

Dvar Torah Outline — Nefesh HaChaim / Ramchal: Boundaries, Intention, and How Physical Actions Become Spiritual Perfection

Abstract

This dvar Torah develops a central Ramchal idea: Hashem embedded *גבולים* (definitions) and *סדרים* (relational structures) within the physical world so that human engagement with physical objects can become a vehicle for spiritual growth rather than distraction. When a person uses the world according to the object's spiritual "design," within the proper frameworks (time, combinations, procedure) and with proper *כוונה*, the physical act itself becomes an act of *שלמות*. The shiur then addresses a key tension: since death was decreed after Adam's sin, purification cannot fully actualize in this world—but every mitzvah still strengthens the soul and purifies the body "in potential," to be revealed later. A passage from Rav Chaim Volozhiner clarifies that at the moment of a mitzvah a person becomes "encircled in holiness," and Olam HaBa is the permanence of that revelation.

I. The challenge—and opportunity—of the physical world

A. Not only a distraction, but a unique arena of ascent

- The physical world poses a *tremendous challenge* because material involvement can pull a person away from spirituality.
 - Yet it also creates a *great opportunity*: through physical action, a human can reach spiritual heights that even angels cannot reach.
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II. “גבולים וסדרים”: Hashem built definitions and structures into the world

A. The opening claim (Ramchal)

- “זוה כי שם יתברך שמו גבולים וסדרים לאדם בתשמיש שישתמש בעולם ובריותיו”
 - Hashem placed boundaries and systems for how a person is meant to use the world and its creatures.

B. What is a גבול (boundary)?

- A *definition*: what a thing is, what it can do, and what it cannot do.
- A boundary is the conceptual “edge” that makes an object distinct and usable in an intended way.

C. What is a סדר (order/system)?

- A *relationship-structure*: how one item relates to another.
- Examples of “systems”:
 - How objects combine (one-with-two-with-three).
 - How an item relates to time, place, and context.

D. Scope limitation

- The focus is not on the metaphysics of objects “in themselves,” but on how these גבולים and סדרים matter **for human use**.

III. The third condition: כוונה is indispensable

A. Adding intention to the physical structure

- “ובכוונה שיכוון בהם”
 - Beyond the object’s definition and relationships, the person’s intention is essential.

B. Clarifying “מצות צריכות כוונה”

- The gemara’s language can mislead: there is no real doubt that mitzvot require intention.
- The debate is more about whether basic awareness is automatically present even when one is distracted.

C. Three conditions for transforming physical action into spiritual ascent

- “אשר בישתמש בהם האדם באותם הגבולים ובאותם הסדרים ובאותה הכוונה שציווה הבורא יתברך”
 1. Use the object according to its גבול / spiritual definition.
 2. Use it within its סדר / correct relational structure (including time and combination).
 3. Perform it with the right כוונה.
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IV. “סגולה”: objects have unique spiritual characteristics

A. Correcting a common misunderstanding

- Many think סגולה means a charm/amulet.
- Here it means: an object’s **unique spiritual characteristic** and intended role.

B. Examples: different objects, different “spiritual jobs”

- לולב has its own unique spiritual capacity; a random branch does not substitute.
- A cedar branch is used in the purification of a מצורע—showing a different סגולה.

C. Examples of סדרים (how the mitzvah is structured)

- Purifying a מצורע requires a system of items used together (e.g., cedar, additional elements, and procedure).
- includes סדר לולב:
 - being taken together with other species,
 - and being done specifically in the time-frame of סוכות.

D. Question raised: does “structure” include speech and motion?

- It may include required declarations (e.g., ביכורים requires a verbal declaration).
 - ברכות but help shape (often מדרבנן), are typically not part of the Torah-level structure כוונה.
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V. The core “turnaround”: physical action becomes an act of perfection

A. The chiddush: the physical can be flipped from obstacle to engine

- “יהיה גם הפועל הגופני והחמרי עצמו פועל שלמות”
 - If done within סדרים, גבולים, and כוונה, the bodily act itself becomes an act of self-perfection.

B. What enters the person through mitzvah-action

- “ובו יתעצם באדם מציאות שלמות ומעלה רבה”
 - The act integrates real שלמות and מעלה into the person.

C. Elevation described twice—two layers

- “ויתעלה בו ממצבו השפל וירומם ממנה”
- Suggested distinction:
 1. A *new perfection* is “added into” the person (like ingesting something beneficial).
 2. The person’s overall “level” rises as a result.

D. Illustrative analogies used in the shiur

- “Poison mushroom” vs. “power-up mushroom” idea:
 - The same physical world that could harm can—when used correctly—become empowering.
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VI. A broader framing: the “supernal wisdom” designed mitzvot to fix חסרונות and build דבקות

A. Hashem’s calculation of human lack and human destiny

- “ואולם השקיפה החכמה העליונה על כל כללי החסרונות המוטבעים בעניינו של אדם”
- And also:
- “ועל כל ענייני המעלה והיקר האמיתי הנצרכים לו להיות ראוי שיהיה מדבק בו יתברך ונהנה בטובו”
 - Man’s design includes embedded חסרונות, and also the potential for true greatness: דבקות and enjoyment of Hashem’s goodness.

B. לכן: a full system of boundaries and structures

- “וכנגד כל זה סידר לו סדורים והגביל לו גבולים”

- Outcome:
 - "אשר בשומרם אותם, ישיג בהם כל מה שצריך מן המעלה האמיתית..."
 - And:
 - "וישלול מעניינו כל מה שהוא הרחקה מן הדבקות העליון"
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VII. 248 and 365: mitzvot as a complete "spiritual medicine plan"

A. The classic correspondence

- 248 positive commandments ↔ 248 איברים.
- 365 negative commandments ↔ 365 גידים.

B. Positive mitzvot: building and strengthening

- Doing "the good" augments and elevates corresponding parts of the person.

C. Negative mitzvot: abstention as repair

- Not doing the forbidden is not "neutral"—it can remove damage.
- A prohibition implies there is some pull toward misuse; resisting it is a תיקון.

D. Example discussed: prohibition of consuming blood

- The Torah forbids eating/drinking blood.
- The existence of the prohibition indicates a human susceptibility, and abstaining refines the person.

E. Desire for even "normal" things (like food)

- The desire-to-eat is tied to the earliest human failure (עץ הדעת טוב ורע).
 - Human appetite and misuse are part of the larger story of descent and repair.
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VIII. Going beyond obligation: seeking mitzvot as spiritual gain (with caution)

A. People sometimes pursue "extra" mitzvot

- Not only doing what is required, but seeking opportunities for additional mitzvah acts.
- Caution noted: it can become "wacky" without guidance.

B. Example raised: שילוח הקן

- People may arrange opportunities to perform the mitzvah even when they don't intrinsically need the eggs.
 - The underlying assumption: the mitzvah-act itself creates spiritual perfection when done properly.
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IX. A major pivot: death prevents full “in-world” actualization of purification

A. The “if not for the decree of death” model

- “ואלו לא היתה הגזרה גזורה שימות”
 - Without death, mitzvot would progressively strengthen the soul and weaken bodily darkness until full purification happened **in this life**.
 - Soul and body would ascend together toward דבקות.

B. But since the decree stands...

- “ולפי שהגזרה גזורה... אין הדבר נעשה בפעם אחת”
 - Full elevation cannot be completed now.
 - The תיקון is real—but not fully actualized in the present bodily condition.

C. What *does* happen now: internal strengthening and “potential purification”

- “אך על כל פנים מתחזקת הנשמה בעצמה”
 - The soul becomes stronger *in itself*.
 - “והגוף מזדכך בכח... אף על פי שאינו נעשה בפועל”
 - The body becomes refined **in potential**, though not yet in actual manifestation.
 - “וקנה האדם מצב שלמות בכח... שיצא אחר כך לפועל בזמן הראוי לו”
 - A person acquires a state of perfection “stored” to be actualized later, at the proper time.
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X. Clarifying “מזדכך בכח”: Rav Chaim Volozhiner on the mitzvah-moment

A. The conceptual difficulty

- Purity sounds like a *state*, so “purified in potential” feels paradoxical.

B. Nefesh HaChaim: what a person would feel during a mitzvah

- Rav Chaim Volozhiner:
 - "בעת עשיית המצוה, יבין וירגיש בנפשו שהוא מסובב ומלובש כאש בקדושה... ורוח נכון יתחדש בקרבו"
 - At the time of a mitzvah, one is surrounded and clothed in holiness, like fire—leading to renewed inner spirit.

C. Reframing קדושה as "revelation vs. opacity"

- Earlier framing recalled:
 - Soul = light/radiance (revelatory).
 - Body = opaque/dark (concealing).
- When doing a mitzvah:
 - Divine will is visibly "expressed" through the human act.
 - The person becomes temporarily transparent—a conduit of revelation.

D. Why the קדושה "leaves" after the mitzvah

- Once the act ends, the revelation is no longer present in the same way.
 - The "potential" remains because:
 - the body participated in that revelation event,
 - and that event is stored to become permanent later.
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XI. "שכר מצוה מצוה": the reward is the experience of the mitzvah itself

A. Common reading vs. Rav Chaim's reading

- Common: doing one mitzvah brings another opportunity.
- Rav Chaim: the mitzvah itself is the reward because it is a moment of דבקות/revelation.

B. Olam HaBa as permanence of mitzvah-revelation

- In this world: revelation during a mitzvah is temporary.
 - In Olam HaBa: that revelation becomes enduring—each mitzvah becomes an eternal מצב of encircled קדושה.
 - Accumulation: mitzvah upon mitzvah yields an ever-expanding permanence of דבקות.
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XII. Summary (key takeaways)

- Hashem embedded **גבולים** (definitions) and **סדרים** (structures/relationships) into the physical world so that human use can be spiritually constructive.
- A mitzvah requires: the right object (its **סגולה**), the right framework (time/combination/procedure), and the right **כוונה**.
- When done correctly, the bodily act itself becomes **פועל שלמות**, integrating real elevation into the person.
- Because death was decreed, purification cannot fully actualize now; nevertheless, mitzvot strengthen the soul and refine the body **בכח**, to be revealed later.
- Rav Chaim Volozhiner clarifies “בכח”: at the moment of a mitzvah, a person is “מסובב ומלובש... .and Olam HaBa is the lasting continuity of that revelation”, **בקדושה**.