

“The fire on the Altar shall be kept aflame on it, do not extinguish it.” (6:5)

The literal translation of lo sichbeh is “do not extinguish it.” The Baal Ha’Tanya rendered an alternative interpretation for this phrase. “You must extinguish the lo, the negative, within you.” Negativism is an all-consuming destructive force which paralyzes an individual. How does one overcome a negative self-image? How does one develop self-esteem? It is not the intended goal of this book to serve as a psychological authority, or to offer advice for coping with one’s emotional deficiencies. Yet, culling from some of the popular Torah-oriented authorities will help us to address a problem whose severity has reached epidemic proportions.

A noted psychologist posits that pleasure and enjoyment are profound psychological needs that are essential for maintaining one’s self-esteem. One’s value system determines his concept of pleasure. The desire for pleasure in an emotionally stable person is basically a means for claiming control over his existence. People’s values determine what is pleasurable for them. For someone leading a Torah life, these values must be Torah values. Hence, if one adheres to and masters the values as prescribed by the Torah and interpreted by Chazal, he should be able to extinguish the lo within him.

In Pirkei Avos, Chazal enumerate a number of values that “incidentally” do not concur with the prevailing values of contemporary society. We can appreciate the great wisdom of our Sages who distinguish between Torah values, which are conducive to self-esteem, and the bogus values of society, which drive one to the depths of negativism and depression.

We are taught that the sign of strength is the ability to master oneself, not to be a master over others. People who feel adequate do not need positions of power or superiority to maintain their adequacy. Our greatest leaders, such as Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon Ha’Kohen, resisted leadership and had to be coerced into accepting their roles.

The Torah teaches us that wisdom is measured by a willingness to learn whatever one can – from whomever he can. It requires self-esteem to be a good learner. Learning from anyone and everyone increases one’s knowledge and adds to one’s self esteem. Thus, wisdom, as defined by the Torah, is both a cause and a consequence of self-esteem. An inability to accept constructive criticism is a sure sign of low self-esteem. One whose negative image is dominant cannot tolerate the awareness of any defect within himself. He will be apt to surround himself with people who laud him and tell him that which he wishes to hear.

We are taught that wealth has nothing to do with how much one has, but rather with the capacity to enjoy whatever one has. One who embraces Torah values knows that true wealth means being satisfied with what one has. Such an individual is not subject to the devastation resulting from the loss of physical assets. He knows that Hashem will provide. Thus, his feeling of worthiness in striving to fulfill Hashem’s will makes his pursuit of wealth superfluous.

According to Chazal, honor consists of giving recognition and admiration, rather than receiving them. A truly honorable man is not obsessed with the pursuit of honor. He would rather give than receive! He finds no difficulty in praising others. This is, of course, in sharp contrast to the negative individual whose desperate attempts to build self-worth causes him to disparage others in order to gain a false sense of superiority.

Another important Torah value suggests that we evaluate time qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Often, one does not analyze his life unless it is precipitated by some crisis. Otherwise, this analysis may not occur until retirement leads to serious reflection. When people look back and note how little substance and meaning they had in their lives, they become depressed. Chazal teach us otherwise. One can reclaim an entire life through the medium of teshuvah, repentance. Through a sincere recognition that one has lived in error, followed by contrition and repentance, one can redeem his entire existence.

Looking back on one's past, only to discover that he had wasted opportunities and had squandered talents and energies, can be a devastating experience. The Torah perspective does not believe in such a despairing perspective. One brief moment of serious repentance can reclaim a life that otherwise might ultimately be wasted.