

“Shiviti Hashem l'negdi Tamid”: David HaMelech’s Prescription For G-d Consciousness and Character Refinement

A personal journey to Hashem, spiritual symmetry and emotional equilibrium

My journey began as a frustrated mother with a huge, seemingly uncontrollable temper. I felt like there was no way to diminish the rage inside of me every time my children acted out or did anything that was not in keeping with how I wanted things to go (sound familiar to anyone?) I had read several books on chinuch banim, on anger, and attended a chinuch banim class by one of the best in the field for two years. Still none of the above helped me in the moment to calm myself down, re-gain my self-control and composure, and deal with my kids in a far more effective way than screaming and yelling at them. This was hurting my kids, ruining our relationship and destroying me. Until one day I finally woke up from this repetitive nightmare with the help of an amazing teacher, mentor, spiritual guide here in Eretz Yisrael (Chana Luk, Elon Shavut). Chana was the first person to teach me how to deal with my kids and their hi energy and the clashing that usually led to by very simply learning how to bring HaKadosh Baruch Hu, or more accurately, how to bring myself, into a heightened awareness of His presence, in whatever scenario I was facing.

Now I'll pause here for a moment by mentioning that I've been observant for over 20 years, was very involved in Kiruv, and really did not need anyone to convince me that Hashem exists, is always watching me and is involved in every detail of my life. I knew that, I taught that, I believed that. Still, as clearly evidenced by the way I would respond whenever things weren't going my way, I wasn't living it!

My journey continues when I decided to take a course with Chana's teacher (Elon Feldman, Ramat Beit Shemesh) who taught us to use the verse from Tehillim (16:8) “Shiviti Hashem l'negdi Tamid” in a matra- like manner to quiet our minds and help us enter into a meditative, more intuitive state. As I added this to my morning routine, something quite magical started to happen.

I would repeat this verse over and over until I found myself entering into a very calm, centered, clear space. I began doing this every morning and then the truly miraculous started happening:

whenever my kids would push my buttons and start acting out later in the day, I decided to combine what I was learning with Elon with what Chana had originally suggested: just bring Hashem into the picture. I found the verse "Shiviti ..." a very effective reminder of what I knew all along: namely Hashem is really right beside me all the time ("Hashem l'negdi tamid") and He is the One orchestrating this whole scene for one purpose: to get my attention and remind me to "invite Him in" - to re-establish our connection. I began to discover the potential of what R. Avigdor Miller zt"l explained in one of his classes on the power of speech called auto suggestion.

Simply put, we can use words spoken out loud as a means of re-wiring our brain and as a result impacting our experiences.

What was happening was that by going into this meditative/intuitive space every morning (and this needs to be practiced to be truly effective, hence the word Emunah comes from the verb l'hitamen which means to practice or exercise) by way of my "Shiviti" mantra, my brain began to associate being in a calm, clear, centered space with saying this pasuk. Practically speaking, Hashem had led me to the solution of how to shake myself from being in a frazzled, unconscious, reactive state (obviously I don't mean unconscious physically but rather unconscious spiritually - we usually find ourselves in one of three states of consciousness at any given moment - we're either unconscious, self-conscious or G-d conscious - the key as I saw it was to shift my mental state in a moment's notice from a state of unconsciousness to a state of G-d consciousness) and move myself into a more clear, calm centered state.

Practically speaking my kids would start running around the house at bedtime, fighting, or whatever had become normal defiance in my household. I would begin to chant out loud: "Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid" and all of a sudden the scene immediately shifted: either my kids would calm down or make shalom with each other or express to me something they needed. Bottom line, crisis averted. I didn't yell. I didn't become impatient and what moments earlier had seemed like a totally chaotic scene had now become instantly transformed into calm resolution.

One could easily explain the mechanics of this turn around in multiple ways: a behavior modification therapist would explain it simply as a reflection of my calm state. Because I had re-wired my brain to associate being calm and centered with saying this pasuk, my calm reaction enabled my children to also be calm. This is a nice explanation for behavioral psychologists but I intuited that there had to be something deeper, more kodesh going on here than simply my children reacting to my shift in energy (though of course our energy makes a huge difference in the way our children respond to us). In the beginning I didn't really understand what was going on. All I knew was I had finally found a way to stop yelling at my children (assuming I remembered to say it which still remains a challenge) and I began to feel for the first time a genuine liberation from a horrible middah which had haunted me for so long. I longed to understand what was really going on here and so began my heartfelt desire to uncover the "secret" behind these sacred words uttered by David Hamelech: "Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid."

Not long after this I began teaching an Emunah Building Workshop I developed called Lights of Emunah. I saw the tools I was taught by Chana and Elon and others (another teacher was R. Efim Svirsky, author of Connection: Emotional and Spiritual Growth Through Experiencing Hashem's Presence) as all a means of coming closer to the ultimate End: namely a more real and palpable relationship with Hashem Yitbarach. I continued to search for and encouraged my students to help me solve the mystery of this passuk. I didn't know why yet but I strongly intuited that this verse uttered by David Hamelech contained within it the key to d'vekut (attachment) to Hashem.

I asked the women in my workshop the simple question: what is this verse teaching us that we don't already know? Any G-d fearing Jew knows and believes that "Hashem l'negdi tamid". What's the chiddush here?

And then we began to look at this elusive word "Shiviti" more closely. (Artscroll translates as "I place" or "I set before me" but I sensed there was more to it than that). I asked the women to help me grammatically dissect this word "Shiviti" and we came out with the realization that whatever this "Shiviti" thing is, it's a verb written in the first person in the past tense. And then the pieces began to fall into place: what was David Hamelech trying to convey by using this strange conjugation of this strange word?

I have to do something and having once done that thing, then "Hashem l'negdi tamid"? (again of course Hashem is always "l'negdi tamid." The chiddush we came to realize is that there is something I need to do, there is a mental action I need to make that allows me to be open to and more aware of His Reality.) I still did not know what this "Shiviti shift" as I'll call it was but I davened to Hashem to help me find out.

The mystery began to unravel one day when I was learning with someone the book Inner Space by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan zt"l. Rabbi Kaplan was describing the process whereby Prophets were able to receive prophecy and he explained that "prophets use the third person because they are on a level of objectivity, of total detachment from themselves. It could be that this is the concept of Hishtavut (השתוות) mentioned in a number of texts. This term is derived from the root Shava (שוה), meaning equal. It denotes a certain kind of equanimity... " He goes on to explain: (from the sefer Me'irat Eynayim) that Hishtavut is "the ability to totally nullify one's ego and to feel exactly the same whether he is praised or insulted... All of these steps are a preparation for receiving prophecy itself. They indicate that a person is utterly detached from his 'I'. He can then look down at himself from outside of himself and refer to himself in the third person" (Inner Space: pp. 138-9). He concludes that "This is an extremely important point. We know that a prophetic vision can only be obtained when one is in a perfectly balanced mental state." (See Rambam's Moreh Nevukhim 2:36).

At this point I felt as though the Heavens had opened up and Hashem was guiding me on a very personal special journey indeed.

It struck me as so obvious that this thing called "Hishtavut" or as I later learned it to be called "Hishtavut Hanefesh" had to be related to my mystery word "Shiviti" since they both shared the same Hebrew root שוה .

I quickly became obsessed with trying to learn whatever I could about "Hishtavut" and how it might help me in my yearning to feel a constant consciousness of "Hashem l'negdi tamid". I researched further. The same above Rav Aryeh Kaplan quote sent me to his footnotes (p.220, notes 55,56) which read:

"The concept of Hishtavut is also found in the Talmud where it is called 'overcoming one's natural tendencies' (being ma'avir al midotav) as found in Megillah 28a; Taanit 25a." And here comes the clincher: R. Kaplan notes (from R. Isaac of Acco quoted in Sh'arey Kedusha 4:1:3, 4:1:6-7 pp.3-4) that "The Divine Presence (Shekhinah) [ie. Hashem L'Negdi Tamid] is revealed to one who has attained this level of total indifference [ie. Shiviti] to all outside influences." Eureka! That's it!!! At this point I became totally convinced that "Shiviti" and "Hishtavut" were one and the same and that one who strives towards attaining a level of "Hishtavut Hanefesh" is blessed with as R. Kaplan says above, an experience, an awareness, a heightened consciousness of "Hashem L'negdi tamid". In other words, when one does or rather when one trains his thoughts towards this level of Hishtavut (ie. Shiviti) then what naturally follows is the clarity of "Hashem L'negdi tamid".

I knew this from a deep intuitive place that this had to be true, that there had to be a connection between "Shiviti" and "Hishtavut" but I knew I obviously couldn't teach this based on my intuition alone. So began my search to find a source for my intuition. To try and get more of a handle on this word, I looked up "Hishtavut" in a Hebrew-English dictionary and came up with the following definitions: (Alcalay dictionary) **כּוּבֵשׁ יִצְרוּ** (being ma'avir al midotav, overcoming one's natural tendencies as cited above); **מְבַלִּיג** (restraining, restraint, cheerfulness); and (control over moods) **שׁוֹלֵט בְּרוּחוֹ**.

I asked the Rosh Kollel here in Ma'ale Amos (R. David Steinhilber) for his help at discovering the meaning of Hishtavut and he sent me to Chovot HaLevovot: Gate of Wholehearted Devotion of all Acts, ch. 5 where it says: "It is related that one of the pious asked another, 'Do you possess equanimity.' (הַנִּשְׁתוּיִת) 'In what sense?' he asked. 'Are praise and insult equal in your eyes?' (נִשְׁתוּהוּ) 'No'. 'Then you have not yet arrived. Make the effort! Perhaps you will reach this level. For it is the highest level among the pious and the most precious of virtues.'"

Meanwhile I began to uncover more about "Shiviti" and discovered (with the help of my husband) that "Shiviti Hashem..." is not just a nice saying from David Hamelech.

It is in fact the opening sif of the Shulchan Aruch and is the halacha with which the Beít Yosef begins his master codification of Jewish Law (Shulchan Orech: Síman א (א)). The halachic sefer the Chaye Adam elaborates on how does one fulfill "Shívítí Hashem" and asks (paraphrased): "How is it possible for a person to be d'vuk (attached) to Hashem?" The m'chaber answers: "He should attach always his thoughts on Him (**דבוק במחשבותו בו**) as it is written Shívítí Hashem..." This idea is also brought down by the Rambam in Moreh Nevuchím (3:56): "The power of thought that Hashem granted us is what connects us to Him." As paraphrased by R. Shímshon Píncus zt"l in his sefer Shabbos Kodesh (pp. 119-120): "When we think about Hashem, we are actually with Him. And when we think about something else, we simply disconnect from Hashem."

Based on the above sources, it's clear that there is a mental process involved in fulfillment of this halachic dictum. To fulfill "Shívítí..." requires a level of mental consciousness /thought process on our part and so too with Híshtavut Hanefesh. In order to nullify one's ego, overcome one's natural tendencies, and be able to transcend whatever situation a person finds himself in requires a supreme and disciplined mental effort. It was becoming more and more clear to me from all the sources Hashem was revealing to me that our thoughts and specifically our way of thinking are the common denominators to these two concepts Shívítí/Híshtavut. There still remained two more pieces in the puzzle that needed to fall into place:

1. Find a source somewhere that linked the words "Shívítí" and "Híshtavut" and
2. Explore more this idea as expressed above by the Rambam: that it all comes down to our thoughts, way of thinking and how the mind works.

Baruch Hashem, Hashem led me to the answer to both of these questions in a relatively short time frame. It happened the day after Shavuot. I was listening to a shiur by R. Moshe Weinberger (www.ravmosheweinberger.com) and he began his talk with words that still reverberate throughout my being. He was quoting from The Last Will and Testament of The Ba'al Shem Tov and the first sentence he translated from the words of the Ba'al Shem tov was: "Shívítí loshon Híshtavut". I screamed with joy and excitement louder than I'd ever screamed before (and my mother being an opera singer I know how to scream!)

It was like my own personal Matan Torah given to me as a gift the day after we celebrated the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The explanation of Hishtavut given by the Ba'al Shem Tov exactly echoes the Chovot Levivot cited above. As translated by R. Weinberger: Hishtavut means **הכל שוה אצלו** indicating "I am always equal, I am always in a state of equilibrium whether I am being praised or I am being insulted, everything is שוה (equal) by him... As seen in the light of the greater awesome presence of Eloket and what that is calling upon you to do, all is equal..."

R. Weinberger continues: "Everything is equal because the yetzer hara has been removed from him." In other words, what is the role of the yetzer hara? It is there to confound our thinking. It is there to cover over our ability to perceive the Eloket, the G-dliness in all of Reality and to create the illusion that "I" am at the center of the universe, not Hashem. "I" control all things, all situations. "I" expect everything to go according to My plan.

There are therefore at least two main modes of corrupted thinking that keep us away from the G-d consciousness commanded upon us by "Shiviti": one is the over emphasis on the "I", the over extension of the ego; and the other is a total tuning out of Reality and just going into unconscious re-active mode. The first danger the Ba'al Shem Tov addressed in his explanation of the pasuk: "I am standing between Hashem and between you ("Anochi omed ben Hashem u'beinechem" :Devarim, Va'etchanan, ch. 5, v. 5)

According to the Besht's teaching, one should understand this passuk to mean that the "I" the "Anochi" as the ego is what is standing between Hashem and the Jewish people. In terms of the second mode of corrupted thinking, the Ramchal addresses in his sefer The Derech Eitz Chaim where he describes the best way to defeat the yetzer: "Being Conscious will strengthen the soul and certainly distance from him the yetzer. There is nothing that weakens the soul before the yetzer like the lack of consciousness. And if someone's consciousness is broad and stands on his heart, he would never sin at all...Since G-d wants that man will be ruler over his yetzer...He put in him the ability to be conscious..."

The Ba'al Shem Tov again echoes this teaching and exhorts us: "a person need only direct his consciousness to the presence of holiness in all things..."

Every person at all times, in every situation, on his level can to some degree meet up with Elokut, G-dliness" (as paraphrased by R. Weinberger). So based on all of the above, what is the thinking process one should go through in any situation? "Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid", R. Weinberger explains, means to ask yourself: right now what is my Avodat Hashem, what is Hashem communicating to me right now that He wants me to do? What is the Elokut that's present in this moment right now? And how is one able to respond effectively and clearly in any given situation? Answer: through the mode of thinking that is characterized as hishtavut hanefesh: having the perspective that "הכל שוה אצלו". "Shiviti means Hishtavut" or as R. Weinberger describes it: "I am always feeling in a state of spiritual symmetry and equilibrium...Why? Because Hashem l'negdi tamid!" "Shiviti" R. Weinberger concludes, "becomes the battle cry of the Jew in this world...Everything is Elokut. Everything is שוה (equal) when perceived from that perspective."

To summarize: It becomes a circular mental process: to the degree that I have a strong consciousness that Hashem is with me, Hashem l'negdi tamid, to that degree I can come to a state of inner calm and mental equilibrium (Shiviti/Hishtavut hanefesh) in any given situation. At the same time, to the degree that I have disciplined my thinking and I've worked on this middah of Hishtavut Hanefesh, I've worked on this "Shiviti" thing (ie. diminishment of the ego, being ma'avir al midotav, self-restraint, control over my moods, inner calm and equilibrium, etc.) then it follows that this Shiviti/Hishtavut process will prepare my Kli to experience more of the Reality of "Hashem l'negdi tamid". As we explained above by R. Issaac of Acco, "The Shekhinah is revealed to one who has attained [note the past tense used here] this level of total indifference to all outside influences." Or to put it back in the words of David Hamelech, "Shiviti...." therefore I am able to recognize "Hashem l'negdi tamid."

While it is true that we do not have access to prophecy today, still we are B'nai Neviim as the Gemara reminds us (Pesachim 66a): "If the Jews are not prophets, they are the children of prophets."

That being the case, we too have potential access to experiencing more Elokut in our lives, making our connection with Hashem more real, palpable and personal.

We can then be partners in a relationship for which G-d created the whole world as expressed by the Ramchal in Ch. 1 of his classic work Path of the Just: "man was created for the sole purpose of rejoicing in G-d and deriving pleasure from the splendor of His Presence; for this is true joy and the greatest pleasure that can be found."

Bringing all of this down to L'maase, how does one live with "Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid"? Coming now full circle to what I said at the very beginning, the key as I've experienced is to repeat this passuk whilst in a relaxed, calm, focused state, repeating it over and over again until you begin to feel even more relaxed and calm. With practice, (again Emumah from the verb L'hitamem meaning to practice) you will begin to feel embraced by a deep, calming sensation of being in Hashem's Loving Presence, surrounding you and filling you (for a detailed description of some model meditations that I use, see To Heal the Soul, by R. Kalanymus Kalman Shapira in the Introduction called Inner Silence; also see R. Efim Svirsky's book Connection, exercise 3: Concentration on the Feeling of Love, Protection and Harmony from Our Creator).

Now you can also add to your focused meditation in your own words the ideas presented above: namely that with every repetition of Shiviti, feel your ego shrinking more and more. Ask Hashem in this focused state to bless you with the quality of Hishtavut hanefesh, that this feeling of equilibrium, inner calmness, and self-control should remain with you throughout your day. Ask Hashem to help you transcend whatever situations you find yourself in during the day, to go above your normal operative ego state and rise to the level of seeing the Eloket in all situations. Ask yourself: what is the message that Hashem is communicating to you right now, what is the personal ratzon (will) that He has set out for you in this moment. And finally whilst feeling this sense of inner calmness and balance and symmetry, and your thinking is clearer and more focused on what's Real and what's illusion, ask Hashem to help you anchor these thoughts and feelings with repetition of the phrase "Shiviti Hashem l'negdi tamid". Then whenever you need to go back into this calm, centered space, repetition of this phrase will trigger your brain and bring you back there in an instant. This comes with practice but from my own personal experience it really works!

Whenever I find myself slipping into an unconscious, re-active, routine mode or I'm feeling a need to control whatever situation I'm in, I can now pause, catch myself, breathe (I find taking that first deep breath is essential; the key is to remember to do this, to make this mental shift before you snap out of reality) and remind myself outloud: (sometimes if I'm really on the edge I'll shout it outloud, my kids are very used to this by now but it sure beats shouting at them) "Shiviti Hashem...!" That triggers in my brain everything I practiced in the morning, that Hashem is right here, that Hashem is the One sending me this situation.

Hashem loves me and He is just trying to get my attention to re-establish our connection; as soon as I remember Hashem is with me, then all is manageable, all is good. We know this to be true. Now the key is to feel it and to live with it. If Hashem is really right here beside me, so I can be calm. I can feel centered and balanced. And I can switch my corrupted thinking at will, at any given moment, into a mode of spiritual symmetry and mental equilibrium. I can be free from reacting from a place of ego and control and instead respond from a place of Truth and peace!

As we share more and more of our experiences in this journey towards closeness to Hashem and mental mastery, I believe that together we can help one another break through the walls of deception and the barriers of illusion. And if we can help to remind ourselves and one another that all is Oneness, every situation, every nuance in life is really Hashem's way of talking to us, then we'll be able to experience constant joy in everything that we're doing, in every single moment of life - b'ezrat Hashem!

To learn more about how to apply this "Shiviti" strategy along with other practical tools to access our Emunah resources for healing, spiritual empowerment, and greater joy in daily living, check out [LIGHTS OF EMUNAH](#) and our other fantastic seminars/resources on how to develop a more personal and palpable relationship with our Creator.

A new Lights of Emunah series will be beginning after Pesach. For more information and/or to register, contact Devorah Yaffa at: DevorahYaffa@G-dDirectTorah.com or visit: www.G-dDirectTorah.com.