive from it. When it faces a problem, it interprets it through the clarity of Torah and responds accordingly.

These two opposing forces each claim to define us and to accurately present the world around us.

The body urges us to think of ourselves primarily as a body begrudgingly saddled with a *neshamah*. It asserts that the world is as it appears and claims that we need to center ourselves on that reality and respond to it on its terms if we are to thrive, or even just survive. It encourages us to pursue physical pleasure and self-serving pursuits.

The *neshamah* insists that we are actually souls tasked with elevating the body. It asserts that the world is not what it appears to be. The truth about the world is to be found in the Torah, and we need to center ourselves on that reality. Everything about ourselves and everything we experience needs to be understood through Torah in order to know how to act—and react—properly. It encourages us to pursue connection with Hashem and fulfill the

2 By which I mean, primarily, the *nefesh* that animates the body.

mission He gave us, which will bring true *brachos* and enjoyment in this world and the World to Come.

Which one is correct? Who am I and what kind of world do I live in? What is valuable in life? Getting this right is the first and most important thing, and it's doubly important when confronting a challenge. Getting it wrong has serious consequences.

When we think of ourselves as a body inhabiting a dangerous and indifferent world, and react to our troubles from that perspective, we actually set aside the Divine strength and transcendence of our *neshamos* and become subject to all the limitations inherent in nature. Not only that, but our *neshamos* are also dragged down with our bodies and suffer those constraints.

The result will be fear and anxiety, causing us to feel overwhelmed, outmatched, and vulnerable. Rabbeinu Bacheye writes that when a person sees the world as a force to be reckoned with and puts his trust in reassuring elements of the world, Hashem allows that natural process to unfold. That means that the person who defines himself as subject to the natural world doesn't only feel vulnerable; he truly becomes vulnerable.

This is why recognizing and embracing your core identity as a *neshamah*—and the clear-eyed perspective on reality that comes with that—is such an important foundation.

When we embrace our identity as a *neshamah*, and express it through Torah and *mitzvos*, we bring the strength and the clarity of the *neshamah* to bear on our situation. By connecting to Hashem, we can tap into His infinite strength and overcome the obstacles we face.

The feelings of fear, anxiety, and vulnerability find no ground to take root, because the world in which threats have power independent of Hashem is seen as the illusion it is.

Instead, our *neshamah* recognizes the Torah as the correct address to properly understand our situation and to direct us in navigating it successfully, when we might otherwise have looked to the world or to other nations.

IN TALKING WITH MANY PEOPLE about their challenges in life, I've found that some are misled into thinking that since other nations face

what seem to be similar challenges and have developed an approach to addressing them, we can adopt or adapt those approaches to our own lives. I would say that we shouldn't, but the truth is that we simply can't.

Not only are we not starting from the same conception of reality; we are simply not like the nations around us. Our core, our *neshamah*, is fundamentally different, which means that the causes of our emotional distress are different, and because of our *neshamah* and our connection to Hashem, the way we combat that emotional distress is different as well.

Recognizing that we're different should make it very obvious that we need to turn to Torah. You have to use the solution that matches the problem. Even if everyone else will pull up to a gas pump when their car is empty, someone driving an electric car won't even consider it. That solution, effective as it may be for everyone else,³ is simply not relevant for his car.⁴

This is why it is so important to start with the recognition that each of us is a *neshamah*. It's that knowledge that makes it clear that we have to "drive past the gas pump" and turn for insight and guidance to the Source of life and truth, Hashem Himself, through His holy Torah.

I always referred to Otisville as "a place called prison," choosing to identify with my *neshamah*, which was merely located there, and not with my body, which was incarcerated there.⁵ Having achieved that clarity, even my body did not experience incarceration. Unlike many others, I never had to resort to pharmaceutical tranquilizers or anti-depressants to survive. Eventually, I also merited to be freed from physical incarceration and return home to my waiting family. Thank You, Hashem.

3 It's worth noting that the approach of those around us is often ineffective and even destructive, as even a cursory assessment will show.

4 As in all matters, *rabbonim* and *da'as Torah* have the final say in determining the correct way to deal with each individual situation.

5 Discussed in detail in "The Inside Story," pages 104 and 410-413

2. EMUNAH

We already possess certainty and clarity about the most fundamental aspects of life.

YIDDEN ARE CALLED “*ma’aminim bnei ma’aminim*”—believers, the sons of believers. When Avraham Avinu recognized the Creator and passed the ten *nisyonos*, he merited that his descendants for all generations would have an unshakeable *emunah* embedded in their *neshamos*.

Our *neshamos* are one with Hashem. The essence of the *neshamah* remains unaffected by the misleading world around us. It continues to inhabit the reality where everything is clear and truth is readily perceived.

This clear-eyed aspect of the *neshamah* means that even while he’s living in this confusing world, a Yid, by his very nature, is able to perceive the truth and reality of Hashem and G-dliness. This ability is the source of *emunah*.

Emunah is not what the world calls “blind faith,” a heartfelt conviction that takes over when the mind can no longer provide certainty. *Emunah* is certainty—a certainty rooted in the perception of the *neshamah*, which sees and knows things that our physical senses and our minds cannot detect.

The *neshamah* and its clarity give the Yid certitude about the truth of Torah. We can’t see gravity or electricity with our physical eyes, but the “eyes” of our mind tell us that they’re real and practical with absolute certainty. Similarly, the eyes of our *neshamos* can see the truth—and the practical implications of that truth—with certainty, even though it is beyond our physical senses.

We see this demonstrated in the various “*bas kols*”—the Heavenly proclamations—that are described by *Chazal*. What would be the purpose of an announcement that is inaudible to its intended audience?! Why announce, “Return, wayward sons!” for example, as described in *Midrash Eichah*, if the wayward sons can’t hear it?

The answer is that they’re not inaudible to their audience, even if they are inaudible to the human ear. The *neshamah*, attuned to the reality beyond the physical, hears and is moved by these pronouncements, which we experience as otherwise unaccountable

stirrings to *teshuvah*.

Clarity rooted in *emunah* is the only proper foundation for life. Even our intellects only work when we have *emunah*; it is only by basing our lives on *emunah* that we are able to think clearly.

People strive to make their decisions logically, but in real life, logic is not a compass—which always points towards true north—but a GPS, which obediently helps you get to whatever destination you choose. Our emotions or appetites often set the destination, and the mind calculates the route, improvising and rationalizing until “you’ve reached your destination.” Our eyes are so blinded by self-interest, we may not even realize this is happening.

When our forefathers said *na’aseh v’nishma*, they were not only ensuring that their actions would be correct. They were also freeing their minds from the influence and distortion that the heart exerts in order to change the mind’s conclusions and allow it to indulge in its desires.

Unlike a foundation of mere logic, the foundation of *emunah*—the truth we perceive with our *neshamah*—is robust and unshakeable.

There are always aspects of a given situation that our understanding does not cover, and there’s always a counterpoint to our understanding, an alternative way of looking at things that introduces doubt. *Emunah*, by contrast, covers every aspect in its simplicity and, because it’s something the *neshamah* sees, is not subject to challenges and quibbles.

WHAT REALLY MAKES EMUNAH the bedrock that it is, are the truths that we see with our *emunah*. The Rambam enumerates thirteen such truths—each of which is an important part of a Yid’s foundation for life.

First, and most fundamental among them, is the existence of Hashem. He is One, without beginning, and without end. He is the Creator of all that exists and is continually creating and renewing existence. There is no other power but Him. Every other force we see in the world is merely an expression of His will, bringing about His desired outcome in the manner of His choosing.

These truths shield us from the emotional turbulence that comes

with a challenge. Without them, we would be tossed in the storm like a ship with no rudder.

Hashem has chosen to cloak His presence and give us the impression that the world works by natural cause and effect. That's a defining characteristic of our world. In fact, the word *olam*—world, is related to the word *he'elam*—concealment.

Things sometimes seem bleak. The forces we confront seem great, and all projected outcomes look bad. Without our *emunah*, we seem (and feel) powerless in the face of this adversity.

Our *emunah* pierces the illusion and sets us on firm ground.

A video is comprised of hundreds or thousands of still images displayed at high speed, creating the illusion of sequential movement and a great analogy for the illusory qualities of our world.

Each moment of our apparently seamless reality is independently created by Hashem. Living within that reality, we experience the illusion of cause and effect, but the sequence is, in truth, wholly contingent on Hashem's will. At any point, Hashem can create a different continuation or outcome—the miraculous salvation we need.

Not only does Hashem create everything, our *emunah* tells us that Hashem orchestrates every aspect of creation with Divine intention. As the Baal Shem Tov says, even a leaf blows in the wind by Divine intention and it's moved exactly that way by Hashem, for a purpose.

All the more so, when it comes to matters that impact Yidden, those who serve Him and fulfill His purpose in creation. We mention this special connection multiple times each day when we affirm our *emunah*: “*Shema Yisroel*,” we say, “*Hashem Elokeinu*”—Hashem is our G-d.

Everything that happens to us is exactly as Hashem intends it. Our *emunah* also tells us that He intends only our good.

Hashem is the essence of goodness. Our *chachamim* even say that “to do good to His creations” is one of the reasons Hashem created the world to begin with. He is our loving Father and everything He does—which is everything that happens—is good and for our

good. And He knows what is good for us better than we can know ourselves.

This was a great comfort to me during what seemed to be setbacks in my case. As an example, those around me who were filtering the experience through a natural lens felt that losing the appeal for resentencing before the district judge was a heavy loss.

Viewing these developments with *emunah*, guided by Torah, I insisted that it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I didn't understand why, but I knew this to be true with the certainty of my *neshamah*.

Years later, when Hashem granted my miraculous salvation through the good President Trump, the benefit of that “loss” became clear to all. Had the resentencing occurred, the judge would have, at best, conceded a few years and still issued a terrible sentence, say twenty years, or even fifteen. Within the natural order, that would have mollified some of my supporters and reduced support for the clemency that commuted my sentence after eight and a half years.

IDENTIFYING THE SOURCE and nature of *emunah* tells us something very important: *Emunah* is not a *madreigah* or a skill we need to acquire. As Yidden—*neshamos*—it's an inherent part of our nature. All we need to do is to uncover it and learn to rely on it. When we do, we gain absolute certainty about truths for which logic is incapable of providing certainty.

“That sounds great,” you might be saying, “but I don't **feel** that certainty.” That may be, but the Torah assures you that it's there. If you don't hear your *neshamah*, you have to examine the ideas and behaviors you've picked up in life and discard those ideas or behaviors that conceal your *neshamah*.

You need to learn and internalize the Torah, which brings your *neshamah* and its *emunah* to the fore, in your mind and in your life. Uncover it and bring it to bear on your life, because it's the foundation that will see you through even the strongest storms.

Sometimes, you do hear the voice of your *neshamah*. For example, you know that *parnassah* comes from Hashem, without question. Yet, you find yourself struggling with decisions that

should really flow naturally from that clarity. This is because the other part of yourself, your body, is just as certain about its perception of the world, and it makes very logical arguments.

When we hear these two voices, the culture around us trains us to ignore our *emunah*. Modern attitudes elevate the conclusions of the mind and dismiss anything that can't be understood and explained in logical terms as suspicious or outright false, *r"l*.

We know that's not correct. Just as we accept the testimony of our physical eyes even when we can't explain the how's or why's of what we see, we likewise need to accept the testimony of our *neshamah's* "eyes," (which is our inherent *emunah*), even if the part of us that wants to understand independently isn't quite there yet. By learning Torah, we will discover that the truth can also be presented in ways that are convincing to the mind, and that way, we can serve Hashem fully—body, heart, and mind.

3. BITACHON

Hashem wants us to trust in Him.

BITACHON MEANS TRUST; perfect tranquility of heart and mind.

This is not a state that occurs in nature. Every living thing has needs. It needs to acquire necessities and protect itself against dangers of one sort or another. Despite our best efforts to fill those needs, the future is unclear. We don't know how things will end up, and this troubles us. Should we have done something differently in the past? Should we be doing something different right now?

This anxiety and uncertainty are rooted in the impression we get from the world around us that the outcomes are shaped by our efforts. We'd better be sure we've done everything we can, and we've done it right. Even when we're sure that we have, we're still troubled, because there are myriad external factors and circumstances, over which we have zero control, which could undermine our efforts and lead to an undesirable outcome.

All of that anxiety would be perfectly justifiable if the world actually worked that way—but it doesn't. Torah grants us true tranquility because it reveals that the reality is very different. As we discussed earlier, everything in the world and in our lives is created and orchestrated by Hashem, not by our efforts—past or present. Furthermore, Hashem is the essence of goodness, and all He's done and will do in our lives is for our benefit.

Knowing that the future is entirely in Hashem's hands, and that it will be good, grants us the true tranquility that escapes those who believe that many forces, including themselves, contribute to their outcomes.

In fact, it is our *bitachon* itself that makes us worthy of Hashem's *brachah* and *yeshuah*. As with every *mitzvah*, to ensure that we are understanding and applying Bitachon correctly we need to learn about it in Torah, such as in *Sha'ar Habitachon* of Rabbeinu Bacheye.

THERE'S A POINT HERE that's widely overlooked, which gives rise to one of the most frequently asked questions:

We insist that everything Hashem has done—even things we

found unpleasant—was actually good even if we don't see how. This is the truth through which a Yid views everything that happens to him, as famously demonstrated by Nachum Ish Gam Zu and by his student, Rabi Akiva.⁶

But if unpleasantness can be good, how does knowing that Hashem will only give us goodness spare us from the anxiety that something unpleasant might be in store? It might be something Hashem knows is good and still be unpleasant.

The answer is in the details. Nachum Ish Gam Zu and Rabi Akiva were teaching us how to look at the past, what Hashem has already done, but this is not the way we're supposed to look to the future.

To understand the past, we use our *emunah*. It's a principle of faith that everything that exists or occurs is from Hashem and that Hashem is the perfection of goodness. It follows that anything that happened in the past was good, whether or not we found it pleasant.

When it comes to the future, Hashem tells us to trust in Him to do that which we are trusting Him to do, and to expect only open and obvious good, good that we can relate to. That's the foundation of our *bitachon*. It's not about "past performance" or any logical calculation or projection. Hashem tells us to trust Him, and we do.

As *Yidden*, when it comes to the future, we set aside the past completely—good or bad—and say, "I trust in Hashem that the future will be good and pleasant."

There doesn't have to be an explanation for how or why that will be true, even if it wasn't true in the past. We are a nation accustomed to Hashem's overflowing generosity and miracles, and we know that He is not bound by any limitations. It can be revealed good, and Hashem wants us to trust Him that it will be revealed good.

Although we accept Hashem's decrees with love, when faced with uncertainty and even (and especially) when the signs indicate that

6 Although they merited to actually (eventually) see the goodness in their suffering, their famous expressions of clarity about what Hashem had done—*gam zu l'tovah* and *kol d'avid Rachmana l'tav avid*—were expressed before they saw the revealed good.

trouble is brewing, we have the power and the obligation to change what is shaping up to be hidden good into open, obvious, pleasant good.

The way we effect that change, the true *hishtadlus*,⁷ is by fulfilling our obligation to trust in Hashem, embracing the clarity that the outcome rests only on His will and only He can change it. We then appeal to Him directly through *tefillah*⁸ with *bitachon* to change the outcome, and we strengthen ourselves in the study of Torah and the fulfillment of *mitzvos*, both in quantity and in *hiddur*.⁹

Part of *bitachon* is to engage in the natural means through which Hashem's *brachah* or *yeshuah* can be expressed, but this must be done with the understanding that it does not, in fact, affect the outcome and we're doing it only because that is the will of Hashem. This clarity will also guide us in how much time and energy to expend on these efforts and how to proceed when they demand concessions from our *avodas Hashem*.

It's important to remember that *bitachon* is not a matter of personal choice or a *madreigah* to aspire to once we feel ready. Hashem instructs us to trust Him,¹⁰ that is to say to expect—and as a certainty, not a possibility—that He will give us good that we can perceive and appreciate, not just hidden good.

Even if it's taking longer than we expect or if things look grim—even when the sword is at our very neck—Hashem tells us not to despair of His mercy and to continue to trust in Him and *daven* for our salvation.

The combination of *emunah* and *bitachon*, rooted in the clarity

7 Distinct from what is commonly called *hishtadlus*—practical, natural efforts like taking a job or visiting a doctor—which is merely the means through which Hashem will deliver the outcome and does not, in truth, impact the outcome.

8 Worthy of its own heading due to its importance, I'm including *tefillah* as an expression of *bitachon* due to space constraints.

9 Our trust in Hashem that He will agree to our will must coincide with our own commitment to fulfill His will.

10 In *Shaar HaBitachon*, Rabbeinu Bacheye points to the *pesukim* “*Bechanuni na b'zos*” and “*Bit'chu ba'Hashem adei ad*,” and classifies ignorance of this fact as one of the *mafsidim* which undermine our Bitachon.

and certainty of our *neshamah*, helps us look to the past with acceptance and to the future with confidence.

I found that my *bitachon* gave me the strength to deal with the most difficult part of life in a place called prison—getting out of bed in the morning. Many were so beaten down by the injustices of the past and the hopelessness of the future that they just couldn't face the day. My *bitachon* told me that the day would surely be good—clear and apparent good—and propelled me to my feet with energy and enthusiasm.

If night fell and I was still in Otisville, I looked back at the day with *emunah* that I had been where I needed to be, and I said “*gam zu l'tovah*,” and I looked to the morning with *bitachon* that I would surely be freed.

4. KAVANAS HABRIYAH

We were created for a purpose. So were our challenges and difficulties.

WHY DID HASHEM CREATE the heavens and the earth? *Chazal* tell us that the answer is in the very first word of the account of creation: *Bereishis bara Elokim*; for the sake of two things which are called *reishis*: the Torah and the *Yidden*.

The Torah also tells us that both Torah and the *neshamos* of the *Yidden* existed before the world was created. That means that Hashem didn't create the world so He could create the Torah and the *Yidden*—Hashem created the world so that the *Yidden* could keep the Torah specifically in a physical world.

When we set out to fulfill that purpose, a question immediately arises: Why didn't Hashem create a world in which our needs were assured as a matter of fact? That would free us from both the practical and the emotional burdens that result from the struggle to obtain our needs and leave us free to focus exclusively on serving Hashem.

For that matter, why does our service of Hashem itself require effort? Why didn't Hashem just create us with a refined nature, the ability and inclination to learn, and the sensitivity and focus to *daven* as we should?

To answer that, let's examine what it means to serve Hashem. When we hear that phrase, we naturally think of the things we are told to do—*daven*, learn Torah, fulfill *mitzvos*. If that was all there was to it, we would be entirely justified in asking why it's harder than it has to be to do those things.

But we know that there's more to the story than that—simply by looking around and noting that Hashem created our world, the physical world.

Someone once jokingly explained why it is that you always find things in the last place you look. “Obviously!” he said. “Once you find it, you stop looking!” If you see someone still looking, you can tell that they haven't found what they were looking for.

The spiritual worlds—the worlds of *malachim* and *neshamos*—were created before the physical world. Hashem already had beings that served Him with holy perfection; perfectly aligned to His will, perfectly engaged in the study of Torah, perfectly worshipping Him in song and *tefillah*.

Yet, He went on to create our world—a world where the truth is hard to believe and the right thing is difficult to do—because serving Hashem is not just about *davening*, or learning Torah, or doing *mitzvos*. Serving Hashem is *davening*, or learning Torah, or doing *mitzvos* even though it isn't obvious or easy.

Asking Hashem to eliminate the (admittedly difficult) process is like offering a collector a beautiful photocopy instead of a hand-painted masterpiece. The process is not incidental to the final product; it's the whole point!

The world around us is a big part of what makes things confusing and difficult, but the true confusion and difficulty lie within, as we discussed above.

Yes, at our core we are each a Divine *neshamah* that has perfect clarity, is good by its very nature, and is capable of overcoming any obstacle. But the life we experience is shaped by a struggle between that *neshamah* and a very different and contradictory *nefesh*, one that is rooted in the reality we readily perceive around us. It encourages us to center our lives on ourselves, striving to pursue gratification and avoid exertion.

You might think that that is just a set of values or perspectives that we decide to embrace or reject, but the Torah tells us that it's actually a part of ourselves that is actively, maliciously, and often deviously diverting us from truth and life.

That part of ourselves, the *yetzer hara*, operates primarily from our heart, the seat of instinct and emotion. Once it has stirred our emotions or appetites, it also seeks to expand its control to our minds, but only in a subordinate role—to rationalize its desires and conclusions and to plan ways to pursue them, not to seek truth or clarity to guide our actions.

Our *neshamah*, our *yetzer hatov*, is rooted in true reality. It sees through the facade around us and drives us to recognize our Creator and center our lives on connecting with Him and fulfilling the purpose of our creation. The *yetzer hatov* works primarily through the mind and intellect, which can find the truth in Torah and by Torah's light.

The mind seeks to not only withstand being controlled by the heart, it seeks to expand its control to include the heart. When the heart understands and relates to the truth of Hashem, true *ahavah*, love of Hashem, flows from the heart, along with passion and energy in rejecting the illusions of the world and serving Hashem.

By nature, the mind can control and direct the heart—even our anatomy has the head placed above the heart, unlike animals—but our instincts and emotions have years to take hold as habit before our minds mature and the *yetzer hatov* is able to weigh in properly. This sets the stage for the great struggle of our lives which is the essence of our *avodas Hashem*. That struggle is precious because it's a struggle.

Our *yetzer hara* pushes us to surrender to the instincts and emotions emerging from the world around us, making every effort to drag us—heart, mind, and soul—into the illusion. Pulling us in the other direction, our *yetzer hatov* tries to bring the clarity of Torah to the fore, guiding us not only to resist the call of our untamed hearts and of the world around us but to harness and excite our hearts with the passion and delight of holiness and truth.

Every thought we have, every impulse or interest we experience, stems from one of these two sources. There is no neutral. An idea

or impulse either expresses and cements the illusion in which we live, weakening our hold on the truth, or it flows from and affirms the truth, rejecting the illusion. This is an important thing to keep in mind. Many wrong and dangerous ideas are accepted into our minds or hearts without scrutiny because we believe neutrality is possible.

By overcoming our *yetzer hara* and doing Hashem's will in a world in which He is not readily perceived, we are demonstrating that it's not devoid of His presence, *chas v'shalom*.

It's not just "religious" things that are part of our *avodas Hashem*. Everything a Yid does, every decision he makes, and every perspective or attitude he adopts is part of his connection to Hashem.

This brings Hashem's presence into a context where it seemed absent. This context is not just the physical world but the human spirit. Each one of us, with our unique circumstances and our unique set of strengths and weaknesses, poses a slightly different variation on the same question: Can Hashem also be found *here*?

By creating the world in this way, Hashem gives us something that nothing else in creation has—the opportunity and ability to be His partner in creation. To be a giver and not only a receiver. Like Rabi Akiva told the wicked Turnus Rufus, Hashem creates wheat and gives us the job of perfecting it through our effort, to grind it into flour and bake bread.

AWARENESS OF *KAVANAS HABRIYAH* is an important foundation in our lives, an indispensable source of strength and clarity in facing adversity.

It shows us that the difficulty of our *avodah* is itself important and valuable, an insight which gives us added energy and enthusiasm. The harder it gets, the more strength and encouragement we take, knowing that it's giving Hashem that much more *nachas*, and this awareness also makes the burden a little bit lighter.

It also provides an answer to probably the most frequently asked question in the history of the world. When "bad things happen to good people" the people in question often ask, "What did I do

to deserve this?” They feel aggrieved and oppressed. *Bitachon* reassures us that it’s ultimately good, which helps, but *kavanas habriyah* gives us an entirely different insight.

First, when something unpleasant happens, we’re **supposed** to ask that question—not rhetorically, but with all sincerity. We’re supposed to thoroughly and honestly examine our behavior and address shortcomings we find.

However, keeping in mind *kavanas habriyah*, if we’ve done that assessment and can find nothing that justifies the difficulty we face, we should consider that it’s not actually a punishment—it’s an assignment, a part of our *avodas Hashem*, a *nisayon* designed not to punish us or break us, *chas v’shalom*, but to lift us up.

Consider the ten *nisyonos* of Avraham Avinu: He was sentenced to be burned alive for his devotion to Hashem, displaced from his homeland, suffered a famine, had his beloved wife kidnapped (twice), went through decades of infertility, and more—culminating in the command to sacrifice his long-awaited and dearly cherished only son.

Does anyone ask, “What did Avraham do to deserve this?” No! We recognize that these were all demonstrations of the strength of his *neshamah* and his connection to Hashem, which earned him and all of his descendants an eternal bond with the Creator Himself. The same is true of the *nisyonos* that we face. They’re not punishments, they’re part of our *avodas Hashem*—the purpose for which we, and all of existence, were created.

This lays to rest all the emotional turmoil that comes with grievance. It also grants us well-founded confidence. Correctly seeing his circumstance as a task from Hashem dispels any feeling of inadequacy a Yid might feel in facing temptation or other *nisyonos*. No matter how difficult the challenge may seem, he’s confident that he can overcome it.

After all, it was created by Hashem to reveal the true power of his *neshamah*, which is greater and more powerful than anything else in creation and not bound or limited by nature. Hashem surely gives us everything we need to fulfill the purpose for which He created us.

5. TORAH

Torah is our life, our guide, and the blueprint of creation. It reveals our essence and has all the answers.

ALTHOUGH OUR AVOS AND THE SHEVATIM served Hashem with devotion—paving the way for us—our mission as *Yidden* truly began at *Mattan Torah*. It was at that moment that Hashem removed the barrier that separated the heavens from the earth, the spiritual from the physical, allowing the world to become permeated by *kedushah*—a mission with which He tasked us, His holy nation.

Over the objections of the *malachim*, Hashem gave us, in this physical world, the Torah, which contains His infinite wisdom. It goes even further than that; Chazal tell us that the first word of the *Aseres Hadibros*, *Anochi*, stands for “*Ana nafshi ksavis yehavis*,” which can be translated as, “I have written [into the Torah] and given [to you]: **Myself**.” Hashem infused His essence into the Torah. It is through the Torah (and the *mitzvos* it conveys) that we connect to Hashem and also reveal our true nature which is already connected to Hashem.

The Torah is our life, and our wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the world. It’s only through the Torah that we know the truth about our *neshamah*, *emunah*, *bitachon*, the purpose of creation and so much more.

The word Torah comes from the same root as *hora’ah*, guidance, because it’s the practical instructions for how we should live.

More than that, *hora’ah* also means decree or directive, because Torah is the channel through which Hashem decreed the world into existence. In other words, the Torah is the blueprint which laid out the circumstances of creation and the tool Hashem used to implement it, through *Asarah Ma’amaros*. Torah does not just describe reality, it creates reality. It is the channel of life and energy for us and for the entire world.

Without Torah, we would be lost, groping in the darkness like the nations of the world. Facing the challenges of life without this eternal and solid foundation, we would be constantly reacting and adapting our ideas to each situation, ending up with unstable ideas

and positions that are not rooted in truth.

The Torah reveals the essence and truth of creation and cuts through the confusion to guide us in every situation, straight and true. There's nothing that's not addressed by Torah, because everything that exists comes **from** Torah. The Torah is called "*Torah Ohr*," the Torah of Light, because it sheds light on and brings clarity to every aspect of creation.

In His infinite kindness, Hashem didn't keep the Torah secret, hidden from mankind. He gave it to us through Moshe Rabbeinu so we would know the purpose for our creation and how to achieve it.

Because the existence of nature and its rules flow from and through Torah, Torah is not subject to the limitations that are intrinsic to creation. Torah will always supersede nature. As we've discussed, this is also true of our *neshamah*. The difference is that our *neshamah* has to compete with our body's natural perspective in order to express its clarity, something which is often difficult.

The Torah is the way to do that. Studying Torah reveals our essence, energizing and strengthening it, the way food sustains the body, enabling us to triumph over our *yetzer hara*. As Chazal say, "If you encounter this despicable [*yetzer hara*], drag him to the hall of Torah study."

Learning *Toras Emes* gives us the clarity that's so critical to overcoming our *yetzer hara* and its lies. Human logic is limited and flawed. Hashem's wisdom is infinite and perfect. Torah connects us to Hashem's wisdom and shows us how to think clearly and perceptively, enabling us to interpret the events in our lives correctly.

Encountering new and foreign circumstances in a place called prison, it was only through the wisdom of Hashem, that He gave us in the Torah, that I was able to see things for what they were and find the way forward. In each case, I would ask myself, "How do our holy *chachamim* look at this situation? How does Rabbeinu Bacheye teach us to navigate this decision in light of *Sha'ar Habitachon*?"

If I would have relied on my own human intellect, I would have become ensnared in the many and devious traps a place called

prison sets to lure people into a prison mentality. *Toras Hashem* saw me through the darkness and across the tightrope with my *neshamah* pure, my sanity safeguarded, and my heart unpolluted.

Even when our learning is not directly applicable to our daily challenges, adopting Torah thinking is an important part of centering our lives on Hashem and our *neshamah*. I found that learning Torah allowed me to experience *ta'anug*, spiritual enjoyment in my connection to Hashem, even in that cold, dark place. This diminished the emotional and physical pain of being in a place called prison.

6. MITZVOS

Mitzvos connect us to Hashem and enable our *neshamah* to interact with the world without being influenced by it.

THE WORD MITZVAH means commandment, but it's also related to the word *tzavsa*, which means connection. It's only through fulfilling Hashem's commandments that we're able to connect with the infinite Creator. Knowing that a *mitzvah* is a commandment gives us a strong feeling of duty and obligation. Knowing that a *mitzvah* is a connection to Hashem gives us gratitude, energy, and enthusiasm for this tremendous opportunity, this gift from Hashem!

In *Sha'ar HaBitachon* Rabbeinu Bacheye points to this connection as very important to a person who doesn't have the friends or family he would like and as a result feels lonely. He needs to remember that he has a close connection with Hashem, which he expresses through doing *mitzvos*. This eliminates the feelings of loneliness and isolation he would otherwise feel.

I reflected on this very frequently in a place called prison. I constantly reminded myself that Hashem was with me, which was a powerful consolation. How did I know Hashem was with me? Because I was with Him, connected to Him by doing everything I could—even if it required sacrifice—to fulfill His *mitzvos*.

Our *yetzer hara* would have us think of *mitzvos* as burdens—to be borne when necessary and lightened whenever possible. Particularly in difficult situations like a place called prison, it urges

us to limit our involvement and exertion in Torah and *mitzvos* to the minimum, and take advantage of any possible leniency, lightening the load.

The truth is that Torah and *mitzvos* are powerful gifts that connect us to Hashem and enable us to rise above the adversity. Diminishing them in any way only weakens their effect on us, making us that much more aligned with the world which is so full of the challenges we seek to overcome.

Recognizing that, I would keep every stringency and *hiddur* I could, each one intensifying the effect of the *mitzvah* and its assertion that I lived in a totally different world.

Fulfilling the *mitzvos* doesn't just help us survive our challenges, it actually brings about the salvation we need. Hashem acts *middah k'ineged middah*, as *Pirkei Avos* says—and Rabbeinu Bacheye quotes—when Hashem sees that we have embraced His will over our own natural desires, He will ensure that we receive the pleasant good that we trust Him to provide.

The best part is that everything can be a *mitzvah*. There are obviously the 613 *mitzvos* from the Torah, the *mitzvos d'rabbanan*, and the myriad *minhagim*, but even the most mundane physical activities can also be a *mitzvah*. “*B'chol deiraechachecha da'eihu*,” we are told. In all your ways, know Hashem! Let all your actions be for the sake of Heaven.

Chazal tell us that when our intentions are to serve Hashem, every act is a *mitzvah*. Working to provide for ourselves and our families so we can serve Hashem; eating to have the strength to *daven*, learn, or do a *mitzvah*; and even sleeping to renew ourselves for another day! They can all be *mitzvos*, each one connecting us to the infinite Creator.

Mitzvos also help us overcome our inner struggle, our own nature and our natural perspective on the world, enabling us to see the world as it truly is, and live in it as Hashem intends.

As we've discussed, the world imposes its version of reality on us at every turn. The *neshamah* is embedded in a body and has to participate in all the body's actions. We learn something with each action and interaction, training ourselves in the nature of reality.

When we're financially strapped, for example, and we work and earn, we learn many lessons—most of them wrong.

We learn that cause leads to effect, that our efforts are an active ingredient in the outcome, that our livelihood comes from our employer, and so on and so forth.

While the essence of our *neshamos* stands above the fray and isn't affected, it can become obscured, and we can begin to adopt these wrong conclusions.

Mitzvos are like a spacesuit for the *neshamah*, allowing us to operate in this foreign environment without suffering any ill effects. When an action is a *mitzvah*, the most important aspect of that action is that it is being done for Hashem and that it's connecting us to Hashem. This insulates us, protecting us from being misled into accepting that the world has an independent existence and power.

Taking our example of working for our livelihood, when we go to work because Hashem wants us to do so to create a channel for His *brachah*, and we keep that truth in mind as we work, none of the goings-on at work—the cause and effect, the ups and the downs—can confuse us about Who really provides for us.

Torah illuminates our hearts and our minds, opening the door to a different reality. *Mitzvos* usher us through that door to inhabit a world where everything is an opportunity to connect to Hashem.

As we've mentioned, recognizing that something is a *mitzvah* is a source of well-founded confidence when we face the world, because Hashem surely gives us the strength to do anything He has commanded us to do. Throughout my difficult ordeal, whenever I detected that something was a *mitzvah*, I knew I had the strength to persevere.

It's true that doing a *mitzvah* requires strength and clarity, but it also **provides** strength and clarity, which is extra motivation to not only do the *mitzvah* but to do it as carefully and beautifully as possible, even when that demands sacrifice.

7. TESHUVAH

Even when we stumble, our essence remains pure and we can always return.

JUST AS A MITZVAH CONNECTS us to Hashem, an *aveirah* separates us from Him, *r”l*. When we reflect on our behavior and identify *aveiros*, our *yetzer hara* tries to compound the problem and push us further away from Hashem by insisting that we’re damaged, disconnected, and we’re not worthy of Hashem’s mercy and love. If we’re facing a difficulty or a challenge, our *yetzer hara* points to that as evidence, trying to drive us to despair or depression.

In those moments, we need to remember that we can always do *teshuvah*. Even before we take the steps to do *teshuvah*, Hashem does not abandon us. He desires and awaits our *teshuvah*. When we turn to Him sincerely and seek forgiveness, drawing closer to Him, He accepts our *teshuvah* and embraces us as if we had never sinned.

Accurately translated, *teshuvah* means “return.” It is rooted in the fact that the fundamental nature of a Yid is good and holy. If he has deviated from that, all he needs to do is return to his natural state of love and connection with Hashem.

When we do *teshuvah*, resolving never to repeat the *aveirah*, Hashem accepts it. It’s that simple. So certain are we that Hashem forgives us when we ask, that in *Shemoneh Esrei*, immediately following our request for forgiveness, we recite, “*Baruch Atah Hashem, chanun, hamarbeh l’slo’ach*”—Blessed are You, Hashem, Who is gracious and forgives abundantly.

Saying Hashem’s name in vain is forbidden. Whenever there is doubt about whether we should say a *brachah*, we abstain. Clearly, then, there is no doubt that Hashem has forgiven us and this *brachah* is warranted.

Chazal say, “There is nothing that stands in the way of *teshuvah*.” No matter what we’ve done, the power of *teshuvah* should dispel any feelings of hopelessness or despair, any feelings that suggest Hashem’s kindness and mercy are out of reach.

8. SIMCHA

Simchah is not only critical—it's a *mitzvah*.

FINALLY, A WORD on the importance of *simcha*. Joy is critical to our success in all endeavors. Even with the clarity and strength to prevail, it's our energy and enthusiasm, rooted in *simchah*, that propel us forward. Depression and lethargy spell certain failure, no matter how strong we may be.

Simcha is not just a good idea—it's a *mitzvah*. The Torah tells us to serve Hashem with joy. But what does that mean? Joy is something that you feel, not something you do. How can you command someone to feel joy? More importantly, how do you go about fulfilling that commandment, particularly if you are facing difficulty in life?

We need to recognize that our feelings don't just happen to us. They flow from our perspectives, which means that we're not powerless in the face of a feeling. If we realize that a feeling we have is not appropriate to the situation, or that we're not experiencing a feeling that we know we should be, we can always do something about it.

First, we can examine our perspectives. When we fully understand and appreciate the fundamentals we've discussed here—the sublime nature of our *neshamos*, the presence and love of Hashem that we experience through *emunah* and *bitachon*, the privilege of fulfilling the purpose of creation by serving Hashem—our hearts will fill with joy and enthusiasm. Studying the Torah sources on these topics and discussing them with a *rov* or a good friend will help us internalize these ideas to the point that our emotions react appropriately.

It's also possible (and actually pretty common) that our apathy is not because we don't understand or appreciate the gift of life and the opportunity to serve Hashem—that is to say, it's not a problem in our minds or perspectives. The problem is that our hearts have become desensitized.

Engaging with the world for its own sake—when that interaction is not part of a *mitzvah* or *avodas Hashem*—diminishes our spiritual sensitivity, and over-indulgence in physical enjoyment

intensifies that effect.

We must take stock and recognize that these behaviors are deadening our heart and soul to the indescribable joy we naturally take in our Creator.

Remember that, since Hashem instructs you to serve Him with joy—and to serve Him in all you do—you are unquestionably capable of lifting the cloud of apathy and melancholy, with the infinite strength of your *neshamah*, and living your life with joy.



RECORDINGS OF RABBI RUBASHKIN'S CLASSES
AND THE SCHEDULE OF ONGOING CLASSES
CAN BE FOUND AT **ALEPHBEISGIMMEL.COM**

SUPPORT THESE AND OTHER CLASSES AT **ALEPHBEISGIMMEL.COM/SUPPORT**