

THE OU WOMEN'S INITIATIVE IS PROUD TO PRESENT:

— ASERET YEMEI TESHUVAH —

IDEAS
& *inspiration*

5784

THE
Women's
INITIATIVE

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שיינדל פריידל בת שלמה דב וקינע

Dedicated by Yitzchok and Barbie Lehmann Siegel in loving memory of our beloved parents
Dr. Manfred and Anne Lehmann

רב מנשה רפאל בן החבר חיים ופיגא
ושרה בת יצחק משולם פייש וחיה חנה אידל
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יעקב בן צבי הלוי וחנה
ושרה ראסא בת רפאל ופעשא

and in loving memory of our beloved brother Jamie Lehmann

חיים מנחם בן הרב מנשה רפאל ושרה



A message from
REBBETZIN DR. ADINA SHMIDMAN
Founding Director, OU Women's Initiative

בס"ד

Dear Friend,

In a very unusual presentation of messages, the *haftorah* read on the Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, captures the voices of three different prophets. Why multiple messages of *teshuvah*? Wouldn't a singular voice be more powerful and convincing rather than jumping from prophet to prophet?

As no two people are the same, each person's path of growth and transformation must be unique. For some, the process is gradual, a step-by-step approach, while for others, the path to repentance is a sharp pivot, a remarkable encounter or a dramatic transformational experience. By capturing three different voices, Hoshea, Yoel and Micha, we can appreciate the sophisticated and nuanced messages of spiritual return.

Throughout the generations we have been provided with a remarkable canon of halachic and hashkafic works to guide us through this auspicious period. These ideas and ideals provide a guide for spiritual return and interpersonal repair. This collection of essays expounds on these themes capturing the nexus of Torah and psychology to build and mend our relationship with Hashem, others and ourselves, to inspire growth and direct our prayers heavenward.

The OU Women's Initiative is deeply grateful to Yitzchok and Barbie Lehmann Siegel, along with an anonymous donor, for their generous support of this project. Thank you to the Women's Initiative commission chairs, Miriam Greenspan and Nomi Rotblat for their leadership and dedication. Thank you to the talented mental health professionals for their erudite observations and insights. Finally, I express my appreciation to the Women's Initiative team, Adeena Mayerfeld, Nechama Epstein, Rachel Miller and Shoshana Rapps, the Mr. Saul Bernstein OU Women's Initiative Summer Intern, for their efforts in putting this meaningful collection together.

May Hashem grant us a year filled with good health, happiness and holiness in a restored world.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה

Rebbetzin Dr. Adina Shmidman
Founding Director, OU Women's Initiative



This essay collection contains divrei Torah, and should therefore be disposed of respectfully by either double-wrapping prior to disposal, or placing in a recycling bin.

Transliterations in this publication are based on Sephardic or Ashkenazic pronunciation according to authors' preferences.

THE

Women's

INITIATIVE

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Teshuvah: A Cognitive-Behavioral Approach

Dr. Ditzza Berger

Teshuvah presents a conundrum. On the one hand, we know there are things that we must change. In principle, moreover, we are committed to the task. Nevertheless, reflecting on the inadequacies of our conduct and character—both of which, according to the Rambam, we must try to rectify (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 7:3)—can be paralyzing. Negative thoughts and emotions feed off each other. And, both can lead to problematic behaviors, which in turn reinforce the thoughts and emotions.

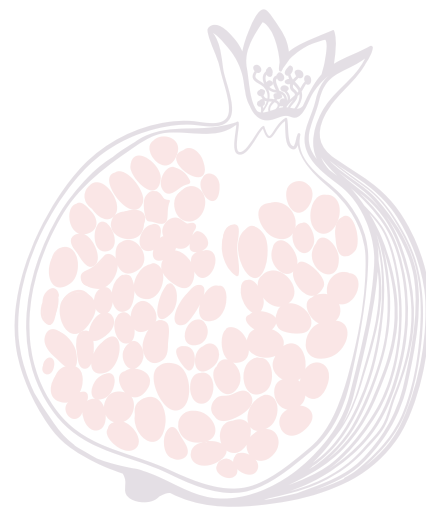
The attitudes that make *teshuvah* challenging find parallels in the therapeutic sphere: the same tendencies that impede religious growth present obstacles to psychological healing. A cognitive-behavioral approach, however, offers a model to help us succeed. It is true that our thoughts, emotions and behaviors influence one another. Precisely because of their mutual relationship, however, all three provide entry points for disrupting the cycle of negativity and turning ourselves in a positive direction. Furthermore, while certain emotions—which are often tied to character traits—may cause us to spiral downward, we may often harness those very emotions in a more positive way.

To illustrate the different entry points, let us consider the Torah's first lesson in *teshuvah* (Bereishit, chapter 4). After G-d rejects Kayin's offering, we are told that "Kayin was very angry" and that "his countenance fell." As Rav Saadia Gaon observes, these reactions constitute internal and external expressions of emotion. To help Kayin confront them, G-d then addresses each one: "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?"

G-d's first question, as explained by the Netziv, addresses an emotion, anger, that is tied to Kayin's arrogance; he feels that his offering did not deserve rejection. G-d, therefore, encourages Kayin to target his negative emotions—by using his thoughts. Specifically, He urges him to reflect critically on his self-perception, so that his arrogance, and in turn his anger, might subside and allow a healthier attitude. By contrast, G-d's question about Kayin's "fallen countenance" concerns an emotion, despondency, that arises not from a character trait but from a *conviction*: after experiencing rejection, Kayin genuinely thinks that he has no future. Fundamentally, then, it is this destructive *thought* that Kayin must target: Is it really true that he cannot become better in G-d's eyes? Is there not room for a more positive outlook, one that points toward a path to success? Finally, G-d tells Kayin, "After all, if you improve, you will be uplifted." With this statement, G-d urges the sinner to target his *conduct*: despite what Kayin might think, he holds the power to make concrete, practical changes that will yield a positive outcome.

It bears emphasis that even though G-d challenges Kayin's emotional responses, both internal and external, those responses nonetheless serve a purpose. Indeed, Rav Saadia Gaon remarks that, in an important way, we must evaluate Kayin's reactions favorably. After all, without experiencing *any* negative feeling, a person will probably fail to undertake the steps necessary for *teshuvah*. The challenge, therefore, as in the therapeutic realm, becomes to harness emotional reactions in the service of constructive change. Whereas feelings of guilt, when taken to an extreme, can lead a person to despair, a moderate amount of guilt may serve as a positive catalyst.

When we feel discouraged, sensing that change is prohibitively difficult, a cognitive-behavioral model can, in the final analysis, offer a pivotal corrective. By carefully distinguishing, and patiently reflecting on the negative thoughts, emotions and behaviors that contribute to our feelings of powerlessness, and then asking how we might address each one, we can better recognize when each of them arises, address it in the appropriate way and help redirect the cycle in a positive direction. If we untangle the forces that make change seem daunting, the journey of *teshuvah* may, in the end, become a far smoother ride for us all.



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The Neuropsychology of Teshuvah

Dr. Sarah Lewis-Levy

Dedicated in memory of my father, Dr. Bernard Lewis a”h, whose fascination in finding the synchronicity of Torah wisdom with our current knowledge of the sciences sparked my own interest in the topic.

It is revealing that a word specifically referring to the brain, like the modern Hebrew word, *moach*, does not appear in the Torah. The Torah refers to a broader, more spiritual concept of the “mind” with terms such as *nefesh*, *neshamah* and *sechel*. In the Shema we are commanded to love G-d with all our “heart” and all our “*nefesh*,” ואהבתך וכל-מאדך (Deut. 6:4).

Although *nefesh* is usually translated as referring to the soul, defining *nefesh* as relating to the mind is reflected in our more contemporary understanding of the brain. Dr. Wilder Penfield, a preeminent neurologist at McGill University, acknowledged that human consciousness stems from something beyond the physical grey matter of the brain (1975). We can define *nefesh*, mind, as the seat of conscious awareness or cognition, and define *lev*, heart, as the source of emotions. Thus, the verse in Shema above distinguishes between the “heart” and the “mind.” Similarly, *Sefer Shmuel* makes a distinction between these two areas: והקימתי לי כהן נאמן כאשר בלבבי ובנפשי יעשה: *I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind* (I Samuel 2:35).

Current psychology contends (Cannon-Bard, James-Lange, Schacher-Singer and Lazarus) that it is thought, or cognitive appraisal, which impacts how we interpret our bodies’ physiological reactions. For example, if we experience heart palpitations, our thoughts and interpretations about why we feel this way will guide our emotional response and differentiate whether the heart palpitations lead us to feel fear or excitement.

The premise that thoughts, feelings and behaviors are distinct from one another, and that thoughts have influence over feelings and behaviors, is the basis of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), found to be effective for treating depressive and anxiety disorders. Reframing negative thoughts will in turn improve feelings and behaviors. This triad of inter-related responses is referred to as the “cognitive triangle.” The belief that we have the ability to control our thoughts and emotions is supported by the biblical commandments that require us to feel certain emotions, such as hatred, love and happiness. The verses below highlight the notion that these emotional responses are volitional:

בלבבך לא-תשנא את-אחייך בלבבך, *Do not hate your brother in your heart* (Lev. 19:17)

ואהבת לרעך כמוך, *Love your fellow as yourself* (Lev. 19:18)

ושמחת בחגך, *You shall rejoice in your festival* (Deut. 16:14)

The verse from *Parshat Nitzavim*, read on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, exquisitely describes the *teshuvah* process as being in sync with the cognitive triangle pattern: כי-קרוב הוא... לא-נפלא הוא ממך ולא רחוק הוא... *Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach... The thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it* (Deut. 30:11-14).

The Torah is defining the methods of achieving repentance as being readily accessible – “in your mouth,” i.e., through the process of confession (*vidui*), “in your heart,” i.e., the process of regret (*charatah*), and “to observe it,” i.e., behavioral change (*azivat hachet*).

These three steps correspond to those specified by the Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuvah* and can be viewed as reflecting the CBT triangle of thoughts, emotions and behaviors:

1. *Vidui* - Verbal confession and proclamation of sins increase awareness: **Cognition/Thoughts**
2. *Charatah* - regret and motivation to improve: **Emotion**
3. *Azivat hachet* - plan to change actions: **Behavior**

Once the process of self-awareness (cognition) and the feeling of regret (emotion) is complete, how does one muster the self-control to change his behaviors and resist repeating the transgressions when tempted under similar circumstances (behavior), thereby effecting complete *teshuvah*? Wouldn't the innumerable neuronal connections reinforced over the course of time through habit preclude change?

Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to adapt as a result of environmental input. Research shows that brain plasticity exists throughout a lifetime. Practicing a new skill can change hundreds of millions of the connections between the nerve cells in our brain maps. Even our thoughts take place in the neurons of our brain. A neuron is made up of three parts: the dendrites, which appear like branches, the cell body, and the axon, a cable that carries electrical impulses toward the dendrites of neighboring neurons. Every time a thought is repeated, the dendrites of the neurons associated with that thought grow, and the wiring is strengthened. When we stop thinking a habitual thought, the dendrites shrink and disappear (Doidge, 2007).

To create new habits we need to grow new neuronal pathways which involve time, learning, effort and practice. In the context of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, there are a multitude of techniques to practice regularly in order to create new and more adaptive thinking patterns which enhance emotions and ultimately behaviors, creating a positive cycle within the cognitive triangle. Thus, we can view any self-improvement activity as engagement in the process of *teshuvah*.

We are fortunate to have ready access to a wide variety of therapeutic interventions. All of our initiatives to improve ourselves inside and outside of the context of therapy are part of the holy work of the *teshuvah* process. May the Almighty see and accept these efforts and allow us to achieve complete *teshuvah*.

Sarah Lewis-Levy, PhD, is a neuropsychologist in private practice in Jerusalem, Israel.



Regret as a Catalyst: Unlocking Change Through Reflection

Dr. Yael Muskat

This is the season of regrets. In the days surrounding Rosh Hashanah, rather than stock up on champagne and confetti for the New Year, we are asked to reflect and regret. The feelings and thoughts that come with regrets are so painful that the human mind and psyche will try almost anything to avoid them. At the same time, study after study shows that effective regret leads to a better future. Jewish tradition agrees. Regret is at the heart of the *teshuvah* process, which Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls a time of “profound liberation.”

What is the most effective way to regret? In his book, “The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward,” Daniel Pink shares fascinating insights on why we regret and what regret has to offer. His description of “good regret” connects directly with the steps of *teshuvah* in our tradition as described by Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuvah*. According to Rambam, after separating from sin, we must confess, regret and resolve not to sin again. Pink’s expansive definition and prescription for how to regret touches on all three of these steps.

#1: Confession: A stark parallel between the psychology of regret and the experience of *teshuvah* is that of confession, or *vidui*. Pink asserts that “the first step in reckoning with all regrets, whether regrets of inaction or action, is self-disclosure.” He recommends habits such as having a regret circle, a gathering with close friends to discuss mutual regrets, or having a “regret resume” with a list of things we regret, because the very act of this disclosure without judgment will propel us to future action and growth.

Just as Pink recommends verbalizing our sins even to ourselves, Rambam enumerates confession as a key component to *teshuvah*. We verbally take responsibility for the sins that we committed. We also name the problem and by doing so we put a limiting factor on it. Rav Soloveitchik called this step the first act of *teshuvah* in that it is a cry to G-d. The act of confession is a call for help and it reflects a desire to change.

#2: Feeling regret: The anxious feelings associated with regret can also be seen as feelings of loss for what could have transpired had we made a different choice. Pink warns, “Don’t push away the feeling: Welcome the feeling of regret; it can propel us forward and improve our lives.” One must feel regret to grow from it and change. As an example, CEOs who were asked to confront their regrets about a negotiation ultimately improved their “decision-making hygiene” and made more informed, thoughtful decisions going forward (Pink). If we simply push away the feeling of regret, then we do not give ourselves the opportunity to know what we want or need to change.

Similarly, Rambam states that a crucial step for *teshuvah* is to experience *charatah*, which is regret. Rav Soloveitchik explains that sin separates us from G-d, and the pain associated with *teshuvah* is that loss of closeness and connection with G-d. *Teshuvah* is a process of “restoring our relationship with G-d,” and a key step in this process is the feeling of loss associated with regret.

#3: Resolve not to sin again: There is a danger in regretting too much. Rumination, or overthinking about past mistakes, can lead to severe negative psychological consequences. Pink warns, “don’t dodge the emotions, but don’t wallow in them either. Confront them; use them as a catalyst for future behaviors.”

To fight rumination, the key to successful regret and *teshuvah* is to transform the feelings and thoughts into action. Regret is only useful if it is connected to an action plan, which Rambam refers to as resolving to do better in the future. This involves an action plan such as making amends, asking for forgiveness, or making a plan to change and do better in the future.

When seen in this context, regret is elevated to being not only a healthy behavior, but it can actually be redemptive. This psychological approach to *teshuvah* and the opportunity of regret brings to mind the famous description of Elul as a time of *אני לדודי ודודי לי*, *I am to my Beloved as my Beloved is to me*, a time for closeness and love between man and G-d. G-d, as it were, is holding our hand while we go through this difficult but ultimately redemptive process. The prescription for regret is not easy. It is not supposed to be. But it is the key to building a better tomorrow and restoring ourselves to the people we can truly be. Regret is the nudge to push us to improve. Let us find the strength not to ignore it, and also not to buckle under it, but rather to grow and redeem ourselves through it.

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The Gift of Shame

Dr. Danielle Dragon

Modern psychology has led *shame* to have a negative reputation. We have been taught that shame is a psychological villain to be eradicated. Our personal experiences of shame were often highly negative. But what if we have learned it wrong? The Torah defines shame as a vital and G-d gifted emotional experience and helps us understand that the inherent problem is not shame, but our nearly automatic responses to shame.

How does the Torah define the construct of shame? In *Sefer Shemos*, Moshe Rebbeinu is delayed in descending from Har Sinai to return to the Jewish People. Rav Hirsch translates the word *delayed*, as, “did not fulfill their expectation.” Klal Yisrael anticipated Moshe’s return at a certain time and he was late (from their perspective). He did not meet their anticipated expectation. Here, the Hebrew word for *delayed*, בּוּשָׁה, shares a root with the word בּוּשָׁה, *shame*. Thus, we understand that **shame** is the feeling of **disappointment when there is a difference between expectation and reality**.

We have all experienced the schism between our ideal version of ourselves, and the reality of what occurred. I wanted to speak calmly to my children, I yelled instead. I wanted to daven with *kavanah*, but I was too distracted. When reality differs from our expectation, we will likely find ourselves with a sharp and guttural feeling of shame in our stomach. Ideally, this discomfort is intended to act as a wake up call to stir the process of *teshuvah*. *Shame* is meant to be uncomfortable and noticeable, alerting us to our error or shortcoming, and motivating us towards a future of behavioral change.

For many individuals, the uncomfortable shame experience very quickly causes one of three processes, all problematic responses that attempt to deter us from *teshuvah*. The first reaction one may engage in is to **hide**, portrayed by Adam and Chavah after eating from the *Eitz HaDa’as*. “They heard Hashem’s voice in the garden...and the man and his wife hid themselves...” (Bereishis 3:8). After we fall short of an ideal or expectation, we might “hide,” mindlessly scrolling, shopping or engaging in a numbing strategy to avoid recognition of our non-ideal behavior. Although hiding and denial may prevent us from experiencing the discomfort of shame in the moment, it ultimately derails us from the *teshuvah* process, pulling us away from חרטה, *regret*, ודוי, *identification of our wrongdoing*, and therefore, קבלה לעתיד, *a commitment to change*.

Another reaction borne of shame, is our propensity to **blame others**. When Hashem gives Adam a chance to confess, he blames Chavah, “And the man said: The woman whom You put at my side - she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (Bereishis 3:12). In turn, Chavah blames the snake. Both Adam and Chavah sinned, experienced shame and blamed others rather than allow their shame to propel them toward accountability. Many of us relate to this seemingly automatic reaction. Picture this: I’m late for carpool when I pride myself on being timely. Instead of apologizing to both my child and the Rebbe, my propensity might be to blame the seemingly infinite others involved; *the previous appointment ran late, my kids hid my car keys*, etc. Anger and exasperation often collude with this propensity. When we blame others with an angry tone, we are more effective at convincing ourselves and others that we are not to blame.

Instead of allowing our shame to act as an alarm and stir the process of *teshuvah*, we unconsciously and aggressively blame others for our falling short. This is particularly problematic as blaming others allows us to completely avoid the *teshuvah* process and create a delusion that it was not our fault.

The third reaction to shame is to blame ourselves and engage in **negative and repetitive criticisms of the self**. Imagine this: you miss lunch with a friend because you neglected to schedule it correctly. Next, you feel hot feelings of shame in your stomach and throat. Almost instantaneously, you bombard yourself with negative comments - *What's wrong with you?! You're so disorganized! You're a horrible friend*. For many, this punitive and aggressive self-talk derails us from an effective *teshuvah* process and instead leaves us in a paralyzed or dysregulated state.

In an explanation of the shame construct, Rav Hirsch writes: "Therefore, He implanted within man a sense of shame, which would always inform man of his inadequacy. Thus, man became his own monitor and guardian." Shame, explains Rav Hirsch, is a G-d-given gift that allows individuals a sense of autonomy and free choice. We ultimately decide whether we are measuring up, when we have erred, and when to engage in the process of *teshuvah*.

Knowing that shame is a gift from Hashem, we can view it is an alarm, ultimately stirring a heartfelt process of *teshuvah*. Due to the difficulty many have in tolerating the experience of shame, we unconsciously jump towards one of these three processes; hiding and denial, anger and blame or self-hatred. Leaning towards these maladaptive reactions pushes us further from an effective *teshuvah* process.

So how do we tolerate shame and avoid these three problematic reactions? Having increased knowledge of the three problematic reactions may decrease our propensity to engage in them. Learning to slow down and increase pain/frustration tolerance and exploring our shame associations (What happened when you felt ashamed? How did people respond to you? How did you internalize falling short of expectations?) may also allow us to more consistently and effectively engage in the process of *teshuvah*. May Hashem grant us the strength and insight to turn our shame into an authentic process of *teshuvah*.

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"Sorry" Seems to Be the Hardest Word

Dr. Lisa Aiken

Psychotherapy offers insights into our interpersonal relationships. It helps us understand and relate to others in a better way, and offers tools to build, or rebuild, and thereby strengthen those relationships. When we make mistakes that hurt others, we create a chasm between ourselves and them as well as between ourselves and G-d. One of the best ways of healing that rupture is by empathizing with others' feelings and apologizing.

What obstacles get in the way of reconciliation? Often it is our sense of shame and guilt. Too often, we want to evade responsibility for our wrongdoing and blame someone else for it. Serious mistakes remind us of our inadequacies. We may even project negative qualities onto the person we hurt to avoid the pain of introspecting and improving ourselves. We might also feel unworthy of being forgiven or be afraid that the person we hurt will not forgive us. To compensate for that sense of shame and guilt, we become arrogant, which Judaism teaches is the root of sin.

How can we overcome these three obstacles to reconciliation? Implementing two of the Rambam's steps of *teshuvah*—regret and confession, will enable us to fix the character flaw that led to our inappropriate behavior and grow from the experience. Illustrations of these obstacles and the pathway to repentance and reconciliation are found in Tanach, as early as the first sin in Gan Eden.

The first illustration comes from Adam. When questioned by G-d about his awareness of his nakedness, Adam blamed his wife for giving him the forbidden fruit, saying, ואכל (Bereishit 3:9-12). Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, in Bereishit Rabbah (19:12), notes the verse does not say ואכלתי, *I ate*, in past tense. Rather, this verb form means, "I ate, and I will eat again!" If one has a character flaw of blaming others and does not fix it, one will repeat the same (or other) sins. Daryl Bem's self-perception theory resonates in such cases. The narrative sounds like this: Once I disobeyed G-d, I now see myself as a sinner so I will continue to do the same misdeed again. Breaking this cycle necessitates recognizing the pain caused by our self-centeredness, acknowledging the gravity of our actions toward others, our weakened spiritual connection and fostering a commitment to assume responsibility for our deeds.

The story of Yehudah exemplifies this transformative process. Yehudah initially suggested selling Yosef to merchants, contributing to a cover-up that deceived his father (Bereishit 37:26-27). Over time, Yehudah's recognition of his father's pain and genuine remorse for his actions paved the way for his later encounter with Tamar, after which he was able to publicly acknowledge and regret his actions, and reconcile with Tamar. Yehudah's evolution from his past mistakes was driven by sincere regret and taking ownership of his behavior.

Similarly, King David, a descendant of Yehudah and Tamar, serves as a profound example of growth through *teshuvah*. Hashem sent the prophet Natan to confront David about Batsheva (II Shmuel 12). The parable Natan shared served as a mirror to David's actions, ultimately leading to a confession and acceptance of guilt. Only after this confrontation did David take responsibility for his actions, "I have sinned against the L-rd." This turning point sparked David's journey towards redemption and King Shlomo, the next king of Yehudah, was born to David and Batsheva.

In conclusion, the process of healing and growth through apology is an intricate journey, as illuminated by examples from the Tanach. Overcoming the barriers of shame, guilt, arrogance and blame, and embracing sincere regret and confession, paves the way for personal transformation and mending broken relationships. These narratives remind us that even within our imperfections, the path to reconciliation and redemption is not only attainable, enabling us to evolve and lead more authentic lives, but it is admirable and honorable.

Lisa Aiken, PhD, of Jerusalem, Israel, is a clinical psychologist, international speaker and author of fourteen Judaica books.



Powering Change: Profound and Practical Pathways from Torah and Psychology

Dr. Jessica Kornwasser

“All forms of teshuvah, however diverse and complex, have a common core: the belief that human beings have it in their power to effect inward change.” Rav Adin Steinsaltz

Imagine this scene: You are standing in shul on Yom Kippur with your well-used *machzor* in your hands. As you approach Vidui, you come across the Post-it notes you placed in your *machzor* several years ago on which you have written details about what you would like to change in your behavior. Looking at these familiar notes, you may pause for a moment and think, “why am I staring at the same Post-it notes that were here last year?”

We have all surely experienced a version of this scenario. What we may really be considering is whether we have truly accomplished the *teshuvah* step delineated by Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuvah of kabbalah al he'atid* – an acceptance for the future. It is unsurprising that we often are in this situation. It is far easier to regret our actions than to actually implement change. Fortunately, our sages provide us with profound and practical guidelines for changing behavior, that quite remarkably, are echoed in current psychological approaches.

Rambam in *Hilchot Deot* explains that all character traits can exist at two extremes. For example, the trait of happiness can be frivolity or overwhelming sadness. Rambam states that the *derech yesharah*, the straight path, is discovering the midpoint between the two extremes. Regarding happiness, the midpoint would be maintaining a quiet happiness with a friendly facial expression. In advising how a person can achieve this *derech yesharah*, Rambam explains that one can develop his/her character traits to the desirable midpoint by performing, repeating and performing until the moderate action becomes second nature. Further, when one struggles with an extreme behavior, Rambam suggests that this person should move toward the opposite extreme until he is ready to come back to the middle path (*Shemoneh Perakim 4:5*). For example, a greedy individual should move toward squandering his possessions. When he is reaching the point of becoming a habitual squanderer, he moves to the moderate point and engages in generosity.

Similarly, Marsha Linehan's Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) (2015) focuses on helping individuals move toward effective behavior by “walking the middle path,” an example of which is her Wise Mind concept. Wise Mind is a mindfulness practice that helps access one's inner wisdom by integrating the two extreme states of mind: Reasonable Mind and Emotion Mind. Reasonable Mind is the extreme of reason, without the input of emotions (i.e. packing up your office methodically after being fired). Emotion Mind is a state in which emotions are in control and reason is cast aside (lashing out at your boss after being fired). Wise Mind is the midpoint at which these two extreme states of mind integrate (packing up your office and calmly expressing to your boss your feelings about being fired). Everyone has the capacity to access Wise Mind, and DBT recommends using breathing exercises and other mindfulness tools to get there. Accessing Wise Mind is a powerful example of Rambam's prescription to choose the midpoint to yield optimal behavior.

Relating to Rambam's advice for a more intense intervention, DBT proposes Opposite Action as a way of changing unhelpful emotions. When one experiences an emotion that does not fit the situation and acting on the emotion would be ineffective, DBT recommends behaving to the contrary of what the emotion would dictate. For example, if a person is feeling fear that is deemed unwarranted and acting on the fear would not be effective, then performing an action that is the opposite of fear, such as approaching the feared situation, will eventually cause a reduction in fear.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (mitzvah 16) famously states, כי אחרי הפעלות נמשכים הלבבות, *our hearts and thoughts follow our actions*. Through actions, we can bring about changes in our thoughts and hearts. Many Ba'alei Mussar use this statement to motivate individuals to engage in desirable actions even if their hearts are not yet there, with the confidence that the actions will evoke the desired feelings.

This is similar to the concept of Behavioral Activation, a therapeutic intervention using behaviors to activate pleasant emotions, often used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Beck, 2011). Behavioral Activation instructs one to act even without motivation, but with the knowledge that eventually the individual will experience the positive impacts of the actions on their emotional functioning. In a clinical setting, if an individual is experiencing depression and avoiding pleasant activities, a Behavioral Activation intervention would be for the individual to engage in their pleasant activity of choice (i.e. gardening, running, going to a concert) even though they are truly unmotivated to do so. By going through the motions, eventually the joy and/or fulfillment will surface, and the depressed individual will enjoy the benefits of these positive emotions and effect real change.

As we contemplate changes that we hope to make, we can use both “walking the middle path” and “going through the motions” strategies to help actualize change. Reminding yourself to access your Wise Mind when you notice that you are at the extreme of reason or emotion is another sure way for a favorable behavior change. If davening with greater *kavanah* (intention) seems difficult to achieve, “going through the motions” of regular davening can eventually lead you to the heartfelt davening that you are striving for. These ideas are only a glimpse of the ways in which modern psychology echoes the words of our sages when it comes to methods of change. With the profound wisdom of the Rambam and the *Sefer HaChinuch* and the practical pathways offered by DBT and CBT, may we all be fortunate to revise the Post-it notes in our *machzor* each year!

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Praying for Growth: The Tefillot of Yamim Noraim, Growth Mindset and Permission to Be Human

Dr. Rona Milch Novick

Positive psychology is the study of how individuals can flourish. In exploring what makes us resilient, healthy and happy, two related phenomena have been identified as critical: growth mindset and the permission to be human. Carol Dweck, who first coined the term growth mindset, explained in her 2015 interview with *EdWeek* that with such a mindset, people believe that basic abilities are not fixed, and can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. In other words, they believe in their ability to change and grow. A related concept, the permission to be human, has been described by Tal Ben-Shahar, leading positive psychology and happiness researcher, as the acceptance of our total self, including our failures and negative emotions (Octavian Report, 2023). This is the antidote to perfectionism, which can create an intense and irrational fear of failure, rigidity and defensiveness—the exact opposite of growth.

The concept of personal growth is central to Jewish thought and practice. We begin each day with *Modeh Ani*, thanking Hashem not only for returning our soul to us, but for His abundant faithfulness in us, in our ability to be better today than we were yesterday. Throughout the year, Jewish holidays include themes or symbols of renewal, such as the *seder* plate egg on Pesach, and the Tu B'Shvat celebration of trees. Nothing in Jewish life however, better represents new starts and the endless capacity for our growth than the Yamim Noraim. The liturgy of the season often juxtaposes our humanness and failures with our capacity to grow and change.

We prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with Selichot. Although the Selichot focus on Hashem's attributes of mercy, near the opening of each day's Selichot service, we acknowledge our non-perfection, "לך ה' הצדקה, ולנו בשת הפנים," *Yours my L-rd, is the righteousness and ours is the shamefacedness.*" In the moving Rosh Hashanah *tefillah*, ונתנה תקף, immediately after we describe Hashem's judgement and determination of the fate of each member of His flock, we chant "ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה," *but repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil of the decree!*" This is a perfect exemplar of growth mindset. The future is not fixed, we have growth potential, to engage in repentance, to complete acts of kindness, to strengthen our spiritual connection to Hashem.

The heart of the Yom Kippur *tefillot*, the Vidui, begins with our admission that it would be the height of brazenness to deny that we sinned, we must admit our imperfection. Before our prayers continue to the itemized listing of our failings in the על הטא there is a powerful statement of change and growth: “הרשענו ופשענו לכן לא נושענו. ותן בלבנו לעזוב. ודרך רשע דרך רשע, *We have acted wickedly and have sinned willfully, therefore we have not been saved. Inspire our heart to abandon the path of evil.*”

The *tefillot* of the Yamim Noraim provide us with numerous opportunities to give ourselves permission to be human. The repeated focus on our sins, failures and imperfection could be devastating and paralyzing. However, our *tefillot* are replete with both a celebration of Hashem’s extraordinary mercy and forgiveness, and with validation of our endless capacity for growth.

As Rabbi Dov Greenberg at the Stanford University Chabad says, “Judaism champions a growth mindset... We strike our heart over and over as we enumerate our misdeeds to drive home the point that although we have failed, we are not defined by our mistakes. We can grow from them; we can be better in the future.”

When we pray during the Yamim Noraim, we laud Hashem and His mercy, we beg for His forgiveness. At the same time, we stand in shul, from the first evening of Selichot through the last notes of Ne’ilah, praying for growth.

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What Does it Mean to Chart our Path Forward?

Dr. Chana Gelb

Do we believe that our future can be different and better than our past? Rambam answers this with an emphatic “yes.”

The concept that we can change our behaviors, our thoughts and our relationships is both powerful and also often misunderstood. There are many different schools of thought within psychology that explain mechanisms of change. These range from cognitive behavioral approaches that we can change our thoughts and this impacts behavior, to more dynamic, insight oriented approaches that change can happen through self-reflection. In Judaism, Rambam outlines in *Hilchot Teshuvah* his understanding of *teshuvah*, loosely translated as repentance, that includes aspects of how to effect change. The four stages are: (1) עזיבת החטא, *abstaining from the behavior* (2) חרטה, *regret* (3) ודוי, *verbalizing the sin* and (4) קבלה על העתיד, *a declaration that “this won’t happen again.”*

Philosophically, the idea that we can change is rooted in Rambam’s understanding of free will in Chapter 5 of *Hilchot Teshuvah*. Rambam feels it important to include this in *Hilchot Teshuvah* as it is a cornerstone of believing that we do in fact have control over ourselves and our lives. We must believe that we can change or we will not engage in the process. Rambam (*Hilchot Temurah 4:13*) says that the sole purpose of the *mitzvot* is to make us better people. It is our responsibility to adopt this perspective before performing *mitzvot* which can also help us channel our character to become our best selves.

Religiously, the concept of change is grounded in hope. In *Sefer Devarim*, Moshe reflects on the Jewish people’s struggles in the desert and that G-d dealt with them compassionately. Ramban, in his introduction to *Sefer Devarim*, explains that Moshe is empowering Bnei Yisrael as they transition to the Land of Israel, Hashem will treat them with compassion, and this frame of mind will allow them to conquer the land, to feel that being human is part of life. If G-d does not give up on us, then we can find it within ourselves to persevere. It is up to us to integrate that into our perspective, drawing on the idea that we have free will, and can lean into that perspective.

Psychologically, how does this work? I would like to suggest that the concept of *teshuvah* and specifically קבלה על העתיד, a statement that we will be different in the future, is nuanced. In some ways we believe we can be totally different people. However, this sounds overwhelming and also superficial. If, instead, we recast the statement of intent to change into trying to enhance who we are, to grow, to develop better tools and new insights into ourselves, then our inner struggles are also reframed. It is not that our negative aspects go away fully, rather, we add in perspective, tools or insights that change the reality. We recognize that our core traits are not inherently good or bad and we do not wish the bad ones away. Instead, we channel them differently. As Steven Hayes, founder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (2012), says, “I kind of look at what’s on the T-shirts and I see another solution, which also worries me.

I see ‘Just do it,’ ‘No fear.’ - this kind of suppressive response to the treacle that the culture tries to define for us as a meaningful life also blows up on you. ‘No fear’ is not something that you should put on your shirt. How about, ‘I can hold my fear and still connect with you?’ Put that on your shirt. ‘It’s okay to be me with all of my history.’ Put that on your shirt.”

Many people spend a lot of time wishing they did not struggle with their core traits, be it anxiety, anger, avoidance, etc. The reality is that to a large extent one will always have those core traits. The idea of *על העמיד קבלה* is not to stop experiencing your core traits—that would be a plan for failure. The goal is to identify and accept those core dynamics as parts of yourself and to look at how to re-channel and re-frame these same traits.

For example, people become anxious before taking a test, a big work presentation or hosting a big party. They stay up all night ruminating, or worrying and going in circles. When they develop an awareness of the core anxiety and learn how to plan ahead, they feel a greater sense of control. Then they learn how to respond and not react to that feeling and the worry is not the same. The feelings do not go away, but we change how we cope with them. We can learn to validate our feelings and understand why we are anxious, and we can have a better “inner conversation” with ourselves about it and then perhaps we can find better ways to cope.

Perhaps a good example of this in Tanach of this model of “enhancing our personalities” as a model of change is Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe was *כבד פה וכבד לשון*, *heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue*, and had the remarkable qualities of *עניוּוּת*, *humility*, and self-awareness. He developed his leadership abilities by integrating these core traits.

As we think about what we would like to reflect upon in our own lives and if we believe that we have the free will to determine our future, then this idea of “enhancing” who we are and the belief and hope that we can, will help us find a way to make meaningful change.

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Teshuvah Lessons from a Marshmallow

Dr. Jessica Kalmar

You are presented with a choice—one marshmallow that you can consume immediately or the promise of two marshmallows if you wait an unspecified amount of time. In Walter Mischel’s famous marshmallow study (1970), some preschoolers delayed gratification to receive two marshmallows—while others sought immediate reward. Why should we care? What is so great about the ability to wait for two marshmallows instead of immediately enjoying the fluffy, chewy goodness of one? The preschoolers in Mischel’s research (1988) who delayed gratification grew into adolescents who scored higher on college entrance exams, exhibited stronger planning skills, were less distractible and were better at managing stress than those who immediately consumed one marshmallow. Elsewhere, Martin Seligman’s research (2005) demonstrated that self-discipline is a better predictor of academic success than IQ. Robust willpower was also associated with higher self-esteem, stronger relationship skills, better physical and mental health and increased financial security. Okay—so willpower is important—but what can a marshmallow teach us about the *teshuvah* process?

The structure of the Rambam’s *Hilchot Teshuvah*, Laws of Repentance, begs a question posed by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in *Al HaTeshuva*. The first four chapters of *Hilchot Teshuvah* focus on aspects of repentance, the fifth and sixth chapters present a discussion of free will and proofs of its existence derived from verses in Tanach, and the seventh chapter returns to a discussion of repentance. Why are the two chapters on free will inserted amidst the chapters dealing with *teshuvah*? What is the contribution of the two chapters on free will to the discussion of repentance and their relevance to the surrounding material?

According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, in *Hilchot Teshuvah*, the Rambam details different forms/levels of *teshuvah* and complete *teshuvah* is predicated on free will. Without freedom of choice, one cannot achieve true repentance. In the first *halachah* of the second chapter, the Rambam states that complete repentance is achieved when one encounters the same situation where one transgressed, has the ability to commit the same sin again and does not do so out of sincere repentance rather than out of fear or lack of strength. If one is no longer able to repeat the sin due to changes in circumstances, then repentance is achieved, but not the higher level of repentance which requires exercising free will. Thus, the Rambam’s discussion of free will and establishing its existence through proof texts from Tanach is central to our discussion of repentance.

Sometimes our will fails us. Despite our resolutions to change our behavior and not repeat our transgressions, when we encounter temptation, we repeat the sins of our past. Here is where the ability to wait for the second marshmallow comes in. Psychological research sheds insight into how we can consciously exert our will to successfully regulate our own behavior. The children in Mischel's study were more likely to resist temptation if they distracted themselves or turned away from the marshmallow, or simply closed their eyes. Distancing or distracting ourselves from temptation can be useful when trying to maintain our resolve and not repeat our sins in the future.

Another useful tactic to narrow the gap between resolution and behavior is a technique that Peter Gollwitzer (2006) calls "implementation intention." For this strategy, people formulate a plan for situations that might test their resolve, usually in the form of an if-then statement. For example, someone who has resolved not to speak *lashon hara* at the shul kiddush might tell themselves before leaving for shul, "if a discussion is moving toward gossip, I will change the topic to describe the beautiful waterfall I saw on my hike this week." Formulating these plans supports people as they strive to bridge the gap between their resolutions and their actions.

Roy Baumeister (2012), a preeminent scholar of self-control, compared willpower to a muscle that can become fatigued with use—each attempt to resist temptation draws down on our reserves. But Mark Muraven's (2008) research highlighted that peoples' beliefs and attitudes influence their ability to utilize their willpower. People who exert self-control due to external pressures deplete more of their self-control than those who exert self-control for autonomous reasons. In the fifth *halachah* of the second chapter, the Rambam speaks of our autonomy and states that our being in control of our actions is something that we must not only believe in, but something that we must know, through wisdom. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that this knowledge refers to an obligation of maintaining constant awareness of the responsibility of freedom of choice, that we can create worlds and we can destroy them. Perhaps keeping this knowledge in the forefront of our mind's eye can help us to wait for the second marshmallow, strengthen our willpower muscle and successfully implement our resolutions for change.

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Improving Ourselves, One Habit at a Time ***Dr. Hinda Dubin and Mrs. Malka Kohen***

The Yemei Ratzon, particularly the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, are a time of closeness to Hashem and an opportunity for *teshuvah*. During this time, many of us look for ways to create meaningful change in our lives as well as develop a deeper connection to Hashem. While we realize that there is room for growth within ourselves, there are many actions that we engage in which have become routine or a matter of habit. At this point, we have become unaware of certain unfavorable or even prohibited behaviors; furthermore, we can forget that they were something we wanted to change and they become completely permissible to us.

Rav Huna states, *ביון שעבר אדם עבירה ושנה בה - הותרה לו. הותרה לו סלקא דעתך? אלא נעשית לו כהיתר, Once a person commits a transgression and repeats it, it is permitted to him. Can it enter your mind that it is permitted to him merely because he has sinned twice? Rather, say that it becomes to him as though it is permitted (Kiddushin 20a).*

As we enter the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, it behooves each of us to spend some time in introspection and choose a single behavior which has become a habit, to the point it is “permitted” to us, which we would like to change.

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, a principle in quantum mechanics, informs the first step we can take in changing a habitual behavior. This principle states that the behavior of particles is modified simply by observing it. This applies to human behavior as well. When we take the time to regularly observe our behaviors, we already begin the process of changing them. For example, if you would like to be more careful about *lashon hara*, the first step might be to keep track for a week of each time you speak *lashon hara*. As you detail it, you may notice that simply by tracking it, you already speak it less.

Further, when we track a behavior, we can pay attention to some of the environmental factors that affect when we engage in the behavior. For example, someone may find that they speak *lashon hara* when they go grocery shopping, when they are with a particular person, or when they are experiencing a certain emotion, such as boredom or frustration. An awareness of these environmental factors can allow us to have more consciousness and intentionality when one finds themselves in these conditions.

Another important component of habit reversal is accountability. It is useful, as you move forward in this process, that you also share your goal with a friend or family member. This can help you stay on track and have someone to check in with regularly. In addition, set specific times and places to work on your goal.

While we recognize the need to change a problematic behavior, it is also helpful to practice self-compassion. We strive for excellence; however, we also need to accept that we are human beings and perfection is not attainable. When we put

together the ideas of *מה הוא אף אתה, just as He is, so you shall be*, of needing to emulate the ways of Hashem, (*Rambam, Hilchos Deos, perek aleph*) and that Hashem is all forgiving, *קל רחום וחנון, a merciful and gracious G-d* (*Shemos 34:6*), we realize that just as Hashem is willing to forgive us for our transgressions, we can forgive ourselves. As we work to change our habitual behavior, it is imperative that we recognize that we will not get it right every time, and we should always be gentle with ourselves and commit to being better in the future.

It can feel overwhelming to attempt to change a behavior that we have been engaging in with minimal awareness over a long period of time; therefore, it can be helpful to break the process into small, attainable steps. For example, in cutting back on *lashon hara*, one may tackle one hour of the day at a time and move onto the next hour when she feels she has sufficiently mastered the hour she has taken on.

Another strategy to cope with the daunting nature of habit reversal is to “just start.” Many people mistakenly believe that they need to wait until they feel the proper motivation and then they can change. Actually, it is the exact opposite; one has to start, and even if one does not feel motivated at the outset, motivation will come as one begins to engage in the task. We know that when we have the desire to change and we get started on the process, Hashem will help bring us the rest of the way: *בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך בה מוליכין אותו, man is guided in the way he wants to go* (*Makkos 10b*). Lastly, *אין השכינה שורה אלא מתוך שמחה, the Divine Presence only rests in the presence of joy* (*Mesilas Yesharim 19:99*). Approach your goal with *simchah* and optimism, knowing that Hashem loves you and awaits your return.

What habit will you attempt to recognize and change with joy and hope in these days of spiritual renewal?

10 Steps to Habit Reversal:

1. Observe the behavior.
2. Pay attention to environmental triggers.
3. Share your goal with a friend.
4. Practice self-compassion.
5. Strive for excellence and perfection while acknowledging one’s humanity.
6. Break the change into small manageable steps.
7. Set specific times and places to work on your goal.
8. Remember progress is not linear, and it’s okay to encounter setbacks.
9. Action precedes motivation.
10. Approach *teshuvah* with *simchah* and optimism.

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