

About this the poets would say: “Come to Cheshbon.” (21:27)

Chazal define this pasuk homiletically, saying, “Come let the rulers who are in control of their evil-inclination make a cheshbon, reckoning, of their spiritual activity. Let us keep in mind the benefit of a mitzvah as compared to the loss incurred by a sin.” Horav Yehoshua Heshel, z.l., m’Aftah said in reference to himself, “When I was young, I thought I could rule over my province, my city – but I was not successful. I attempted then to govern over my immediate family – also, to no avail. Afterwards, I made up my mind to control myself, to rule over my life. As I started to succeed in this endeavor, I came to realize that it is only he who rules over himself that can succeed in governing and directing the lives of others.”

One must make a cheshbon ha’nefesh, to have spiritual accountability towards himself. While many attempt to do this, they often fail because, in their weakness, they lie to themselves, as illustrated by the following story: When he was a young man, the Kotzker Rebbe, z.l., went by foot to visit his rebbe, Horav Simcha Bunim, z.l., m’Peshischa. Along the way, he came upon an old friend of his youth who, regrettably, had left the fold and became an apostate. His friend invited the Kotzker to join him in his impressive carriage. The Rebbe accepted, and they continued together along the way. Suddenly, the Kotzker turned to his friend and asked, “Where is your Olam Hazei, the benefits of This World?” His friend smiled and said, “Reb Mendel, Olam Hazei! I have so much: fields, horses, homes; my material wealth is extensive. Indeed, I live like the czar.” The Kotzker looked at his friend with penetrating eyes and said, “You are mistaken. This is your Olam Haba! I am asking you about your Olam Hazei.”

The Rebbe’s words pierced through the years of indifference and ambiguity. The message was driven home. For some of us, life may present itself as a wonderful material experience. We have to realize that when we enjoy what we perceive as Olam Hazei, which many of us feel we are entitled to enjoy, in reality, we are trading our place in Olam Haba, the eternal world of truth, for a box seat in this ephemeral world. All of this is the result of a lack of self-accounting.

Yet, we must be aware that This World is here for a purpose: in order to gain access to Olam Haba. To gain entry to the spiritual paradise that awaits us all, one must prepare himself in This World, as noted from the following exchange: It was a dark and cold wintry night, the only light was from the snow that was falling with intensity. A Jewish businessman, regrettably an unsuccessful one, was trudging along from one town to the other in his attempt to make the few kopeks necessary to sustain his family. He entered the town of Koznitz, seeking a place to rest his weary body. The town was fast asleep. No lights were on except in one home, where a candle was always burning late into the night so that its inhabitant, the Koznitzer Maggid, z.l., could learn into the wee hours of the morning.

The weary traveler, a Koznitzer chassid, quietly knocked on his Rebbe’s door. When the Rebbe

came to answer the door he hardly recognized his chassid, as he was covered with snow from head to toe. After he came into the house and the snow covering him had melted, the Rebbe recognized his chassid, who now began to bemoan his fate. "Rebbe, I have no Olam Hazeh; I have no life. I move from place to place in search of a livelihood. I am pursued and hounded by creditors, with no way of paying what I owe. I borrow from one to pay another. This is no life. At least, if I knew that I would merit Olam Haba I would persevere."

The Maggid looked at his brokenhearted chassid and said, "If the Olam Hazeh, for which you say you work so hard eludes you, how can you expect to gain a foothold in Olam Haba, if you exert no effort to gain access to it?"

Some individuals do reckon the mitzvos performed in their lives. They calculate the value of mitzvah performance and conjure up entire cheshbonos, accountings, of their future accomplishments and their spiritual worth, but neglect to go beyond the calculations. The Tzanzer Rav, z.l., was wont to tell the following story to illustrate this common failing. A certain woman had a vivid imagination. Once, she had an egg in her hand and reckoned its incredible long-term value to her. From this one egg, she would have a chick which would become a hen that would lay another twenty eggs. Each egg would produce another hen. The twenty hens would lay four hundred eggs which would result in four hundred hens. These hens would produce eight thousand eggs/hens. Indeed, with this single egg she had the potential, over time, to become very wealthy.

As she continued with her high level calculations, suddenly something occurred that shattered her dreams of wealth: the egg fell from her hand and broke. Nothing was left for her but her calculations, which were now worthless.

This is the story of life: We make grandiose plans; we make cheshbonos; we talk about the many spiritual endeavors we will undertake to perform, the people we want to help, but it all ends up as talk. Regrettably, by the time we decide to act, life has passed by, and the egg has broken.