



Week 4

כבוד עצמי

This guided learning sheet explores the *middah* of *kavod atzmi*—self-respect. Each source is accompanied by explanation and discussion questions to facilitate personal reflection and group dialogue.

The first box of questions in color below are general questions about participants' experience of working on *middot* and remain the same from week to week. These questions are a helpful tool to check in and reflect on growth over time, in a consistent manner. Though the questions remain the same each week, the answers will naturally change depending on which *middah* is being explored. You may choose to start or end your learning session with these questions. The rest of questions are specifically related to the *middah* of the week and are interspersed throughout the session to deepen the conversation.

General questions when reflecting on the *middah* of the week:

General questions remain the same from week to week and are helpful tools to reflect on growth over time. The answers will vastly change depending on the *middah* of the week.

1. What did I learn about myself this week?
2. What felt difficult when working on this *middah*?
3. What felt natural or easy when working on this *middah*?
4. How has practicing this *middah* improved your life or how does it have the potential to impact your life?
5. Does anyone in the group have a story of how this *middah* came up in a real situation (this week or beyond)? How did you respond?
6. Does anyone in the group have insights, advice or tips to keep in mind when working on this *middah* going forward?

Source 1

Let's begin by exploring how self-respect becomes the foundation for spiritual growth:

שערי העבודה לרבינו יונה

הפתח הראשון הוא שידע האיש העובד ערך עצמו ויכיר מעלתו ומעלת אבותיו וגדולתם וחשיבותם אצל הבורא יתברך. וישתדל ויתחזק תמיד להעמיד עצמו במעלה ההיא ולהתנהג בה תמיד.... ויצא לו מזה כי כאשר יתאוה תאוה ויעלה בלבבו גאוה לעשות דבר שאינו הגון, יבוש מעצמו ויבוש מאבותיו, וישיב לנפשו ויאמר: אדם גדול וחשוב כמוני היום שיש בו כמה מעלות טובות רמות ונשאות, ושאני בן גדולים בן מלכי קדם, איך אעשה הרעה הגדולה הזאת...

The first stage in spiritual growth is for a person to recognize his own worth: to appreciate his qualities, the qualities of his forefathers, their greatness, and how beloved they are to Hashem. He should constantly strive to uphold this standard and conduct himself accordingly. The outcome of this will be that when he feels a negative desire or is tempted to do something inappropriate, he will feel ashamed of himself and ashamed before his fathers, and say to himself, "A person as great and honorable as myself, who possesses so many good, lofty, and elevated qualities, and who is a descendant of great people and of kings—how could I do such a thing?"

Takeaway: *When a person internalizes their own dignity and greatness, it creates a strong moral compass. Inappropriate actions feel out of place when they clash with how a person truly sees themselves.*

Discuss:

1. Think of someone whom you see as a model of dignity. How does their sense of self-respect manifest in their moral compass, shaping their actions and responses?
2. When is the shame mentioned above constructive in motivating personal growth? What is the difference between that and unhealthy shame?
3. Do you think people behave better when they feel guilt or when they feel dignity? When you're about to make a poor choice, which voice is louder: "this is wrong" or "this isn't me"? Why?
4. What would change in your daily behavior if you consistently saw yourself as a person of stature?

Source 2

Not only is self-respect related to spiritual growth; it is also related to belief in Hashem:

צדקת הצדיק קנ"ד

כשם שצריך אדם להאמין בהש"י כך צריך אה"כ להאמין בעצמו. ר"ל שיש להש"י עסק עמו ושאינו פועל בטל שבין לילה כו' וכחיתו שדה שלאחר מיתתם נאבדו ואינם. רק צריך להאמין כי נפשו ממקור החיים ית"ש והש"י מתענג ומשתעשע בה כשעושת רצונו.

Just as a person is required to believe in G-d, so too is he afterward required to believe in himself. This means to say that [one must believe] that G-d has dealings with him and that he is not a creation of G-d that is worthless, like 'an animal of the field' that after their death is gone and no longer. Rather one must believe that G-d, may He be blessed, delights and revels in his doing His will.

Takeaway: *Believing in oneself is not a nicety but a necessity. It involves recognizing that we are neither insignificant nor replaceable, and that each individual matters deeply to Hashem.*

Discuss:

1. Do you think the Torah concept of believing in yourself differs from the way it is usually understood by the rest of the world?
2. What is harder: believing in Hashem or believing that Hashem believes in you?
3. In what situations do you feel most 'replaceable'? How does that affect your behavior?

Sources 3, 4 and 5

A person's self-perception directly shapes their behavior and actions in Avodat Hashem:

משנה אבות ב:י"ג

רבי שמעון אומר, הוי זהיר בקריאת שמע ובתפלה. וכשאתה מתפלל, אל תעש תפלתך קבע, אלא רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום ברוך הוא, שנאמר (יואל ב) כי חנון ורחום הוא ארך אפים ורב חסד ונקם על הרעה. ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך:

Rabbi Shimon said: Be careful with the reading of Shema and the prayer, And when you pray, do not make your prayer something automatic, but a plea for compassion before G-d, for it is said: "for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment" (Yoel 2:13); And do not consider yourself wicked.

יכין שם

ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך. דגם זה מניעה גדולה בכוונת התפלה, כשיחשוב א"ע רשע בפני עצמו ויתיאש מן הרחמים, ויחשוב שכל תפלותיו לא יועילו לו:

AND DO NOT CONSIDER YOURSELF WICKED—This is a great obstacle to proper intention in prayer: when a person considers himself wicked in his own eyes, he may despair of mercy, thinking that all his prayers will be of no benefit to him.

רמב"ם שם

כשיחשוב אדם עצמו חסר ופחות לא יגדל בעיניו חסרון שיעשהו

When a man thinks of himself as lacking [virtue] and low, it won't seem like a big deal in his eyes to do something negative.

Takeaway: *Belief in yourself and your inherent goodness may impact positive spiritual activity, such as the way you approach tefillah. It also impacts negative spiritual activity, setting the standard for what you allow yourself to do.*

Discuss:

1. How does seeing yourself as 'not good enough' subtly affect the way you do mitzvot and/or daven?
2. Why might low self-perception lead to less accountability rather than more accountability?
3. Making poor choices presumably reinforces one's negative self-image. Practically, how can a person disrupt this cycle, where low self-perception and poor decisions keep reinforcing each other?

4. Do you think people lower their standards because they fail—or fail because they lowered their standards and self-perception?
5. How does negative self-talk subtly justify negative behavior?
6. What is one area where raising how you see yourself would naturally raise your behavior?

Sources 6 and 7

Even in the extreme case where someone is prepared to give false testimony in a capital case, the Torah appeals to one's sense of self-worth. The following Gemara describes how a Beit Din handles witnesses in cases of capital punishment. Because the stakes are so high, in which testimony could lead to someone's death, the court cautions any potential false witnesses:

גמרא סנהדרין ל"ח א'

מתנני' כיצד מאיימין את העדים על עידי נפשות? ... לפיכך נברא אדם יחיד, ללמדך שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו איבד עולם מלא. וכל המקנים נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קניים עולם מלא.... לפיכך כל אהד ואהד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם.

Mishnah: How does the court intimidate the witnesses in giving testimony for cases of capital law? ... The court tells the witnesses: Therefore, Adam the first man was created alone, to teach you that with regard to anyone who destroys one soul from the Jewish people, i.e., kills one Jew, the verse ascribes him blame as if he destroyed an entire world, as Adam was one person, from whom the population of an entire world came forth. And conversely, anyone who sustains one soul from the Jewish people, the verse ascribes him credit as if he sustained an entire world... therefore each and every person is obligated to say: The world was created for me.

רש"י שם

בשבילי נברא העולם - כלומר חשוב אני כעולם מלא לא אטרד את עצמי מן העולם בעבירה אחת וימשוך ממנה

The world was created for me: Meaning, I am important and valuable and worth an entire world, and therefore I won't cause myself to be lost from this world because of this sin...

Rashi explains that the statement "the world was created for me" is directed to the potential false witness: you are too valuable to throw your life away by making such a grave mistake. Reminding him that the world was created for him, reconnects him to his inherent worth and sense of responsibility.

The Sichos Mussar adds that even though this person is acting terribly—he is attempting to have someone killed—an awareness of his own significance can still be powerful enough to stop him from committing something irreversibly destructive.

Takeaway: *Even someone on the brink of doing wrong can be held back by remembering their own worth and responsibility.*

Discuss:

1. In your experience, which is more effective as a mechanism for inspiring change: threatening punishment/fear of consequence or appealing to someone's self-worth/sense of purpose? How can this be applied in real life situations?
2. What is it about being reminded of one's potential that inspires change more effectively than focusing on past mistakes?
3. Have you ever changed your course of action because someone believed in you?

Source 8

The Midrash cites three individuals whose noble deeds were recorded in the Torah and notes that had they known their actions would be preserved in writing forever, they would have performed them on an even greater scale:

רות רבה ה:ו

אלו הנה ראובן יודע שהקדוש ברוך הוא מכתוב עליו (בראשית לז, כא): וישמע ראובן ויצייליהו מידם, בכתפו הנה מוליכו אצל אביו. ואלו הנה יודע אהרן שהקדוש ברוך הוא מכתוב עליו (שמות ד, יד): הנה הוא יצא לקראתך בתפים ובמחולות הנה יוצא לקראתו. ואלו הנה יודע בעז שהקדוש ברוך הוא מכתוב עליו: ויצבט לה קלי ותאכל ותשבע ותתר, עגלות מפתמות הנה מאכילה

Had Reuven known that the Holy One blessed be He was writing about him: “Reuven heard and he rescued him from their hands” (Genesis 37:21), he would have taken him to his father on his shoulder. Had Aaron known that the Holy One blessed be He was writing about him: “Behold, he is coming out to meet you” (Exodus 4:14), he would have come out to meet [Moses] with drums and dancing. Had Boaz known that the Holy One blessed be He was writing about him: “He handed her roasted grain, and she ate, was sated, and there was some left over,” he would have fed her fattened calves.

Takeaway:

The Midrash is not suggesting that these great individuals acted for recognition! Rather, it is teaching us that had they fully appreciated the significance of their actions, and that what they were doing was worthy of being recorded for posterity, they would have performed the mitzvos with even greater depth and grandeur. When a person truly understands the significance of their actions, they naturally invest more effort, care, and heart into them, and a deeper awareness of the value of what we do elevates how we do it.

Discuss:

1. Did you ever do something (or observe someone do something) that felt really important or consequential? What stood out about your (their) approach to the situation?
2. Have you ever seen someone who clearly feels that all their actions matter and are meaningful—how does that belief manifest in the way they live?
3. What is something valuable that you do (ex: chessed, honoring others, etc.) but tend to downplay or not see as significant? How might your approach to it change if you fully internalized how meaningful and impactful what you are doing really is?
4. What kinds of actions do you think people tend to underestimate the most? Why?
5. What gets in the way of a person feeling that their actions really matter?
6. Practically, how can we become more aware about the significance of our actions?
7. Is there something you would do differently if you fully believed your actions mattered?

Source 9

The Avot de Rabbi Natan describes a striking contrast. In the world of malachim there is no competition, while among people there often is. What creates that difference—and what can we learn from it?

אבות ד'ר נתן י"ב'

איזה שלום עשה הקב"ה במרום שלא קרא עשרה גבריאל עשרה מיכאל עשרה אוריאל עשרה רפאל כדרך שבני אדם קורין עשרה ראובן עשרה שמעון עשרה לוי עשרה יהודה שאלמלא עשה כדרך שבני אדם עושים כיון שקרא לאחד מהם באין לפניו ומתקנאין זה בזה אלא קרא גבריאל אחד מיכאל אחד כיון שקרא אחד הם באו לפניו ומשגרו לכל מקום שירצה ומנין שיראים זה את זה ומכבדין זה את זה וענותנין מבני אדם שבשעה שפותחין את פיהם ואומרים שיר זה אומר לחבירו פתח אתה שאתה גדול ממני וזה אומר לחבירו פתח אתה שאתה גדול ממני. לא כדרך שבני אדם עושין שזה אומר לחבירו אני גדול ממך וזה אומר לחבירו אני גדול ממך.

How does Hashem make peace on high? By not naming ten angels 'Gavriel', ten 'Michael', ten 'Uriel', or ten 'Raphael', like men who name ten persons 'Reuven', ten 'Shimon', ten 'Levi', or ten 'Yehudah'. Had He done as men do, on summoning one angel, all bearing that name would come before Him and they would be envious of one another. He therefore named one angel 'Gavriel' and one 'Michael', so that when He summons an angel by name only one appears before Him and is sent wherever He wishes. And from where do we know that the angels respect one another, and are more humble than human beings? When they are about to open their mouths to sing shira, one says to the other, 'You begin, for you are greater than I'; and the other replies, 'No, you begin, for you are greater than I'. This is quite unlike the behaviour of human beings, where everyone says to his fellow, 'I am greater than you'.

Takeaway: *The malachim can honor one another because each one is secure in their own inherent worth. A healthy sense of unique identity and role leaves no need for competition, while insecurity and a lack of unique self-worth evokes a need for validation and recognition. The stronger one's sense of self, the more naturally one can recognize and honor the value in others.*

Discuss:

1. What is the difference between healthy self-worth and a need to feel superior to others? Why do you think people often compare themselves to others?
2. How can self-respect actually lead to greater humility, rather than arrogance? Why might low self-worth show up as arrogance and superiority?
3. When do you most frequently compare yourself to others instead of appreciating others' individuality?
4. How can a clearer sense of one's role and individuality improve interpersonal relationships?
5. What does it practically look like to feel 'secure in your role'?
6. Can you think of a time when feeling confident in yourself made it easier to respect or honor someone else?

Source 10

When the Jews are counted next week in Parshat Bamidbar (1:2), the Torah uses the language שאר את ראשך—'lift up the heads'—to describe the process of counting:

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks – Covenant and Conversation, Parshat Bamidbar

In any census, count or roll-call there is a tendency to focus on the total—the crowd, the multitude, the mass. Here is a nation of sixty million people, or a company with one hundred thousand employees, or a sports crowd of sixty thousand. Any total tends to value the group or nation as a whole. The larger the total, the stronger the army, the more popular the team, and the more successful the company.

Counting devalues the individual and tends to make him or her replaceable. If one soldier dies in battle, another will take their place. If one person leaves the organisation, someone else can be hired to do their job....

Notoriously, too, crowds have the effect of tending to make the individual lose their independent judgment and follow what others are doing. We call this “herd behaviour,” and it sometimes leads to collective madness. In 1841 Charles Mackay published his classic study, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, which tells of the South Sea Bubble that cost thousands of people their money in the 1720s, and the tulip mania in Holland when entire fortunes were spent on single tulip bulbs. The Great Crashes of 1929 and 2008 had the same crowd psychology.... People in a crowd become anonymous. Their conscience is silenced. They lose a sense of personal responsibility...

Hence the significance of one remarkable feature of Judaism: its principled insistence—like no other civilisation before—on the dignity and integrity of the individual. We believe that every human being was created in the image and likeness of G-d. The Sages said that every life is like an entire universe. Maimonides wrote that each of us should see ourselves as if our next act could change the fate of the world. Every dissenting view is carefully recorded in the Mishnah, even if the law is otherwise. Every verse of the Torah is capable, said the Sages, of seventy interpretations. No voice, no view, is silenced. Judaism never allows us to lose our individuality in the mass.

There is a wonderful blessing mentioned in the Talmud to be said on seeing six hundred thousand Israelites together in one place. It is: “Blessed are You, Lord... who discerns secrets.” The Talmud explains that every person is different. We each have different attributes. We all think our own thoughts. Only G-d can enter the minds of each of us and know what we are thinking, and this is what the blessing refers to. In other words, even in a massive crowd where, to human eyes, faces blur into a mass, G-d still relates to us as individuals, not as members of a crowd.

That is the meaning of the phrase, “lift the head,” used in the context of a census. G-d tells Moses that there is a danger, when counting a nation, that each individual will feel insignificant. “What am I? What difference can I make? I am only one of millions, a mere wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea-shore, dust on the surface of infinity.”

Against that, G-d tells Moses to lift people’s heads by showing that they each count; they matter as individuals.

Discuss:

1. What makes it hard to maintain individuality and a sense of unique self-worth in a group setting or community?
2. Which areas of our communities or institutions are most prone to groupthink, where people feel strong pressure to conform? What are the factors that make us susceptible to this?
3. How can we help *ourselves* maintain a sense of individuality and independent thinking in these environments?
4. How can we help *others* maintain a sense of individuality, unique self-worth, and independent thinking in these environments?

Source 11

When a person has finished tithing all their produce (in the 4th and 7th years of the Shemittah cycle), there is a mitzvah of 'vidui maaser'—which literally means 'confessing' that one has done the mitzvah correctly:

הרב קוק, עין אי"ה, מסכת מעשר שני פרק ז משנה י

כשם שיש תועלת גדולה לתיקון הנפש בוידוי העוונות, כן יש גם כן תועלת לפרקים קבועים, שאמנם רחוקים הם ואינם תדירים כל כך כוידוי של החטאים, כדי שלא יזוח עליו לבבו ויהיה נוטה לעצלה לגאוה ולשרירות לב. אבל לפרקים תמצא תועלת לעבדי ה' ישרי דרך גם כן בוידוי המצוות, למען ישמח בהם בלבבו ויחזק ארחות חייו בדרך ה'.

In the same way that there is great value in confessing sins, there is also value to regularly, although not as frequently as confessing sins so that one doesn't become complacent or arrogant, confess one's good deeds, so that one will feel good about them and strengthen themselves in following on the path of Hashem...

Takeaway: *Growth requires not only correcting faults, but reinforcing what is already working. Reflecting on (and even articulating) our strengths and positive actions can reinforce them and build motivation.*

Discuss:

1. What is the risk of focusing only on what needs improvement?
2. How can we navigate the tightrope of strengthening ourselves through our successes without becoming complacent or arrogant?
3. Why do you think people feel more comfortable criticizing themselves than acknowledging what they do right?
4. What is one strength you rely on but rarely consciously recognize?
5. How can recognizing strengths actually *prevent* future failure?

Source 12

It is easy to fixate on the flawed parts of our actions, but this can be dangerous to our well-being:

ליקוטי מוהר"ן רפ"ב:א'-ב'

דע, כי צריך לדון את כל אדם לכף זכות, ואפילו מי שהוא רשע גמור, צריך לחפש ולמצא בו איזה מעט טוב, שבאותו המעט אינו רשע...ואף-על-פי שאתה רואה שהוא רשע גמור, אף-על-פי-כן צריך אתה לחפש ולבקש למצא בו מעט טוב ששם אינו רשע וזהו ועוד מעט ואין רשע, שצריך אתה לבקש בו עוד מעט טוב שיש בו עדיין, ששם אינו רשע, כי אף-על-פי שהוא רשע, איך אפשר שאין בו מעט טוב עדיין, כי איך אפשר שלא עשה איזה מצוה או דבר טוב מימיו.....והבן: וכן צריך האדם למצא גם בעצמו, כי זה ידוע שצריך האדם לזהר מאד להיות בשמחה תמיד, ולהרחיק העצבות מאד מאד (כמבאר אצלנו כמה פעמים). ואפילו כשמתחיל להסתכל בעצמו ורואה שאין בו שום טוב, והוא מלא חטאים, ורוצה הבעל דבר להפילו על ידי זה בעצבות ומרה שחורה, חס ושלום, אף-על-פי-כן אסור לו לפול מזה, רק צריך לחפש ולמצא בעצמו איזה מעט טוב, כי איך אפשר שלא עשה מימיו איזה מצוה או דבר טוב, ואף ששקשמתחיל להסתכל באותו הדבר הטוב, הוא רואה שהוא גם כן מלא פצעים ואין בו מתם, הינו שרואה שגם המצוה והדבר שבקדשה שזכה לעשות, הוא גם כן מלא פניות ומחשבות זרות ופגמים הרבה, עם כל זה איך אפשר שלא יהיה באותה המצוה והדבר שבקדשה איזה מעט טוב, כי על כל פנים איך שהוא, על-כל-פנים יהיה איזה נקדה טובה בהמצוה והדבר טוב שעשה, הינו כמו שצריך לדון אחרים לכף זכות, אפילו את הרשעים, ולמצא בהם איזה נקדות טובות, ועל-ידי-זה מוציאים אותם באמת מכף חובה לכף זכות... כמו כן הוא אצל האדם בעצמו, שצריך לדון את עצמו לכף זכות, ולמצא בעצמו איזה נקדה טובה עדיין, כדי לחזק את עצמו שלא יפל לגמרי, חס ושלום, רק אדרבא יחיה את עצמו, וישמח את נפשו במעט הטוב שמוצא בעצמו

Know, a person must judge everyone favorably (Avot 1:6). Even someone who is completely wicked, it is necessary to search and find in him some modicum of good; that in that little bit he is not wicked... Even if you see that he is completely wicked, you must search and seek the little bit of good in him, wherein he is not wicked. For although he is wicked, how is it possible that he does not still possess even a little bit of good? Is it possible that throughout his life he never once did some mitzvah or good deed?

Likewise, a person must find [some good point] within himself. It is known that a person must take care to be happy always and to keep very far away from depression {as has been explained in our works a number of times}. It may be that when he begins examining himself, he sees that he possesses no good whatsoever and is filled with sin, and that as a result the *yetzer hara* wants to push him into depression and sadness, G-d forbid. Even so, it is forbidden to fall on account of this. Rather, he must search until he finds in himself some little bit of good. For how is it possible that throughout his life he never once did some mitzvah or good deed? And even if when he begins examining this good thing he sees that it, too, is filled with flaws and contains no purity—i.e., he sees that the mitzvah or holy deed that he merited doing is itself comprised of impure motives, external thoughts and numerous faults—nevertheless, how is it possible that this mitzvah or holy deed contains not even a little bit of good? For in any case, despite this there must have been some good point in the mitzvah or good deed that he did... A person has to judge himself favorably and find in himself some remaining good point, in order to give himself the strength to avoid falling completely, G-d forbid. On the contrary, he will revive himself and bring joy to his soul with the little bit of good he finds in himself. . .

Takeaway: *Even when flaws are obvious, there is always some נקודה טובה—positive element. Focusing on that positive point is a deliberate strategy to sustain hope and generate the strength needed for growth.*

Discuss:

1. Do you ever invalidate your own good actions or small positive elements of an action?
2. Do you think it is easier to find the נקודה טובה (positive point) in others or in yourself?
3. Can you recall a time when identifying even a subtle positive trait or element in someone's personality or actions transformed a situation? What was the result?
4. Do you believe that applying that same mindset to yourself (actively noticing even a small positive quality) could impact your own thinking or behavior? When would this be most impactful?