

Torah Talk: Unlocking the Path of *Mesilat Yesharim*

We often speak in reverence about the *Mesilat Yesharim*—the Path of the Just—written by the Ramchal, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. And rightly so. It's a brilliant, carefully structured roadmap for spiritual development. But many people read it and completely miss what it's trying to say.

They see it as a collection of nice *Musar* thoughts. Some inspiration here, a bit of ethics there. But that's not what the book is. It's not a bunch of pious ideas. It's a process. A ladder. A system.

The *Ramchal* built the whole sefer around the *Baraita* of Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair in the Gemara (Avodah Zarah 20b), which lays out a step-by-step ladder of growth:

Zehirut → Zerizut → Nekiut → Prishut → Chassidut → Anavah → Yirat Chet → Kedushah → Ruach HaKodesh → Techiyat HaMetim

Each level flows into the next. You can't skip around. It's a structured guide for personal transformation. Yet most readers never notice the sequence. They treat the sefer as if it's just a list of things you should try to do or be.

But *Mesilat Yesharim* is much deeper than that. It's about timing, self-knowledge, and building a spiritual life the right way.

Start with the Basics, Not the Extras

Let's focus on the levels people often misunderstand the most: *Nekiut*, *Prishut*, and *Chassidut*.

- **Zehirut** is about avoiding sins—being cautious.
- **Zerizut** is about pursuing mitzvot with energy.
- **Nekiut** is where you not only do the right thing but do it for the right reasons, with clean motives and without self-interest.

And *only after all that* does the *Ramchal* allow us to talk about *Prishut*—voluntarily separating from permitted things to avoid risk of sin—and then *Chassidut*, going above and beyond in mitzvot out of love for God.

This is crucial. People today jump to *Chassidut* and *Prishut* without first doing the basic work of *Zehirut*, *Zerizut*, and *Nekiut*. They try to do “extra credit” while failing the core class. That’s not piety. It’s a distraction.

Two Prophets and a Seeming Contradiction

There’s a fascinating Gemara that highlights this exact point (Berachot 10b and Ketubot 105b). It says:

“If you want to take gifts, be like **Elisha** who took them. If you don’t want to take gifts, be like **Shmuel**, who didn’t take anything from anyone. As it says, ‘*Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken?*’ And it also says, ‘*Sonei matanot yichyeh*’—one who hates gifts will live.”

At first glance, this is deeply confusing. Which is it? Are we supposed to accept gifts or reject them? And if hating gifts gives you life—*sonei matanot yichyeh*—then why would Elisha accept them?

The answer is the core of what *Mesilat Yesharim* is trying to teach: these choices are not one-size-fits-all. They depend on your nature, your *tikkun*, and your level in the process.

If you’re someone whose challenge is in materialism, envy, or financial temptation—then rejecting gifts is the right *Prishut* for you. That’s what Shmuel did. He knew his nature, and he wanted to uproot even the possibility of impropriety. Wherever he went, he brought everything with him—he never took even a bite of bread or a sip of water from anyone. That was his tailored *Prishut*.

But Elisha? Elisha had no such struggle. For him, taking gifts was a way to make people feel respected and included. That, too, is a form of *Chassidut*—going beyond yourself to elevate others. And for *him*, it was the right move.

Real Examples of Prishut and Chassidut

Let’s bring this home with a few real-world examples that people often mistake for obligations when they’re actually *Midat Chassidut*—and should only be adopted when you’re truly ready:

1. Saying *Tikkun Chatzot*

Waking at midnight to mourn the destruction of the Temple is a beautiful and holy practice. But it’s not required. If you’re still working on davening *Shacharit* daily, or you can’t make it

through a full *Mincha*, then *Tikkun Chatzot* may be a premature leap. It only becomes meaningful when it emerges from a heart already clean and spiritually stable.

2. Avoiding Pleasurable Foods as a Religious Practice

Some people stop eating meat, sweets, or rich foods as an act of self-denial. That can be a genuine act of *Prishut*—if done to fight internal desires. But if you still lose your temper, cheat on taxes, or indulge in gossip, cutting out dessert is not holiness—it’s a costume.

3. Davening Slowly and With Extreme Focus

Praying *Shemoneh Esrei* with deep concentration is beautiful. But if you haven’t yet conquered anger, jealousy, or arrogance—then those long, drawn-out tefillot might be more about performance than connection. *Chassidut* in prayer should be an overflow of an already-refined soul, not a detour from the hard work.

4. Avoiding Honors and Kavod

Some people refuse Kibbudim (public honors), or avoid speaking in public, thinking it’s humble. And maybe it is—if they’ve worked on their ego and identified honor as a spiritual danger. But if it’s done for appearances, or if inside they’re resentful, it’s not *Chassidut*—it’s theater.

5. Avoiding Social Situations or Women’s Voices Beyond Halacha

Going beyond modesty requirements can be *Prishut*—if it helps you fight personal struggle. But if it’s just mimicking what “frum” people do, or used to shame others, then it’s a harmful misapplication of spirituality.

The Key: Know Yourself

In the times of the Prophets, you could go to a *navi* and he’d tell you what your spiritual mission was—what you needed to fix, where to focus. Today, we don’t have prophets. So we learn it the hard way—by living honestly, by observing our own struggles, by being willing to ask: where do I stumble? What part of my nature needs correcting?

Mesilat Yesharim doesn’t just teach *how* to grow—it teaches *when*. And if you try to jump to *Prishut* or *Chassidut* before *Nekiut*, you’re likely just playing dress-up with your ego.

But if you’ve done the work—if you know your challenge is in envy, or arrogance, or desire—and you’ve fought through *Zehirut* and *Zerizut*, and reached *Nekiut*, then *Prishut* and *Chassidut* can become tools to completely reroute your nature. And that is real *avodat Hashem*.