



The Most Frequent Cause of Misery

You've been feeling stressed out and depressed. Things are not going well for you at work. Your marriage has some very rough spots. Your relationship with the kids is mediocre. You have great difficulty trying to make decisions. You think of yourself as a failure. You decide to consult a psychotherapist. Here are a few scenarios you might share with the therapist who takes your history.

Your father was a very demanding, irritable person. He did not actually physically abuse you, but he was always critical of you. Nothing you did was ever good enough. You remember him saying, "Can't you ever do anything right?" and that remark went straight to your core. Yes, you loved him because

he was your father, and there were ways in which you respected him, but you feel he hurt you deeply. Your mother did not stand up for you to protect you from your father's irascibility. You know that he did not mean to hurt you and she did not mean to abandon you. He was not really a cruel person, but you resented how he acted toward you, and you resent your mother's neutral stance.



You always felt second best or worse in the family. It was a family joke, "Esther, you were supposed to be a boy." "Why can't you be like your sister? She's so pretty and smart!" Your older sister was two years your senior, and was very bright and popular. It was obvious that your mother favored her. You feel, *Why didn't G-d make me a boy? Why wasn't I given a chance to be myself? Why do I have to compete with my sister for attention and approval?*



When you were 5 years old, your mother became seriously ill, and you were placed with an aunt, who grudgingly accepted you. You spent two very miserable months with her. When you returned home, your mother was still not well and there was much anxiety about her health. You felt it was your fault that she was not getting better.

One does not have to be a psychological genius to recognize that the situations you faced, along with the attitudes you felt in your childhood, when your personality was being formed, could have caused you to feel inferior, inadequate, and incompetent. You question whether you deserve to be loved. You don't have high hopes for success. You are unhappy, and you hope that with therapy, you may be able to overcome your negative feelings about yourself and to enjoy life.

You have an excellent therapist. You see him/her once or twice a week. He/she is empathic, and you feel that he/she genuinely cares about you and wants to help you.

You see the therapist regularly for two years, and he/she helps you realize that you are, in fact, a good person, both competent and likable. Your parents were indeed remiss in your upbringing, but that was primarily due to their own psychological issues. When you became an adult, your parents realized that they had not given you a fair deal, and they apologized. The therapist did everything he/she could do to help you overcome your negative childhood experiences and to feel more positive about yourself. To some degree, you do. However, there are still some residual negative feelings. Your therapist tells you that he/she would be happy to continue working with you but that frankly, you have reached a plateau, and that he/she does not see that you could gain much more from continuing therapy.

Now what? Is there no hope that you can achieve the happiness you crave?

Much does indeed depend on the attitudes we experience in our childhood, *but not everything*, and we need to find ways of dealing with those factors that do not respond to therapy. Our self-image —

how we see ourselves — is the major determining factor in whether or not we succeed in life.

I have been accused of having a one-track mind, and I plead guilty as charged. I have indeed said that with the exception of those psychiatric disorders that are of physiologic causation, e.g., bi-polar disorder, all psychological disorders are due, at least in part, and sometimes entirely, to low self-esteem. I feel vindicated by a statement made by the eminent *mussar* (self-improvement) authority, R' Shlomo Wolbe (*Alei Shur*, Vol. 1, p. 168). This brief statement is far reaching.

The Hebrew word for self-esteem is *chashivus*, which means *importance* or *value*. R' Wolbe says, “Without an awareness of *chashivus*, there is no *avodah* (service of Hashem) in Torah.”

This is an amazing, challenging statement. R' Wolbe supports his statement by quoting the words we find before and after the giving of the Torah at Sinai. As a precursor to the giving of the Torah, Hashem said to the Israelites, “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of Kohanim,” which Rashi translates as *sarim*, officers or ministers, of great status and with great responsibilities (*Exodus* 19:6). After the giving of the Torah, when the Israelites were awestruck hearing the voice of Hashem, Moses said, “Do not fear, for in order to elevate you has Hashem come” (ibid. 20:17).

R' Wolbe says that before and after the giving of the Torah, Hashem stressed the lofty status of every single Jew. “With a feeling of insignificance, one cannot achieve the intent of Torah.” One must have a sense of personal *chashivus*.

People have the mistaken impression that because *mussar* requires that a person be aware of one's shortcomings and sins, it is depressing. R' Wolbe cites the *Chovos HaLevavos*, pointing out that before

one can do a soul-searching to discover one's character defects, one must feel that one is precious, because one would exert great caution to avoid damaging something that is very valuable. He cites R' Yeruchem Levovitz, the Mirrer Mashgiach, who said, "A person must indeed know his shortcomings so that he knows how to improve on them, but he cannot do so unless he is aware of his character strengths, [knowing] that he is indeed capable of rectifying [his faults]."

The Talmud states, "Every person is *obligated* to say, 'The world was created for me'" (*Sanhedrin* 37a). This is not an expression of vanity or of inflated importance. Rather, it is the awareness that Hashem created the world for a purpose, and *it is the individual's responsibility to see that this purpose is realized*.

The great sage Hillel said, "If I am here, then all is here" (*Succah* 53a). Hillel is noted for his outstanding *anivus* (humility). His statement was not one of grandiosity, but rather of the sense of *chashivus* that is essential for proper living and Torah observance.

I can testify on the basis of fifty years of psychiatric practice that many, many people lack this vital sense of *chashivus*. If you are familiar with some of my writings, you know that I place great emphasis on the problem of *low self-esteem*. By that I mean that some people have *totally unwarranted and unjustified feelings of inferiority*. The reality is that although they may be bright, handsome, capable, and likable, they do not always feel this about themselves. Often they think that they are dull, unattractive, incompetent, and unlikable. Inasmuch as this is not true, they are living and acting according to false premises, and this error may cause many emotional problems. I came to this awareness because of the following experience.

Let me share my personal experience. I had been a rabbi for ten years and a psychiatrist for eight years. I was absolutely certain that my self-concept was accurate. I did not think that I lacked a sense of *chashivus* until “the incident of the whirlpool” shocked me into reality.

I was the medical director of a 300-bed psychiatric hospital, which had the only emergency service in an area of four million people. If a nurse could not reach the patient’s private doctor, I would be called. Family members called, as did social workers, lawyers, and probation officers. On a quiet night, I might receive four calls from the emergency room; on a busy night, I took ten calls. I was on constant call.

When my two-week vacation came around, I told my wife that I needed absolute rest: no sight-seeing, no adventures. I wanted to sit on an easy chair in a dimly lit room and simply breathe. No activities. I nixed many vacation sites because they were too busy, and I settled on Hot Springs, Arkansas, because there was no activity there. The industry of Hot Springs is horse racing, and the racing season begins on February 15. If one arrives there before February 7, it is a ghost town. In December I arrived at a town where all the stores were boarded up. Just what I needed.

Having had chronic low-back pain for years, I took advantage of the miraculous mineral baths. An attendant ushered me into a cubicle where I immersed myself in a whirlpool bath. This was paradise! I was not available by telephone. No one could reach me. I had the absolute peace and quiet I had been craving.

After about five minutes, I emerged, thanking the attendant for this heavenly experience. “Where are you going?” the attendant asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “What’s next in the treatment?”

The attendant said that in order to continue with the treatment, I must remain in the whirlpool for twenty-five minutes.

I returned to the tub, but after five minutes, I said, “Look, I have to get out of here.”

The attendant said, “In that case, you can’t go on with the treatment.”

Unwilling to forfeit the treatment, I returned to the tub for fifteen minutes of misery.

This was a rude awakening. I had been able to tolerate unrelenting stress at the hospital for three years, but I could not tolerate the peace of paradise for more than a few minutes. Obviously, something was drastically wrong.

I consulted a wise psychologist, who said, “If you ask people how they relax, they may say by reading a book, doing needlework, listening to music, watching videos, playing golf, etc. All of these are diversions, not relaxation. True relaxation is an absence of all activity.

“In your whirlpool, you were deprived of all possible diversions. There was nothing to read, nothing to watch, nothing to listen to, and no one to talk to. Being stripped of all diversions, you were left in the immediate company of yourself. You were alone in a tiny room with *someone you don’t like very much*. No wonder you were miserable.”

This rang true, and I began to do a soul-searching to find

what was so appalling about me that I could not stand my own presence. I gradually realized that my self-concept was seriously flawed, and I embarked on a journey to discover my real self. That I was successful is evident from the fact that I have been back to Hot Springs several times, and I enjoy a full twenty-five-minute peaceful whirlpool.

I cannot stress the following statement enough: *If a person's self-concept is negative, that is his reality.* It is much more than just feeling negative about oneself. He believes that everyone in the world sees him as the negative creature he believes himself to be. If one sees a pile of trash, one believes that everyone looking at it will see a pile of trash, rather than a beautiful rosebush. A person with a negative self-image will believe that everyone will react to him as the inadequate and unworthy person he considers himself to be. Consequently, *he will react to everyone in the world according to his assumption that he is an inferior being.* The fallout of this delusion of inferiority is legion. It affects how one relates to everyone: spouse, parents, children, siblings, friends, employers, etc.

I did not absorb this precious insight from a psychology text, but from a comment by the *Chiddushei HaRim*. When the spies Moses sent to scout Canaan returned, they said that the land was inhabited by a race of giants. "We were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes" (*Numbers 13:33*). The *Chiddushei HaRim* states, "The way you feel about yourself is how you believe others see you." This is an important insight and vital to understanding how low self-esteem can damage one's relationships and limit one's happiness.



The Importance of Chavshirus

The Baal Shem Tov rhetorically asks, “Inasmuch as *ga’avah* (vanity; arrogance) is a loathsome trait, why did Hashem create it? Everything in creation must have some positive function. Of what possible good is *ga’avah*?” Then he provides the answer. “A person should think so highly of himself that he will not do anything that is beneath his dignity.” When the *yetzer hara* wishes to lead a person to sin, it may say, “Go ahead and do whatever pleases you. It doesn’t make any difference to anyone.” One’s response should be, “I’m too proud to do that.”

The Talmud says that a person should think of himself as being in a delicate balance, with precisely the same amount of mitzvos and *aveiros*. Inasmuch as a person is judged by the majority of one’s actions, if one does one more mitzvah, that tips the scale to the positive side and one is judged a *tzaddik*. If one does one more *aveirah*

(sin), that tips the scale to the negative side and one is judged a *rasha*.

Furthermore, a person should think of the world as being comprised of an equal number of *tzaddikim* and *reshaim* (wicked people). If a person does one more mitzvah, that action will give him the status of a *tzaddik*, which will now tip the balance of the world toward the positive, and the world will earn a favorable judgment. If one does one *aveirah*, one will be judged a *rasha*, tipping the world toward the negative, resulting in a harsh judgment (*Kiddushin* 40b).

A person should have a sense of *chashivus* to realize, “The future of the world depends on me.” This is the positive application of *ga’aval*.

With low self-esteem, a person cannot have a true sense of the impact he has on the world.