



## Week 5

### גמישות

This guided learning sheet explores the *middah* of *gemishut*—flexibility. Each source is accompanied by explanation and discussion questions to facilitate personal reflection and group dialogue.

The first box of questions in color below are general questions about participants' experience of working on *middot* and remain the same from week to week. These questions are a helpful tool to check in and reflect on growth over time, in a consistent manner. Though the questions remain the same each week, the answers will naturally change depending on which *middah* is being explored. You may choose to start or end your learning session with these questions. The rest of questions are specifically related to the *middah* of the week and are interspersed throughout the session to deepen the conversation.

### **General questions when reflecting on the *middah* of the week:**

General questions remain the same from week to week and are helpful tools to reflect on growth over time. The answers will vastly change depending on the *middah* of the week.

1. What did I learn about myself this week?
2. What felt difficult when working on this *middah*?
3. What felt natural or easy when working on this *middah*?
4. How has practicing this *middah* improved your life or how does it have the potential to impact your life?
5. Does anyone in the group have a story of how this *middah* came up in a real situation (this week or beyond)? How did you respond?
6. Does anyone in the group have insights, advice or tips to keep in mind when working on this *middah* going forward?

## **Flexibility as Strength**

*Two seemingly opposite traits of fierce determination and gentle flexibility are encouraged in Torah. Let's begin to explore why both are necessary — not as opposites, but as partners:*

### **פרקי אבות ה:כ**

יהודה בן תימא אומר, הוי עז כנמר, וקל כנשר, ורץ כצב, וגבור כארי, לעשות רצון אביך שבשמים.

Yehuda ben Tema said: Be strong as a leopard, and swift as an eagle, and fleet as a gazelle, and brave as a lion, to do the will of your Father who is in Heaven.

### **תלמוד תענית כ עמוד א**

תנו רבנן: לעולם יהא אדם רך כקנה ואל יהא קשה כארו... מה קנה זה עומד במקום מים, וגזעו מחליף ושרשיו מרובין, ואפילו כל הרוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזות אותו ממקומו, אלא הולך וקא עמהו.

The Sages further taught: A person should always be soft like a reed, and he should not be stiff like a cedar. Just as this reed stands in a place of water, its stem continually renews itself, and its roots are abundant. Even if all the winds in the world come and blow against it, they cannot move it from its place. Rather, it bends and sways with them.

**Takeaway:** *The cedar, though big and mighty, snaps in a storm. The smaller and softer reed survives because it bends. Flexibility allows a person to remain rooted in values (ex: in Torah and mitzvot) while adapting wisely to life's unfolding reality.*

*Rabbi Moshe Hauer z"tl, Executive Vice President of the OU, was a man who exemplified the synthesis of these traits. The following are written excerpts from those reflecting on his unique balance of both:*

OU President Mitchel Aeder described Rabbi Hauer as "a man of impeccable character, honesty and integrity. He had a calming demeanor, a soft and humble tone of voice, but he was unbending in his principles."

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg shared, "He was rare: proud and unapologetic about his hashkafa, his rebbeim, his principles, and his values, yet effortlessly and seamlessly connected with people of all backgrounds. He found common ground and common cause with everyone, and saw the G-dliness in each person, developing genuine bonds while always remaining true to himself."

Rabbi Gil Student wrote, "Rabbi Hauer's blend of conviction and openness, his strength of principle and willingness to listen, endeared him to all who knew him. These qualities, as so many are now testifying, allowed him to elevate individuals and the community alike."

### **Discuss:**

1. What are the benefits and risks of strength/steadfastness/rigidity versus flexibility? Can you think of a situation where each was more appropriate?
2. What are the "winds" that challenge our commitment to living a Torah-centered life both internally and externally?
3. How might flexibility actually require more strength than stubbornness requires?

4. Why does flexibility actually lead to long lasting durability? Have you ever experienced this in your life?
5. Reflect on a time when holding firmly to a “cedar-like” position in your life ultimately led to a rupture or setback. How might the outcome have been different if you had responded with the flexibility and adaptability of a “reed-like” approach?

### **Flexibility of Self-Identity**

*Flexibility involves not staying tethered to one identity or role, as we see in the story of Bat Pharaoh. She is the daughter of the king who seeks to destroy the Jews and simultaneously she has compassion on a Jewish baby (Moshe):*

**שמות ב:ה (ורש"י)**

וַתֵּרֶד בַּת־פַּרְעֹה לְרַחֵץ עַל־הַיָּאֵר וַנְּעַרְתִּיהָ הַלֵּלֶת עַל־יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת־הַמִּבְּהָה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת־אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחָהּ:

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her handmaid to fetch it.

**רש"י שם**

את אמתה... והם דרשו את אמתה - את ידה, ונשתרבה אמתה אמות הרבה:

Our Rabbis, however, explained it in the sense of hand. They explained את אמתה to mean את ידה “she stretched forth her hand” because they hold that Scripture intentionally uses this term to indicate that her hand increased in length several cubits (אמה, a cubit) in order that she might more easily reach the cradle.

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**Takeaway:** *Pharaoh’s daughter models the capacity to stretch beyond what feels possible both in an emotional sense and then in a literal sense (ironically, among reeds!). Flexible people are not trapped inside a single identity, defined role, or emotional posture.*

### **Discuss:**

1. What does it mean to “stretch beyond” your natural limits or role?
2. When can moving beyond familiar traits, roles, or self-perceptions open space for deeper growth and possibility? Is there a time in your life you've experienced this self-expansion?
3. How might that same process of stretching begin to blur or erase your sense of self? In other words, how do we distinguish between meaningful stretching of self and self-erasure?
4. Pharaoh's daughter stretched beyond her normal reach or role, literally and figuratively. What “impossible stretch” might you be avoiding out of habit, fear or or a tightly held sense of identity or role?

## **Flexibility in Dichtotomies**

*Flexibility within our identity is not about choosing one self-concept over another, but about learning to hold multiple, even contradictory truths about who we are and how we relate to the world:*

### **Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa: Two Pockets**

Rabbi Simcha Bunim famously instructed his students to carry two notes:

<p><b>Left Pocket</b></p> <p><b>וְאֲנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר</b></p> <p><i>I am but dust and ashes.</i></p> <p>(Bereishit 18:27)</p>	<p><b>Right Pocket</b></p> <p><b>בְּשִׁבְלֵי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם</b></p> <p><i>For my sake the world was created.</i></p> <p>(Sanhedrin 37a)</p>
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**Takeaway:** *Flexibility involves a capacity to hold seemingly opposite truths at once, which can be applied not only to our own self-concept but also to many life situations and worldviews as well.*

#### **Discuss:**

1. What circumstances in your life call for the 'right pocket'? What calls for the 'left pocket'? How do you know which to reach for? Have you experienced moments of feeling both feeling small and deeply significant?
2. In general, why is holding two truths simultaneously a better and more expansive option than clinging rigidly to one?
3. In addition to the two statements above from Rabbi Simcha Bunim, what are two other seemingly opposite truths you think are important to hold simultaneously?

## **Situational Flexibility**

*In addition to roles and ideas, flexibility includes knowing when to pause and when to act. Indeed, at Kriyat Yam Suf, Hashem responds to Moshe's prayers with the following words:*

### **סוּטָה לז': א**

אָמַר לּוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: יְדִידֵי טוֹבְעִים בַּיָּם וְאַתָּה מְאַרְיָךְ בַּתְּפִלָּה לְפָנַי?! ... אָמַר לוֹ: "דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ. וְאַתָּה הָרַם אֶת מִטְּהָ וְנִטְתָּ אֶת יָדְךָ וְגו'".

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: My beloved ones are drowning in the sea and you prolong your prayer to me? ... Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward. And you, lift up your rod and stretch out your hand".

**Takeaway:** *Flexibility involves responding to the demands of the present moment, instead of staying tethered to one mode of coping or spiritual response/behavior.*

#### **Discuss:**

1. How can we discern what Hashem may be asking of us in a particular moment, and remain flexible and open to responding accordingly? How do you decide whether a moment calls for waiting, praying/other spiritual effort, or moving forward in some capacity?
2. Have you ever sensed that, in a particular moment, what Hashem wanted from you was a concrete action rather than something that felt more overtly spiritual, such as davening?

## Reframing as Flexibility

*Yosef displays flexibility when he does not erase his experience of being sold, nor does he cling to bitter resentment about it. Rather he thinks more broadly about it, within a larger story of purpose:*

**בראשית מה:ד-טו**

אני יוסף אחיכם אשר-מכרתם אתי מצרימה. ועתה אל-תעצבו כי למחיה שלחני אלקים לפניכם. כי זה שנתים הרעב. וישלחני אלקים לפניכם לשום לכם שארית בארץ. ועתה לא אתם שלחתם אתי הנה כי האלקים. וינשק לכל-אחיו... ויבך עליהם ואחרי כן דברו אחיו אתו.

"I am Yosef your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. **And now—do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because G-d sent me before you to preserve life.**" There have been two years of famine... G-d sent me before you to ensure your survival and preserve you. **And now—it was not you who sent me here, but G-d.** He kissed all his brothers and wept upon them... and afterward, his brothers were able to speak with him

### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Covenant & Conversation, Vayigash

Reframing tells us that though we cannot always change the circumstances in which we find ourselves, *we can change the way we see them, and this itself changes the way we feel.* Joseph had reframed his entire past. He no longer saw himself as a man wronged by his brothers. He had come to see himself as a man charged with a life-saving mission by God.

Everything that had happened to him was necessary so that he could achieve his purpose in life: to save an entire region from starvation during a famine, and to provide a safe haven for his family. This single act of reframing allowed Joseph to live without a burning sense of anger and injustice. It enabled him to forgive his brothers and be reconciled with them. It transformed the negative energies of feelings about the past into focused attention to the future. Joseph, without knowing it, had become the precursor of one of the great movements in psychotherapy in the modern world. He showed the power of reframing. We cannot change the past. But by changing the way we *think about* the past, we can change the future.

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**Takeaway:** *Flexibility includes the ability to reframe painful experiences within a larger story of meaning and purpose, instead of one rigid and painful perspective or narrative.*

### **Discuss:**

1. How does Yosef's ability to reinterpret his brothers' actions within the framework of Hashem's larger plan reflect emotional/cognitive flexibility? What distinguishes this from simply denying or minimizing the pain?
2. What perspectives, tools, or mindsets can help a person revisit a painful experience through a more flexible lens of growth, meaning, or purpose?
3. What narrow or fixed perspectives about previously painful experiences may be shaping or limiting your present? What might shift if you approached it with greater flexibility and viewed it through a different lens, one that allows for deeper meaning, growth, or possibility?

### **Transformation as Flexibility**

*While Yosef highlights that painful experiences can be understood through a more flexible and expansive lens of meaning, his father Yaakov show us that an expanded self often emerges not despite our struggles but precisely because of them:*

#### **בראשית לב: כו-כט**

וַיֵּרָא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַע בְּכַף-יָרְכוֹ וַתִּקַּע כַּף-יָרְכוֹ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֶאֱבָקוֹ עִמּוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁלַחְנִי כִּי עֹלָה הַשָּׁחַר וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ כִּי אִם-בְּרַכְתָּנִי: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מִה-שָּׂמָךְ וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמַר עוֹד שְׂמֶךָ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִית עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּוְכַל: וַיִּשְׁאַל יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הֲגִידָה-נָא שְׂמֶךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶה תִּשְׁאַל לְשִׁמִּי וַיַּבְרָךְ אֹתוֹ שָׁם: וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָּ כִּי אִם-בְּרַכְתָּנִי... לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֹאמַר עוֹד שְׂמֶךָ כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל:

When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Yaakov's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Yaakov." Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." Yaakov asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ... "Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed."

**Takeaway:** *Yaakov leaves his struggle with the angel wounded, yet he refuses to let go until the struggle itself yields a blessing. Indeed, in that very moment of persistence, he is given a new name (Yisrael). This name is perhaps a symbol of an expanded, transformed self that emerged precisely through wrestling.*

#### **Discuss:**

1. Why might adversity expand a person rather than diminish them? How can flexibility in a struggle or a wrestling experience be turned into a source of transformation?
2. What experiences in your life have brought blessing to your life precisely because they challenged you? How have challenging experiences in life expanded you because they required flexibility and adaptation?

### **Flexibility in Spiritual Growth**

*Flexibility involves recognizing that spiritual growth is dynamic. The imagery of a ladder highlights that we are always ascending, descending, struggling, growing, or recalibrating:*

#### **בראשית כה: יב**

וַיִּחְלֵם וַהֲגִה סֵלֶם מִצָּב אַרְצָה וְרָאִשׁוּ מַגִּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וַהֲגִה מִלְּאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֲלֵיהֶם וַיֵּרְדוּ בּוֹ:

And he dreamed and behold a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached sky and behold angels of G-d were ascending and descending upon it.

**Takeaway:** *Growth is not a fixed destination but an ongoing and ever-evolving process.*

**Discuss:**

1. How can recognizing that growth includes both ascent and descent help a person respond differently to setbacks, struggles, or periods of stagnation? How can flexibility help prevent discouragement or perfectionism in spiritual growth?
2. What does the image of a ladder suggest about the nature of change and self-development? Is there an area of growth in your life which you view as a process rather than a fixed state?

**Flexibility of Your Unique Free Will**

*Flexibility entails approaching your unique points of free choice with openness, rather than rigidity or comparison to past versions of yourself or to others.*

**מכתב מאליהו: נקודת הבחירה**

כן הוא גם בענין הבחירה. כל אדם יש לו בחירה, היינו בנקודת פגישת האמת שלו עם האמת המדומה, תולדות השקר. אבל רוב מעשיו הם במקום שאין האמת והשקר נפגשים שם כלל. כי יש הרבה מן האמת שהאדם מחונך לעשותו, ולא יעלה על דעתו כלל לעשות ההיפך, וכן הרבה אשר יעשה מן הרע והשקר, שלא יבחין כלל שאין ראוי לעשותו. אין הבחירה שייכת אלא בנקודה שבין צבאו של היצה"ט לצבאו של היצה"ר.

The same is true of the nature of free choice. Each person has a zone of free choice where his conception of truth encounters his imagined truth—which is really falsehood. However, the majority of one's actions occur where there is absolutely no conflict between truth and falsehood. Since a person has been educated to act in many areas in accordance with the truth, when he does so, he is not exercising his free will, since he has no option to do otherwise. Similarly, he might make incorrect decisions based on falsehood and not realize that these are improper actions. Since he is so accustomed to doing them, they are now beyond the range of his free will. Decisions of free choice are limited to the meeting ground between the positive and negative forces within an individual.

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**Takeaway:** *Our engagement with real freedom of choice—the precise moments where each person is called upon to exercise free will (nekudat habechirah)—depends on our unique circumstances, experiences, strengths, and challenges. The arena of free choice is not everywhere at once; rather, it is focused at particular points of tension that are distinct to each individual. These are fluid and shifting variables which require flexible and response.*

**Discuss:**

1. The Michtav MeEliyahu teaches that our zone of free choice (*nekudat habechirah*) is unique to each person, based on our strengths and vulnerabilities. What is one area in your life where you feel that tension most acutely right now which you can use flexibility to respond to?
2. What role does flexibility play in helping a person recognize behaviors or assumptions that have become so ingrained they no longer feel like choices? In what ways can rigid thinking prevent growth at a person's current point of free choice? How might flexibility help someone respond when they discover that something they long assumed was "truth" may actually need to be reevaluated?
3. How can understanding that each person has a different "zone of free choice" cultivate greater flexibility, compassion, or less judgment toward ourselves and others?

## **Relational Flexibility**

*Flexibility also involves making space for others:*

### **גמרא יומא כא: א**

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: בְּשֻׁעָה שִׁישְׂרָאֵל עוֹלִין לְרַגְלֵי, עוֹמְדִין צְפוּפִין וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים רְוֹחִים... וְזֶה אֶחָד מֵעֲשָׂרָה נִסִּים שֶׁנִּעֲשׂוּ בַּמִּקְדָּשׁ.  
When the Jewish people ascend to Jerusalem they stand crowded, but when they bow [during confession] there was spaciousness... And that is one of the ten miracles that were performed in the Temple.

**Takeaway:** *The miracle of the Beit Hamikdash gives us an imagery of flexibility which includes the expansion of emotional and spiritual room for others even amid pressure, limitation, and density.*

### **Discuss:**

1. "Standing crowded but bowing with spaciousness/expansion" is considered one of the great miracles of the Temple? Why does "making space" amidst crowded conditions seem miraculous? Why is it often hard to create space for others precisely when we ourselves feel pressured, stressed or constrained?
2. In what moments or areas of your life do you need to create space for others (emotionally, spiritually, or practically)? What makes that difficult?

## **Generosity as Flexibility**

*Several halachot frame generosity not merely as kindness, but as a form of inner flexibility — the ability to loosen one's grip on ownership, control, and self-protection:*

### **ויקרא יט: ט-י**

וּבְקַצְרְכֶם אֶת-קְצִיר אֲרֻצְכֶם לֹא-תִכְלֶה פֶּאֶת שְׂדֵךְ לְקַצֵּר וְלִקְטֹף קְצִירְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט... עֲנִי וְגַר תַּעֲזֹב אִתָּם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם  
And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not completely reap the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest... You shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your G-d.

### **דברים רבה ו:ח**

וְעַל יְדֵי מָה הִנְגָעִים בְּאִים, עַל יְדֵי עֵין הָרַע, אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק בְּנֵהֲגַ שְׁבַע עוֹלָם אָדָם אוֹמֵר לְחֻבְרוֹ הַשְּׂאִילֵנִי קְרֹדוּמָךְ שְׂאֵבְקַע בּוֹ הַעֵץ הַזֶּה, וְהוּא אוֹמֵר לוֹ אֵין לִי, מֵעַן רָעָה... מִיָּד בָּא הִנְגָע עַל בֵּיתוֹ תַּחֲלָה, ... וּמָה הָיוּ עוֹשִׂין לוֹ, מִפְּנֵין כָּל מָה שֶׁהֵיָה לוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בֵּיתוֹ, מִנֵּין, שְׂנֵאָמַר (ויקרא יד, לו): וְצִוְיָה הַפֶּהוּן וּפְנֹו אֶת הַבַּיִת, כִּינֹן שֶׁהֵיָה מוֹצִיא כָּל מָה שֶׁהֵיָה לוֹ בְּתוֹךְ בֵּיתוֹ, קְרֹהֲמוֹתָיו וּכְבֹרוֹתָיו, הָיוּ אוֹמְרִים רְאִיתֶם עֵין רָעָה שֶׁהֵיָה בְּיָדוֹ, מָה שֶׁהֵיָה לוֹ לֹא הֵיָה רוֹצֵה לְהַשְׂאִיל, מִי גָרַם לוֹ לְהַפְנוֹת, עַל יְדֵי שֶׁהֵיָתָה בּוֹ עֵין רָעָה  
"And through what [sin] does leprosy come about? Through stinginess and a begrudging eye (ayin hara). Rabbi Yitzchak said: It is common in the world that a person says to his friend, 'Lend me your axe so I can chop this wood,' and the other replies, 'I do not have one,' out of stinginess. Immediately, the affliction first comes upon his house... And what would they do to him? They would empty everything from inside his house, as it says: 'The kohen shall command, and they shall empty the house' (Vayikra 14:36). Once he brought out everything from his house — his axes and his sieves — people would say: 'Do you see this begrudging eye he had? He refused to lend what he possessed.' What caused him to empty out his house? His stinginess and begrudging eye."

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**Takeaway:** *Rigidity is often rooted in fear — fear of losing comfort, control, status, security, or scarcity. When a person clings too tightly to possessions, routines, or expectations, their world can become emotionally and spiritually constricted; one can become trapped within a very narrow and self-protective perspective. Torah and halacha, particularly in the realm of giving, encourages us to loosen our grip of ownership and control of as an important spiritual value and mitzvah.*

**Discuss:**

1. In what ways can attachment to possessions, routines, or personal control create rigidity?
2. When and why is it challenging for you to be flexible and release your resources or possessions? What fears or insecurities can make it difficult to share what you have?
3. What possessions, expectations, or comforts do you find hardest to loosen your grip on?
4. How can acts of giving stretch us beyond our usual routines, expectations, or preferences?
5. When has an act of chessed demanded emotional, practical, or personal flexibility from you? When has giving expanded you in some way?