



Kashering and Immersing: Lessons for the Soul

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The halachos that govern kashering and toveling of utensils appear in Parshas Mattos. In addition to the actual practical halachos that comprise this area of kashrus, there are many important lessons concerning avodas Hashem that can be derived from these laws. A utensil that was used for non-kosher food cannot be used until it is kashered. The fundamental principle that dictates the application of this halacha is that the method in which the utensil was used is the method in which it must be kashered. Therefore, a utensil that was used with water, such as a pot, is kashered with boiling water by a process called hag'ala. If the utensil absorbed non-kosher food with direct heat, for example a grill, hag'ala is not sufficient and exposure to a flame is necessary via a process known as libun.

Just as non-kosher food must be removed from a utensil by the appropriate method, so too when one sins the impact of one's actions have to be eradicated in the proper way. Teshuva, which how we cleanse our souls, follows the model of kashering our utensils; the degree of teshuva corresponds to the intensity of the impact of the sin on our souls. If one sins half-heartedly without much enthusiasm, the less intense teshuva is sufficient to atone for the transgression. A sin done with great excitement requires a greater level of teshuva.

We are taught concerning the chet ha'egel that Moshe only broke the luchos upon seeing the Jewish people dancing in celebration. It was their enthusiasm for the sin that made the teshuvaprocess so much more challenging and necessitated the dramatic action of breaking the luchos. Just as hag'ala suffices for an absorption of taste that comes about indirectly through water but libun is necessary when a direct flame was used, so too the kashering of the soul is achieved via an intense degree of teshuva when a sin was penetrated with the flame of enthusiasm.

Kashering by hag'ala is not effective for earthenware vessels. Because of its porous nature, earthenware absorbs substances to such a degree that the non-kosher taste cannot be removed. Yet, Chazal teach us that libun is effective even for earthenware. Rabbeinu Tam explains that even though taste cannot be entirely removed from earthenware, the process of libun mimics the original making of the utensil. Since the earthenware vessel was initially formed in a kiln, the process of libun effectively remakes the vessel and thereby permits its subsequent use. This halachic understanding can be applied in the realm of teshuva as well. Chazal mention the practice of changing one's name when doing teshuva. The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuva 2:4) explains that this symbolizes that the person is not merely connecting specific flaws but rather transforming himself, and in a sense becoming a new person. Even if one doesn't actually change one's name, the mindset of viewing oneself as a new person is a critical component of the teshuva process.

In addition to kashering, any utensil that was manufactured or owned by a non-Jew must undergo tevilla in a mikva before being used. The Talmud Yerushalmi compares this to tevilla that a convert undergoes as an act of sanctification, indicating that even our utensils must be made holy before being used. The mitzvah of tevilas kelim has an important message for us as it relates to our avodas Hashem. It is not sufficient to only avoid sin and rectify its effects through teshuva, rather a tevilla in water is necessary for utensils and a tevilla in symbolic water is necessary for our souls. The Rambam (Hilchos Mikvaos 11:12) elaborates upon the symbolism of the water of the mikva. Just as its waters purify the individual halachically, so too the waters of Torah are essential for spiritual purification. It is the complete immersion in the living waters of Torah study that purify and elevate our souls. As we study and practice the intricate laws of kashering and immersing our food utensils, let us focus on the lessons these halachos can teach us in all the realms of our avodas Hashem.

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