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THE ART OF BUILDING SPIRITUAL SAND CASTLES

After Pesach break, it's hard to get back into learning and onto the spiritual Sefirah-sail to Shavuot, to the upcoming Matan Torah. Especially when I have to go back to juggling being a husband, father and breadwinner, not to mention my post-holiday diet.

One of my favorite Sefarim, one that I learned from cover to cover in Mussar Seder when learning in R Tzvi Kaplan's Yeshivas Kodshim, is R' Chaim Volozhin's Ruach HaChaim on Avot. He writes that the major ploy of the Yetzer Hara is to blind the eyes of man, telling him constantly, "How can you find time to learn Torah? You need to be busy with your Parnassah!! You need to support the wife and kids!"

Of course, we need to toil for our bread, and we need to be responsible for our finances. But it is only G-d who decides exactly how rich you will be, which efforts will bear fruit, and how much. All the extra effort will not help you, nor will the efforts "help" G-d give you more, if it is not what He wants to give you.

According to Judaism, people who become rich don't become rich *because* they are in real estate, nursing homes, medical supplies, stocks, selling insurance, or brands. They became rich *while* they were in those fields of business. *From before a child is even created,*

it is decreed if he is to be rich or poor. (Niddah 16b) This ruling determines one's whole financial life. And, at the beginning of each year, on Rosh Hashana, it is decreed exactly how much money you will have in your bank account, for that year. (Beitzah 16a) Of course, it is important that you try to work smart, to do your Hishtadlut, for the Beracha to take place... But no matter how much harder you try, you will not make one dollar more than what has been decided! And, G-d could have given you that same money, with just a *little* work on your part! This is a fundamental pillar of Jewish Emunah.

In stark contrast, in spirituality, regarding fighting your Yetzer Hara, Torah study and connection through prayer, it is not at all like that. As long as you live, till your very last breath, it is undetermined, and up to you, and only you, if you will be a Tzaddik or Rasha. That is the only thing that is left undetermined, according to Judaism! In spirituality, your success is dependent on three things: 1. How much effort and time you invest in your learning Torah. Torah study melts the Yetzer Hara away. (For women, who do not have Torah study, it is their modesty that is their Yetzer Hara repellent. Vilna Gaon.) 2. What and who you associate yourself with, and what and who you disassociate from. How far you



distance yourself from the things and people that are distractions to your learning, prayer, and service of G-d. Keeping your phone out of Shul and study hall, getting the best internet and phone filters, connecting yourself to a rabbi who can clarify any doubts of what G-d wants from you. 3. How much time and effort you invest in praying. Even if a person makes all the effort to fight his Yetzer Hara, he still can't do it alone. G-d made the Yetzer Hara, an angel, much stronger than Man, who is merely flesh and blood. But when a person puts in the effort to fight, G-d helps.

This is the meaning, of the words, אם אין אני לי מי לי. If I am not for myself, if I will not start to fight my spiritual battle setting up proper times to learn and proper study partners, if I will not choose who and what to associate with, if I will not pray for my own good and my needs, who is to me? When it comes to spirituality, in contrast to things of a physical or a material nature, if I don't put in the effort, if I do not initiate and try to make spiritual "moves", I will lose the battle for spirituality in my life. I can't wait for G-d to save me, spiritually, if I am not trying, myself. If I keep waiting for just the right thing to motivate me spiritually, in order to win my spiritual battle - a good class, a Rabbi or friend who is a good influence, being back in yeshiva, having all my life's finances under control right now, etc., it will never really come! G-d is waiting for *me* to be the one pushing ahead, to make spirituality happen, to prepare for it, to take the initiative, to make the moves!

Now, just because you fight hard for your spirituality and you reach your spiritual goals, don't become haughty over your achievements: וכשאני לעצמי מה אני *And when I try to battle for spirituality on my own, what am I?* If G-d does not help me, I can never reach my spiritual goals on my own, because the Yetzer Hara is much stronger than I am! And still, when G-d helps a person overpower

his Yetzer Hara, G-d gives the person total credit, as if he has won the spiritual battle against this Evil Angel alone, without G-d's help.

The problem is that most of us know we are not tzaddikim, we know what we have to improve, but we think we have a "time bank". I'll get to fighting my spiritual battle later in life! The day before I die, I will do Teshuva! I am still midlife, I am still young, *I still look young!* When it comes to material concerns, if you did not make the money today, no worries! You will make it tomorrow, for it is all predestined. If you missed out on the investment, during Covid, you will get another investment opportunity tomorrow, because no one can take from you the amount of money you are supposed to have! But if you missed a day of learning, if you missed a day of good prayer, a day with tzitzit, a day of teshuva, **that day is dead!** You can never get that day back! This is what it means when it says ואם לא עכשיו אימתי. And if not now, when?

There are two seemingly similar words. מושיע savior. עוזר helper. What is the difference between the two? מושיע, Savior, means, that He saves you when you can't help yourself. עוזר Helper, means, that he helps you when you help yourself. When G-d saved the Jews at Yam Suf, it says ויושע. The Jews did not need to do anything on their own, for G-d fought the final battle against the Egyptians; He saved them, on His own. But when it comes to fighting the Yetzer Hara, G-d won't save you, He will only help you if you get up again and try to help yourself. ואלמלא הקדוש ברוך הוא שיעזור לו - אינו יכול לו (Succah 52b) G-d won't save you spiritually, He will only help you save yourself.

The Talmud tells us that a person's shidduch and his Parnassah are as difficult as Kriyat Yam Suf.(Sotah 2b) Of course, nothing is hard for G-d, not even Kriyat Yam Suf! If He

created the Sea, He can definitely split it! But your shidduch, your parnassah, is compared to Kriyat Yam Suf: whatever Hishtadlut you do, and you should do all the Hishtadlut you can - *but that Hishtadlut is not what is going to bring you your parnassah and your soulmate.* Just as it was *hard* for the Jews to see how G-d would bring them a salvation at Yam Suf, it is hard for us to understand how we will be able to find our soulmate and figure out our finances, for the rest of our lives. But G-d will show you. Just like in regard to the splitting of the Sea, G-d was ויִשַׁע, in regard to your Parnassah and soulmate, as well, He is ויִשַׁע. He did not need your Hishtadlut at all to help you, He did not need your help to help you. He saved you, and did it all by Himself.

Another explanation about the common difficulty in Kriyat Yam Suf, shidduch, and parnassah. It was hard for G-d to split the Sea, because the Jews had sin and lacked merit; but still, G-d found a way to give them what they did not deserve. The only thing that makes it hard for G-d to give you your soul mate, to give you your parnassah, is the sins that we have and our lack of merit. And still, G-d finds Selfie Steps for building Spiritual Sand Castles:

1. It's me, or no one. No one can light up my spiritual spark for me.
2. It's now, or never. Today will never come again.
3. All I have to do is start. I can never do it all on my own. G-d will help me.
4. Get rid of distractions. Anything that prevents you from becoming a Tzaddik is a distraction.
5. Know where your efforts make a difference. When it comes to finding your shidduch, when it comes to your parnassah, you don't need to try hard; you just need to keep trying. When it comes to your spiritual fight, you need to try much harder.

THE CHOICE OF EXTRAORDINARINESS

There are five choices that we can make that will decide if and how much we are

a way to give us what we do not deserve. (See Alshich Shemot 13;11)

Why is it so hard for us to loosen up in our physical efforts, and to take more action on our spiritual goals? We invest in what we believe has significance, and we are impressed by financial wins, wealth and strength, and not impressed by a spiritual win, by someone with a connection to G-d. Why?

Because we think of spirituality as not being real, of something that is just an ideal... and we think of fancy cars and homes, physical, material success as real! How foolish! It is the exact opposite! In Olam Haba, all the luxury of this world will be washed away, just as one wave takes down the biggest sand castles! You can't take Upstairs even your socks with you! Everything you toiled to acquire will be left to others. וְעִזְבוּ לְאֶחָדִים הַיָּמִים. (Tehillim 49;11) The only sand castles that will last forever, the only ones that no wave can take down, are the spiritual sand castles that we build while we are here in this world: our Torah learning, and our victories over the Yetzer Hara! עֲשֵׂה תוֹרַתְךָ קִבְעֵ. It is called YOUR Torah.

productive, especially when bouncing back during times of crisis and challenge. Choice

no. 1: Act on the Important; Don't react to the urgent. Choice no. 2: Go for extraordinary; Don't settle for the ordinary. Choice 3: Schedule the most important first; Leave the less important for later. Choice 4: Rule your technology; Don't let it rule you. Choice 5: Fuel your heart and soul; Don't burn out.

Choice 2 is the lesson of this week's Parasha: Go for extraordinary; Don't settle for the ordinary. There is nothing wrong about being ordinary, living a normal and peaceful life. But living extraordinary lives means living a life in which you feel deeply satisfied, accomplishing those things that you feel are of genuine value and have the most importance. What are the extraordinary accomplishments/achievements that will make you feel satisfied when you go to bed at the end of each day?

Parashat Kedoshim, with all its Mitzvoth, was said by Moshe in Hakhel, the gathering of the entire nation. The reason is that it is the most pivotal Parasha. (Sifra; Rashi) In what way is Parashat Kedoshim a pivotal Parasha?

In the introduction of Kedoshim, G-d commands each one of us, even the simplest Jew who attends Hakhel, to be Kadosh. There is no proper English translation to the word Kadosh. Kadosh is loosely translated as holy. But, holy, in the English dictionary, means exalted, perfect, sacred. Most Jews cannot relate to becoming exalted, perfect, or sacred. And that is fine, because "Holy" is not an accurate translation of the word Kadosh. When we redefine our terms and the words we use, we redefine our thinking, we redefine ourselves and become extraordinary. So, what is Kadosh?

The word Kadosh means separate, set aside. The Beit Hamikdash was divided into three separate areas: the courtyard, the Kodesh, and

the Kodesh Hakodoshim; each one was *separate* from the one before it. Kiddushin is the process of setting a woman aside for no man other than her husband. Ironically, a harlot is referred to as a Kedesha, a word that shares the root "kadosh" – for she is separated from civilization, set aside because of her immoral behavior. (see Rashi Breshit 38;21) When the angels join with the Jewish nation each day and refer to G-d as Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, the meaning is that G-d is separated, in every conceivable way, from the grasp of the highest angels and humanity. He is above nature and any other confining measurement. When we make Kiddush, we are testifying how the day of Shabbat is different and separate from Chol, which is ordinary. When we circumcise our children, we are letting them know, for the rest of their lives, that they are different than the gentile.

Rashi comments that the way to become Kadosh and separate is specifically through refraining from immoral relations and behavior. Separation from immorality makes us an Am Kadosh, a Separate Nation, an extraordinary nation, more than anything else. More than refraining from stealing or murder. Why?

It is part of human nature for there to be an attraction between opposite genders. Jews are commanded to rise above their nature. That is what Kedusha means: to separate ourselves from the ordinary and transcend to the extraordinary. Refraining from stealing or committing murder is not something that will make you Kadosh, because it is not extraordinary, nor is it raising above your nature.

You cannot be a complete Jew, who aspires to observe all 613, if you are an ordinary person. The pivot of our Parasha, the uniqueness of it,

is the many mitzvoth that demand you to be extraordinary! Not only in our relationship between Man and G-d, but between Man and his friend, and Man and himself. Allow me to give you just a few examples.

We are commanded in the Parasha to judge others favorably. If the person in question is one who is considered righteous, if there exists only a slim chance to justify what he has done, the Torah commands us to judge him favorably. (See Chafetz Chaim LH Asin, 3) But how can the Torah command me how to think? Chances are, ninety-nine out of a hundred, that he sinned and acted immorally!!! If you heard Lashona Hara – even from a reliable source – you are not allowed to believe it! You are only allowed to take caution and suspect, but not to believe! *You are not allowed to think the way you naturally think!* You are expected to rise above the way you think!

Not only is revenge forbidden, but even your feelings toward the person who wronged you are dictated by the Torah. When a person asks you to do him a favor, and you do it, even though he once denied your request, you are forbidden to feel, in your heart, that you are better than he is! G-d commands you to love your friend, as you love yourself – that same “friend” that it would be only natural for you to hate. *You are commanded to rise above the way you naturally feel.*

How can the Torah command me to think differently from how I think or feel differently from how I feel? How is it even in my control? The only way is to transcend, to leave ordinariness behind me, and become extraordinary!

Judaism even expects you to rise above your nature, your personality, your values, and your perspectives. Run away from honor, but honor

everyone else. Live within your means and practice frugality, but support your wife and kids above your standards. Forget the good things you did for others, but remember the good they did for you. When a person abuses me verbally or physically, Judaism expects me to believe that it was G-d who sent this person as a messenger, and it was not his choice. But when I hurt someone else, Judaism expects me to take responsibility, to recognize that it was *my* bad choice, and I need to repent!

Life is like a wheel. Not any wheel, but like the annoying wheel of a shopping cart that is not going in the direction you want it to go. When life changes on you, you need to rise above your nature. Above all your limitations, above the way you think, feel, believe, behave, above your version of your life story, above the rat race, and even above your education. Today, to survive, we need to be supersonic learners and adapters, and not rely on the outdated information we learned at school or the outset of our careers. Extroverts are challenged to become introverted, and vice versa. Rabbis and Morahs are challenged to become tech-savvy in a kosher way and learn and control technology to redefine Torah education. Merchants are challenged to build brands, sell on Amazon/eBay, and become online marketing gurus. You can't afford to succumb to your natural thoughts, feeling, or even nature.

Adapters to change recommend those who wish to rise above their limiting beliefs, to alter their inner lexicon. Say “I won't” instead of “I can't.” Thoughts like “I can't learn a new job,” “I can't downsize my business,” “I can't lower my budget,” are not your friends. Learn how you can make better choices. Even if it is just your inner lexicon, your choice of words. We have so many choices to make, even when it seems as if there are almost none. Victor



Frankl taught about dealing with challenge and change: You always have control over one thing: the meaning you give to an event and your response to it.

Selfie Steps to rise above your nature.

1. Shift perspective. See the events of today through the lens of tomorrow, of what really matters. Learn to see things from someone else's shoes.
2. Widen your options of how you can respond to an event and what meaning you can give it. If you are angry or hurt or jealous, it is because you chose to be.
3. Understand that your emotions work within a closed cycle. Self-control helps us make better choices. Better choices increase one's self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem automatically deflates the ego. A smaller ego means a greater perspective. A greater perspective makes it easier to gain self-control. Self-control helps us make better changes. Etc. Etc.
4. Adapt the belief, "Nothing in my life will change for the better unless I change."
5. Plan ahead, live with a schedule and long-term perspective. When you live with meaningful goals and move toward your goals with integrity, it is much easier to have self-discipline.
6. Learn Torah; open your mind to wisdom. Lust for immorality only resides in a heart that is devoid of wisdom. (Rambam Issurei Bi'ah 22;21)
7. Believe in G-d and that He created you in His Image. Your biggest enemy is helplessness. You can overcome anything if you just believe in G-d and yourself long enough.
8. Realize that the difficulties you face, the difficult people you encounter, are all part of your unique and custom-tailored spiritual journey of rectification and soul perfection. The same challenges will keep coming back in different forms until you learn how to rise above.

WHAT THE PRIEST TAUGHT ME

I got off the phone with the priest. He gave me *chizuk*. He was not your regular priest. He was a priest who converted to Judaism, and is now Ultra Orthodox. "I have no problem with Torah scholars learning self-help techniques from the gentiles, whether it is in coaching or any other therapy that works. But there is so much in our *sifrei Mussar*, early *mussar*, late *mussar*, *chassidische* or *Litvishe*. Why do we need to look into their books before we know *our* books and work on the "techniques"

offered in our own literature? The gentiles think differently, live differently, and believe differently. Their beliefs and thoughts are between the lines in their books, even if there is no intention to change us and make us think as they do. How can one be sure that the good techniques that he gets from the "good gentile" do not have some life example that is not suitable for our circles of the *Kodesh Hakedoshim*, the inside circles of the ultra religious Orthodox?" He was on speaker. I



heard it. My wife heard it. I hung up, and that was it . Enough mussar from the ex-priest. I went straight into the beit midrash and pulled out the Alei Shur from R. Wolbe. To page 256 . BAM! What I saw was exactly the latest self-help discoveries that the self-help world has discovered . First, a little background:

People want to know why coaching is becoming well liked and well received. People want to know **why** it works and **how** it can be that something so enjoyable and fun can be so effective. And, how can it be that it is helping people in ways that other therapies did not? Four questions, one answer: Will.

There is a tremendous power in the universe. It is called the power of focused thought. Over the last forty years, people in the world of psychology and self- help realized *that it is not only our subconscious* that is governing our thought, feelings and behavior. Researchers realized that you can govern and control these through conscious thought, as well. If someone is feeling happy – he must have had a happy thought. If someone is feeling sad – something negative must have been going through his head. Almost all feelings can be traced to the thought that came before, after, or during the feeling. Although the client may not be aware of this thought, a good therapist can help him find it . After the thought has been identified , the therapist can help the person whose emotions are affecting his life productivity by replacing the thoughts with more effective ones. The way someone feels is very important, for that will define how productive that person will be. So, it goes like this: Thoughts and beliefs, followed by feelings and behavior . They are all connected. All of this shows you how great the power of thought, conscious thought, actually is, for it is the root of feelings and behavior. Whereas the past and the subconscious have been the center

of attention until now, the aspect of present feeling and opinion has been neglected. We do not have to analyze the “why” of the past, as well as all the subconscious input, but rather to realize that the feelings a person has have much to do with the way he is thinking in close connection to what he is feeling. This is the idea behind CBT- cognitive behavioral therapy. The therapist does not have to go to the past of the client, everything is “here and now”. And then, over the last twenty years, life coaching has also become very popular. Coaching works with the will of the client. The power of will is a stronger power in getting a person moving in the direction of his wants than the power of organizing thoughts.

The question of the coach to his client is always directed to the “wants” of the client. “What, how, when, where, or who do you **want** to be...” The coach is working the whole time with the wants of the client. Not with the thoughts. It even catches the client off guard, because many times he is not even thinking about what he wants, but what is in his head. The coach works to help the person to get where he wants to be. That’s it. Of course, there may be some thoughts that must be dealt with through CBT. There may be a need to find out some “why”s on the way, or get over the past with a psychologist. But coaching is about moving forward to what the person wants. Not only that: many times, a person’s thoughts are in his head because that is where his wants are. Help him figure out his wants, help him figure out his value system and where his wants stand on the ladder of importance, and his thoughts are taken care of as well.

This is exactly what R. Wolbe writes. The word רצון , *will* , is connected to the word רוץ , to run. A person’s **will** will cause him to run to do those things that he wants. A person’s



wants are a stronger drive than his thoughts; he will run after things that he wants without first thinking through all the variables. We see a few times in the Torah אהבה מקלקלת את הדעה *desire overrides the train of thought*. Bilaam saddled his own donkey early in the morning without the help of his servants out of his excitement to curse the Jews. At the other end of the spectrum, Abraham saddled his own donkey early in the morning out of his excitement to fulfill the will of G-d and offer Yitschak on the Altar. Didn't Bilaam know that he could not curse the Jews against G-d's will? Wouldn't it have been logical for Abraham to take a little time that day to make sense out of the contradictory prophecies? (כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע) The answer lies in the will – what is your deepest will? If it is clear to you, your feet will take you there. King David would prepare the itinerary befitting a busy king, but found that his feet would bring him, instead, to the Beit Midrash. This is because a person's will is so strong that it controls his behavior more than his thoughts do. This is not because he acts without thinking. It is because a powerful want, a clear focused want, ignites creativity and new ideas. I see this with my children. A child who does not usually exhibit creativity will suddenly find a really creative way to climb the cabinets for a piece of chocolate. The wants get the thoughts running: creativity juices overflow when he is in touch with his wants, and the candy. And the father of all innovations, father of all breakthrough, is creativity. So when the coach gets down to the will, creativity begins. By uncovering the inner will, a new thinking pattern uncovers as well.

Love vs. Respect

Sefirat Haomer is a time of character refinement. 12,000 pairs, 24,000 students of R Akiva, all died at this time for not honoring

I actually had a writer's block this week. I went to shul and I told this concept to my Israeli study partner in Hebrew, and I said that aside from this thought, I did not have anything to write that is a coaching concept connected to our Parasha. He told me that as a matter of fact, this concept answers a question from the Gemara in Tractate Zevachim (47a) – one that he could not get out of his head. The question comes from a passuk in our parasha. How do you know that if someone is מתעסק in קדשים – *a kohen who brings a sacrifice, but is just going through the correct motions, but without the proper intent* – such a korban is disqualified? The answer is because in this week's parasha it says לרצונכם תזבחו you should bring your korban in conjunction with your will to bring it. The Talmud learns from these words לדעתכם תזבחו that you must sacrifice in conjunction with your knowledge. My friend said, "But it does not say in the Torah לדעתכם , your knowledge. It says לרצונכם , with your will...? It must be, then, that we learn from this piece of Talmud, that the root of all knowledge is will. Our thoughts go along with, and stay in the frame of our wants. When we get clear what we want, our thinking improves as well.

Coaching can be just as powerful, if not more, than other therapies, because it goes behind the scenes of the thoughts. Another ancient (and perennially relevant) insight from sifrei mussar, something that the gentiles figured out only in the last couple of years. And, again, the Beit Hamidrash is the place to find out anything you want to know.

each other. (Yevamot 62b) The main Avodah during the Omer is to correct that Middah of respect.



There are three questions one can ask. R' Akiva taught that the main rule of the entire Torah is to love your friend as you love yourself. (Sifra Kedoshim, Yerushalmi 9 Nedarim) How could R Akiva's own students transgress the main teaching of their mentor? And why did this happen, specifically, between Pesach and Shavuoth? Also, isn't it strange that R Akiva's students are referred to as 12,000 "pairs", and not 24,000 disciples?

The Shem Mishmuel answers with a beautiful twist. But first, he writes a lesson about respect. Respecting another is only possible if you recognize that the other person has a strength that you, yourself, don't have, or if he is superior to you in some way. Respect usually stems from recognizing that the other person is greater than oneself in a certain aspect of his personality.

However, in your own body, your right hand will not show respect to your left hand. Your toe will not show respect for your ear, for both are part of one body. Respect is not applicable here; no one part is greater than another, for they are all part of the same "one". The students of R' Akiva learned the importance of loving one another, *but they took their Rabbi's teaching of love to the extreme*. Each one felt that the others were a part of himself. They failed to accord to one another individual identity. As if they were all one. And this was their mistake. Love has no boundaries. But respect does. They loved each other with boundless love, in a way that they all felt one. That is why they are referred to as "pairs", for no one had an identity or a boundary.

Heimish is a good thing, as long as it is not too heimish. Because when there are no boundaries, there is no respect. Aharon's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, died because of this. They got too close to G-d. Their sin was

ה' בקרבתם לפני ה'. They did not realize their boundaries. And this is the reason why R Akiva's students died during the Sefirah. The Sefirah is a time where we count days and we count weeks. Where we give value to both: collectivity for weeks and individuality for days. The students of R' Akiva were on such a high level that they were expected to notice this lesson of balancing individuality with unity and learn from it.

This is a lesson for all areas of life. The best way to treat your wife is how you treated her before she became your wife. The best way to treat your children is as if they are guests, even though they are your guests for 20+ years. Treat them with no less respect than you would treat your neighbor's children. Once you perceive the kids as part of a family, part of a whole, and with no individuality, identities become blurred. The formula to the successful family is found in the balance between individuality and collectiveness. As the Haggadah mentions *אחד חכם אחד רשע וכו'* One the wise, one the wicked, one the simpleton, one that doesn't know how to ask. Why one, one, one, one? Because in order for your family to function with harmony, you have to respect each child for what he is, with his own individuality and identity.

The Mishna teaches, *רבי אומר, איזוהי דרך ישרה, כל שהיא תפארת לעושיה ותפארת לו מן האדם*. (Avot 2;1) A successful relationship, a lifelong relationship, is a balanced one. I once saw a refrigerator magnet that said, "Love is not looking into each other's eyes. Love is looking in the same direction". I would like to take the theory that love is about going in the "same direction" a step further. Love and relationships are like driving a car. A good driver, a smooth driver, knows how to efficiently balance two crucial elements in his car: the gas pedal and the brakes. If you



overuse or underuse either of these, no one will want to be your passenger.

In the journey of relationships, there are also two pedals. There is the pedal of love. You push that pedal each time you give of your time, money, effort or soul. Saying yes. No boundaries. What is mine is yours. That is the pedal of love.

And then, there is the brake pedal. Knowing when to say no. How to say no. How to stand up for yourself. How to respect yourself and your boundaries, so that you can also respect others and their boundaries. Although the gas pedal is very important to get you where you want to go, if there are no brakes, do not get into that car!

All relationships have two main factors. Dos and Don'ts. The do's of a relationship do not carry as much weight as the don'ts. You can give all your money, all your time, your whole Neshama, all the "do's", but if you are not careful to refrain from the things that you are not supposed to do, the "don'ts", the whole relationship can come crashing down.

A common misinterpretation many Orthodox Jews have is that a Mitzvah means a good

deed. A mitzvah is a commandment. The root of the word is, צוה which means command. Or, on a deeper level, a Mitzvah is a way of building a bond between the Jew and His Creator, from the word, צוותא, together.

There are positive commandments and there are negative commandments. And, just as the negative commandments are much more severe than the positive commandments, relationship issues are usually problems with Don'ts more than they are with Do's. My experience in helping people improve socially tells me the following. Those who are doing great with the do's but not with the don'ts have much rockier relationships than those who are good with the don'ts, but not with the do's.

Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player said something I can't forget. "I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me... All I ask is that you respect me as a human being". Respect is not earned through achievement. It is insignificant what another person has accomplished. Respect is because the other person is a human being, and because he is created in the image of G-d.

A seven-week journey to spiritual refinement

Introduction to the Sefirot of Sefirat Haomer

From the second night of Pesach until Shavuot, we count the Omer as a preparation to accept the Torah. It is a purification process, a ladder of holiness. R Chaim Volozhin (NH 4;7) writes that in order to connect with G-d through the learning of Torah, it is extremely important to meditate on purifying one's heart,

before beginning learning. And the way to do this is through the ladder of self-refinement.

The Arizal writes that when we left Egypt, we emerged from the 49th Level of Impurity. And through the power of the Omer, we entered the 49th level of Holiness. The Rashash writes that these days are the source of holiness for all the days of the year. And the way one goes



through these days will affect how one behaves all year long. Each day has its Middah, and there is a Divine assistance to improve precisely the Middah of that day. Therefore, we cite the prayer that in the merit of the Omer, we refine the Middah of that day.

The numerical value of the Hebrew word Middah is 49. What are these 49 Middot? What are the steps involved in rectification?

Allow me to start from the basics. The Ten Sefirot are broken down, primarily, into two groups. The first three, Chochma (Wisdom), Binah (Understanding) and Daat (Knowledge).

The next seven, also referred to as Middot, are read every day in the Siddur in Shacharit, in the Pesukei D'zimrah, לך ה' הגדולה הגבורה והתפארת והנצח וההוד כי כל בשמים ובארץ לך ה' הממלכה. To you, Hashem, is the 1. Gedulah (Chessed), 2. Gevurah, 3. Tifferet, 4. Netzach, and 5. Hod 6. Yesod, ... Ki chol bashamyim uvaAretz , for everything, in the Heavens and the Earth, to you, Hashem, is the kingdom 7. Malchut.

There are aspects of the Sefirot that we can learn, even if we are not learning Kabbalah; these are things that can help one learn how to become the best Jew he can be.

If you do not understand the basics of the Sefirot, you will not be able to understand the significance of the Sefirot and the guidance they offer.

The root of the word Sefirah has a few meanings, each built on the same three letters. ס.פ.ר. The first meaning is the Sapphire stone. When the sky opened up at Har Sinai, the Jews looked up to the Heavens and saw that there was a clear sapphire stone, resembling a prism, under G-d's throne (Shemot 24;10). What does this mean?

The Sapphire the Jews saw hints to the Sefirot they perceived, the way we can perceive G-d's character. The Sefirot relay to us how G-d interacts with the world.

It is of utmost importance to accept the fact that we cannot understand G-d, Himself. When Moshe asked G-d, הֲרֵאֵנִי נָא אֶת כְּבוֹדְךָ. Please, show me Your Honor. G-d answered "You will not be able to see my face, for no man can see Me and live ... You will only be able to see Me from behind ... (Shemot 33)". What does this mean, that we cannot see the front of G-d, but that we can only see Him from behind?

G-d does not reveal Himself, not even to the Angels. Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Hashem Tzvaktot, means that G-d is above the understanding of the angels. Rather, G-d told Moshe, human beings can understand G-d's personality only from His actions. From His ways in the world. We can never even begin to contemplate G-d, Himself. G-d is One G-d, אחד, and the way we perceive how He interacts with His World, is through the Ten Sefirot. Similar to how white light is separated into its component colors – red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet - when it passes through a prism. We can perceive G-d's reflection from His actions and ways, from the other side of the prism. But the Sefirot do not describe G-d, Himself, for G-d is completely beyond human comprehension. Once someone asked a wise man, What is G-d? And the wise man answered, אֵילֹו יִדְעָתִיו הֵייתִיו, If I would know Him, I would be Him. (Derashot HaRan, דרוש ד) In Judaism, we believe that G-d did not create the Universe only once upon a time, long ago, but that He is constantly creating the world. In the present. יוצר אור ובורא חושך ... בורא. את הכל. G-d is creating in the present. עושה מעשה. בראשית. The sapphire stone that the Jews saw at Har Sinai is suggestive of the Sefirot,



through which we can perceive G-d by observing how He manages His world.

Now we can understand the other meanings of the word Sefirah. The word סיפור, or story. We can understand the story, how G-d is telling the world about Himself. מספר, number, although the Ten Sefirot are philosophical, they have, also, a mathematical dimension. There are only ten. That is it. Not one more and not one less. (Sefer Yetzirah) The ten Sefirot are correspondent to the ten Maamarot, Ten Utterances, with which Hashem created the world. (Avot 5;1) Also, the word ספר means boundary. Each one of these ten Sefirot has a boundary; they exist separately, even though they must also work together in order to give even a basic insight into G-d's character, or for one to bring G-dliness to the world.

When we understand the Ten Sefirot even on a basic level, we understand ourselves, as well. G-d made Man in His Image, a Tzelem Elokim. (Breshit 1;27 See Devarim 21; 22) מבשרי אהזה אלוה-ה. From my flesh I will perceive G-d. (Iyov 19; 26) ר' Akiva taught הביב אדם שנוברא בצלם (Avot 3;14) Beloved is Man, for he is created in G-d's Image. This, of course, is not referring to a physical image of G-d. Instead, it refers to a similarity in the sense of potential character. Man has in him G-dly potential. We gain tremendous insight into our own character, when we understand the Sefirot.

We are expected to go in G-d's ways. והלכת בדרכיו. (Devarim 28;9) This is how we can connect to G-d. ובו תדבק. (Devarim 10;20) G-d wants us to be holy, because "I, Hashem, your G-d, am Holy". (Vayikra 19; 2) The key for us to understand what it means to be holy, to be created in G-d's image, is learning each of the ten Sefirot.

The ten Sefirot can be divided into three groups, just as Man has with in him three distinct divisions. The first group is Thoughts, ideas and beliefs. The second group is Character, and the third group is Behavior. The first three, Hochma, Binah and Daat, are from the group of thoughts, ideas and beliefs. The group of the next seven Sefirot are the "Middot". They reflect character and behavior, something more "tangible", making it easier for us to relate to these Sefirot. The list of seven Sefirot that are also Middot, mentioned in our Shacharit prayers, develops into a Sefirat Haomer time-table, a schedule outlining what we have to work on each day of the Omer. Seven times seven. And this is part of our growth in preparing to accept the Torah on Shavuoth. To work on perfecting those traits in our own character on those allotted days.

We start the first night of the Omer with Chesed of Chesed, the ultimate in selflessness. And we work through the 49 days, each day combining one of the Attributes to the main Attribute being focused upon that week, [Chesed of Chesed, Gevura of Chesed, and so on] until we reach Malchut of Malchut. The highest level of majesty.

Before explaining the Middot though, we must know that each Middah has a few components.

- 1-The definition of the Middah.
- 2-The Tzaddik, that merited to personify this Middah, and serve G-d mostly through this specific Middah.
- 3-The part of the human body that expresses this Middah.
- 4-What was created on that day of the seven days of Creation.



It is important to understand this and to be accurate about the Middah refinement of the day. That is where there is special Divine Assistance.

Learn the Sefirot. You will then have a better understanding of your own life's story, and the stories of those in your life. (סיפור, story root). You will also learn how to control and bring boundaries to your own behavior. (ספר, boundary root.) And you will begin an organized, step by step journey, counting, each day, to reach your purpose. (מספר Number root.)

The Orach Chaim writes that our souls are like the Luchot, the tablets that were made from Sapphire. Through the refinement of the

Sefirah, we polish our souls so they will sparkle like Sapphire. And the shine of our souls, your personal spark, will be eternally remembered by G-d through the Sapphire that is under His Throne.

This is a special opportunity to become a more refined vessel to reveal G-dliness in the world. During the days of Sefirat HaOmer, the energy is in the air waiting for you soul to connect to it. This is an opportune time for character development, to rectify the lack of respect of the students of R' Akivah, and make your inner essence shine. Don't miss these Sefirot forces, that linger within, waiting for you to tap into your potential, and live the life you are meant to live! The G-dly person you are destined to be!

A CONNECTION TO G-D

One of the amazing things that happened to me in Miami was a conversation I had on the way to the airport with the Uber driver, an African American.

“Are you a Rabbi?” I try to be. I try to help people get closer to their Creator, through words of Torah. “You can call me Rabbi.” “Can I ask you a question?” “Sure.”

“Did G-d give the whole Five Books of Moses to Moses at Mt. Sinai? Or did G-d give just the Ten Commandments? I keep the commandments, because that is what G-d gave the whole world. Not just the Jews. So, I keep that. The rest of the Five Books, was that also given to Moses at Mt. Sinai?”

I replied that it is not clear what extent of detail Moses received at Mt. Sinai and what he accepted in the Tabernacle, in the Tent of Meeting (See Sotah 37b). But, one thing for sure is that the Ten Commandments were not

given to the Gentiles. They were given to the Jews, as the beginning words start off saying, *I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.* Gentiles never went through Egyptian slavery. All the gentiles need to keep, according to Judaism, are the 7 Noachide laws.

“What? How do you say that? You call yourself a Rabbi? You discriminate? Don't you think that G-d wants the gentiles to live a life of morality with an ethical code?” I never had someone so angry with me in my entire life! He would have thrown me out of the car, if he could have. But, I tried to gently explain that we have 613 laws that we connect to G-d with, and he has only the 7 Noachide laws that he can connect with. He would not accept that. I tried to explain that we are to be G-d's Knights, bringing G-dliness to the world, to be a light unto the nations. Nothing doing. He would not accept that G-d would let the



gentiles alone without ever speaking to them, never telling them how to behave, bar the 7 Noachide laws.

This was right before Purim, when I was thinking of the words of the Vilna Gaon, explaining the words of the Megilla. לְיְהוּדִים לְיְהוּדִים. *For the Jews, there was light,...* The Talmud says that the light that the Jews merited was Torah. (Megillah 16b) The Vilna Gaon explains this to mean that on Purim, the Jews realized that Torah is the light of their lives. This gentile wanted to feel that he had some light in the darkness, some ethical code, in an immoral world. Torah means: a light guiding you, showing you how to live. I never realized how lucky we are to have a connection to G-d, to have direction in life, until I met that Uber Driver in Miami.

Shavuot is not a holiday meant to just celebrate our accepting the Torah, our standing at Mt. Sinai. Shavuot is to celebrate the beginning of a relationship. Every day we accept the Torah, and every day G-d gives it to us, as we say in the blessing, נִתְּנָה הַתּוֹרָה. The One who *gives* Torah. Not נָתַן הַתּוֹרָה, the One who *gave* us Torah 3000 years ago. Every day, every word of Torah we learn, G-d is giving us that Torah. Every generation has its leaders, and the leaders of each generation are as great as Moshe and Aharon (Rosh Hashana 25b). For in each generation, G-d *is giving* the Torah, and it is the duty of each generation to look to their Torah leaders to direct the people, guiding them how to live, according to what G-d is teaching that generation, keeping to the Jewish Code of Law.

What does a person need to do, to feel closeness to G-d, and to see how the Torah is the light of his life? How does a person connect in a way that G-d is talking to him, now, in the present?

First and foremost, in order to connect, Torah needs to be sweet to you. Ever notice the uniqueness of the Birkot Hatorah in Birkot Hashachar? It is the only blessing of a Mitzvah that we pray for it to be sweet, וְהָעֵרֵב נָא. This is because the sweetness of Torah is fundamental for connecting to G-d and knowing what He wants from us. How does Torah become sweet? By taking each word and thinking about it. By chewing it, slowly. No matter how expensive the steak you are eating, if you swallow it all at once, you will not taste its quality. You need to savor each bite.

There is a Midrash that gives us the secret code to connecting, and the prerequisite for savoring the sweetness of Torah. The Torah is compared to water, fire, and desert. הוּי כֵּל צִמָּא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם ; כִּי נִרְמָזוּ וְתוֹרָה אִוֵּר ; וַיִּדְבַּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַּר רַבְבָּה (Bamidbar Rabbah 1; 17) Why these three?

Water- Uniqueness of water is that it flows only to a lower place. Torah will go only to one who becomes humble. Only a humble person is not bashful to ask what he does not know. (אִין הַבִּישָׁן לַמֵּד.) Avot 2;5) Only a humble person is willing to review again, and again and again, and...And only a humble person will listen when wise people speak.

Why not compare Torah to a sweeter, tastier, drink? Why is Torah not compared to orange juice? Why water? The Chafetz Chaim would explain that this is because there is a uniqueness in water, that it is a drink that we do not make a blessing on unless we are thirsty. Unlike orange juice, you can enjoy water only when you are thirsty (See Sh" A-OH 204;7). Torah is sweet only if you realize how much your survival is dependent on it (See Midrash Shir Hashirim 1;3).



Fire – Uniqueness of fire is that it lights up darkness. If you want Torah to speak to you, you need to look at the world around you as darkness, a world of fantasy, delusion, imaginings. Only Torah is reality. Only Torah can shed light on what is right and what is wrong (See Or Hachaim Behukotay 26;27).

Desert – Uniqueness of desert is that the place you are in is not the destination. And the more possessions that you have with you, the more difficult it is for you to get out of the desert, to move around, to enjoy your journey. The lighter the better. For you to realize what G-d is saying to you, for you to connect to the Torah He is giving you, you need to travel light. Not to look for more than you have, not

to let your eyes search the world around you for more material possessions than you already have, but to keep going in the direction of your destination. From the person's first day in this world, he is walking towards death, toward Olam Haba. Life is a journey. And only when you accept that, can you taste the sweetness of Torah and really connect.

So, here are the Selfie Steps. The self-help steps to Sweetness of Torah.

Water – Humility, Thirst. **Fire** – Recognizing that the Torah we learn is our flashlight, a beacon of clarity in a confusing world. **Desert** – Not taking this world seriously. But taking the destination seriously.

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

King Solomon's famous life mantra seems a little strange. *בְּמַיִם הַפְּנִיִּים לַפְּנִיִּים כִּן לְבַ-הָאָדָם לְאָדָם* *As water reflects one's face, so too, the heart of one man reflects the heart of another.* (Mishlei 27; 19) If someone is not being nice to you, he is reflecting you in some way. Try to be nice to him, and you will see a change in his heart as well.

Why did King Solomon use water in his parable of reflection? Were there no mirrors in his time? Didn't the women of the desert give their copper that they used as mirrors in Egypt for making the basin in the Mishkan?

The Baal Shem Tov gave a brilliant answer, one that can change your whole social life. The uniqueness of the reflection of water is that you need to bend over to see it clearly. If King Solomon had used a mirror on the wall as the parallel, you would not have to lower yourself to see the relationship reflection. Only the

reflection of water requires you to kneel and bring down your inflated ego to a healthy place. And this is the secret of *וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כַּמּוֹךְ*. *And you shall love to your friend as you love yourself.* Why does the Torah add the letter ל, "to" your friend? Just say, "And you shall love your friend, like yourself"? The answer is if you want to begin to love your friend, you must come closer to him. What does this mean?

There is another uniqueness in the reflection of water that is paralleled in relationships. This reflection parallel is mindboggling. When you are far from the water, your reflection is bigger than life, out of proportion. When you bend over, when you get close, your reflection gets smaller; it becomes more real. What is the lesson of size dependent on distance in the reflection of water? And what is its relevance to relationships?



When you are far from people, it is because you are arrogant in some way, shape or form. When you are close to people, it is because you are humble with those people. If you find that other people are being haughty, it might be because you, yourself, are too far from them. If only you would humble yourself, if only you would get closer, you would see their humble side as well. As your reflection gets smaller, so does theirs. If you wish to improve a certain relationship, find the humility you need to fix it. It takes soul searching, but it really works.

Arrogant people aren't well-liked. After fifty years of corporate experience, Aldo Papone, senior advisor to American Express, wrote the following: *Arrogance, at its worst, creates a momentum that insists on your downfall and cannot be appeased. We've all seen the bloodlust that occurs when the public senses a weakness in the high and mighty – a corporation, a candidate, or a multimillion-dollar athlete. Arrogance must be punished, and only a display of remorse and humility will get you off the hook.* (Aldo Papone)

Arrogant people are arrogant because they do not realize that they are arrogant. Arrogance is not having your nose in the air. It is much more subtle. It's a false perception of G-d's blessings. If you were blessed with amazing parents. If you were gifted with a great mind. If you were lucky to find a Rebbi/ mentor/ coach. If G-d granted you wealth and its perks/ looks/ voice/ height/ wit/focus/ patience/ self-discipline/optimism/ sensitivity/ social savvy/ etc., it does not mean you are better. It means G-d holds you more responsible. *With great strength comes great responsibility.*

The question everyone wants an answer to during Sefirat Haomer is, how could 24,000 students be sentenced to paying with their lives

for a sin so commonly transgressed, for failing to show one another mutual respect?

R Boruch Mordechai Ezrachi explains that being the students of R Akiva, they were held responsible to emulate him. Being R Akiva's student was not a matter of social status. It was not just about getting in to his Yeshiva. If you were his student, you had a certain strength, and therefore, you were held responsible for living his values. R Akiva's students were unable to pass his Torah on to the next generation, because they were missing the pivotal trait of their great teacher.

Why specifically was this idea of respect, of humility, the essence of R Akiva's greatness?

Rachel gave up everything she had to marry Akiva the shepherd. After 24 years of learning, R' Akiva returned with 24-thousand students. Rachel came out to greet her husband in ragged clothing; she came and kissed his toes. Not knowing who she was and thinking that she was not mentally balanced, R Akiva's students started to push her away. R Akiva told them, "All of my Torah learning and yours is in her merit". Real Torah learning follows humility. This was R' Akiva's message to his students, but they just did not get it. R Akiva's humility was his greatest strength. That is how he surpassed, with a 40-year late start, all the great Rabbis of history. Because the Torah, which is similar to water, goes into the low places. Just like it only fits into an Ark that had all "half-measurements".

With great strength comes great responsibility. If you have something great about you, you are held responsible to use your greatness for great things. The reason why G-d allowed Isabel, the wife of Achab, to kill Navot for not giving them his family-inheritance vineyard (as found in Melachim)



was that Navot sinned by not using his beautiful voice, the gift that G-d gave him, to sing on the Holiday in the Bet Hamikdash. כבוד מהונך We read this to mean that if G-d blessed you with a beautiful voice, you should use it to honor G-d. (Rashi Mishlei 3;9) Yalkut Shimoni Ki Tisa 404) It is your responsibility to serve G-d with the gifts He gives you. Not to be haughty because of your strengths.

As we get ready to accept the Torah, achieving humility is the first step. ונפשי כעפר לכל תהיה G-d, Make my soul like the dust of the earth before all. *And then* open my heart in Your Torah. To accept the Torah we need to become one, a united people. ויהן שם ישראל נגד ההר. And there is no greater way than becoming one nation than by using your greatness to make others great.

THE SIGN OF BELIEF

In order for a coach to be a good coach, a Rabbi to be a good Rabbi, a parent to be a good parent, and a boss be a good boss, he needs to look at his client, student, child, employee, as if they are wearing an invisible sign around their neck. The sign reads, in big, red, bold letters, “Please! Believe in me!”

Our Rabbis teach, לעולם יאכל אדם וישתה, פחות ממה שיש לו; וילבש ויתכסה, במה שיש לו; ויכבד אשתו ובניו יותר ממה שיש לו. *A person should eat and drink on a lower standard than what is within his means, dress in accordance with what he has, and honor his wife and children with food and clothing even beyond his ability.* R’ Chaim Shmuelevitz explains this. When Daddy provides Mom and the kids with their needs on a higher standard than he is technically able to, this is not wasting money, but making a great investment. For, when the family gets a respectable standard of food and clothing from their father, they believe in him – they are confident that he is capable. They say to themselves, *Papa, we believe in you!* And that is one of the greatest resources a person can have. That the people in your life believe in you.

Unfortunately, though, this works two ways. In this week’s Parasha, we learn how badly negative beliefs can affect us.

איש איש אל כל שאר בשרו לא תקרבו לגלות ערוה אני ה' *No man shall come near to any of his relatives for marital relations; I am G-d.* (Vayikra 18 6).

What is the boundary that the Torah made for this statement? A man shall not come near?... From here, we learn that Yichud, remaining together alone in a secluded area, is forbidden. Even with one’s sister, one’s daughter and mother-in-law (under certain circumstances). Why? Because people who see the two in seclusion and do not know that they are related may get the wrong idea. A person shall not “shmooze” with a woman in the marketplace, even if she is his wife. And certainly, not with another woman, for people may interpret this negatively. A man should not walk behind his wife in the marketplace, and surely not behind another woman – for people may misinterpret it. (See Avot dR’ Natan Perek B)

I always thought yichud is forbidden as a boundary, a prevention. I always thought that the problem with shmoozing with the opposite gender is that you might get too close. But R’ Natan taught me that I have the wrong p’shat; I totally misunderstood. *It’s because of what other people might think.*

Isn’t this a little extreme or somewhat fanatic, to care so much what other people think?



Whatever they say is not my problem!?! Good question. Even though scientifically, this doesn't make sense, mathematically, it does not add up, this belief stuff somehow greatly impacts our lives.

R' Yochanan said, Better to walk behind a lion, than to walk behind a woman. (Rashi – A forbidden woman.) Better to walk behind a woman than to walk behind idolatry. (Rashi – one might stray after the idolatry and become an Apikoros). Better to walk behind idolatry than to walk behind the town's only synagogue where the townspeople are praying, and not enter. (Rashi – For then, he looks like a kofer, a nonbeliever, for he stands outside the shul and does not enter.) (See Eirubin 18b)

Why are we to take greater caution not to give a wrong impression than to risk straying after idolatry?

What people believe about you, and what you believe in yourself, are actually predictions of your performance. *What you expect is what you get!* To take control of your life, you need to believe in yourself, to expect from yourself the best. A famous study proves this point : A teacher informed her successor that two actually mediocre pupils were, in fact, outstanding. Instead of getting B- marks, the two finished the year with A+. Because humans are “wired” to live up to expectations!

One of the greatest secrets behind self discipline is belief in yourself. How you perceive yourself can change the position you are in towards sin. If you are too haughty, you need some reminders to humble yourself. If your self esteem or self worth is low, you need to build yourself back up.

The Mishna in Avot says, *הסתכל בשלשה דברים, ואי אתה בא לידי עבירה – דע מאין באת ולאן אתה הולך ולפני מי את עתיד ליתן דין וחשבון . מטפה סרוחה... למקום עפר רמה ותולעה... לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה. Focus on three things, and you will not come to sin. Know where you came from, from a putrid drop (of seed). Know where you going, to a place of worms (the grave). And know in front of Whom you are going to give accounting, in front of the King of Kings, Blessed be He. (Avot 3; 1)*

This is the secret recipe for humility, so that you won't get anywhere near sin. R' Chaim Volozhin, gives us the alternate route to stay away from sin. R Chaim points to a 'mantra' of R' Akiva, later in the chapter.(3 14) *הביב אדם שנברא בצלם, הביבין ישראל שנקראו בנים למקום Beloved is man, for he is created in G-d's Image. Beloved are Yisrael, for they are called Sons of G-d. Beloved are Yisrael, that they were given a Kli Hemdah, the Torah, G-d's precious treasure.* This is the secret ingredient to internalize the belief in one's self, and to rebuild one's self perspective, so that he won't find himself in the position of sin.

Look at yourself as part of G-d's Image. You are irreversibly good; just take yourself seriously. You were given the Torah, G-d's treasure. You are a Ben Torah. You learn, or learnt, in Yeshiva. And G-d loves you with a special, fatherly love. Even if no one else believes in you, He does. א-ל אמונה. (Devarim 32 4) For if G-d did not believe in you, he would not keep you around.(See Yalkut Shimoni 942)

A GOOD HEART



The most important word I learnt since I started coaching is the word resourcefulness. Tony Robbins, the world's leading coach says, *When people fail to achieve, they often say they are missing resources like time, money, people and so on. Yet, the top achievers in the world know that resources are never the problem; the real problem is a lack of resourcefulness.* What is resourcefulness? Resourcefulness is the ability to find quick and clever ways to overcome difficulties. It is a skill or talent for making the most out of what you have, so that you reach your greatest accomplishments.

As a coach, I never gave bad advice. Because a good coach *never* gives advice. The Hebrew word for advice is עצה. Yet the Hebrew word for resourcefulness is תושיה. The job of the coach is to challenge the client with a good, open ended, question so that the client comes up with an answer to a question by being resourceful, tapping into "resourcefulness". The coach is not supposed to be wiser than the client, telling the client what or what not to do. Rather, a coach who is doing his job is a coach who unveils the resourcefulness of his client.

What is this word Tushiah? לִי-עֲצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָה: (Mishlei 8) *To me is advice and resourcefulness.* The Torah is called Tushiah. *When G-d created the world, He consulted with the Torah, whose name is Tushiah. And the Torah said, Master of the World, if there is no army, if there is no camp to the King, over what is He King? And if there is no Nation praising the King, where is His honor? The Master of the world heard, and it was sweet to Him. The Torah said, HKBH consulted with me to create the world as it says, לִי-עֲצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָה. To me is advice and resourcefulness.* (Pirkei D R Eliezer 3) The Torah did not give advice. It asked G-d a power question.

In Mishlei, we find again that Torah is Tushiah. (2;7) יִצְפֹּן לְיִשְׂרָאֵל תוֹשִׁיָה R Eliezer asked R Yehoshua to explain this passuk to him. He said to him, "My son, from the time a person is created in his mother's womb, the Torah that he is going to learn is hidden for him". A person has hidden inside him his portion of Torah, his way of understanding its truth. It just needs to be tapped into. Resourcefulness.

What is the tool that makes it possible to tap into this resourcefulness?

R Yochanan Ben Zakai told five of his students to go out and find the right path a person should choose for himself. R Elazar Ben Arach's answer was, a good heart. And R Elazar unique strength was that he was מְעִיין במתגבר a bubbling spring. An endless source of Torah knowledge.

What is a good heart? What is a bad heart? We are obviously not referring to the blood pump in the torso. Rather, a good heart is referring to the spiritual component in the body that is responsible for love, friendship, hate, and cruelty. This spiritual entity is connected to and 'pumps energy' to the whole body, just like the heart pumps blood to the whole body. A good heart is a heart with no negativity, no hatred or harbored resentfulness or anger, no haughtiness or jealousy. Such a heart is capable of all the resourcefulness in the universe, and is a potential source of endless Torah knowledge.

It is interesting. From the day of Lag BaOmer onward, we cease to mourn R Akiva's 24,000 students. Why? Because day 33 is the day between the words לב and 32 טוב. is the numerical value of Lev – heart. Tov's numerical value is 17, and there are 17 days left to the Omer from day 32 on. 33 is the



beginning of a good heart. From this point of the Sefirah onward, the character refinement focuses on improving one's heart. The Or Hachaim splits the 48 ways to acquire Torah into three groups. The last group, the last 16 are days that are related to the last sixteen of the 48 ways to acquire Torah, and these ways are character refinement. We can notice how when R' Shimon Bar Yochai refers to his students, he calls them Chevraya, friends. This good heart was what empowered R' Shimon to tap into his part of Torah, which ended up becoming the Zohar.

And this was the answer of R Elazar Ben Arach. The way that a person should choose, the path leading to becoming a Torah scholar, is not acquiring more tools. It is to improve one's character. Because when you have a good heart, you have infinite internal capacity for Torah knowledge. Ever wonder how R Akiva, who shared the Alef Bais book with his son in school at the age of 40, was able to outdo all the Rabbis of his generation? How did Rachel, his wife, recognize his potential and know that she believed in him, when he was still a shepherd??

Rachel saw in him the good heart. And once someone's heart is perfect, polished, and pure, the Torah fits right in! It fits like a glove. Of course, with Rabbi Akiva it needed to drip-drop; it needed an uninterrupted 24-year learning streak. But Rabbi Akiva's heart was so good that he was able to tap into his resources and bring out endless Torah knowledge.

There are so many aspects of a good heart. Appreciation. Happiness. Contentment. Humility. Patience. To name just a few. The Talmud teaches why the Torah is called Tushiah. For it weakens (from the word Mateshet) a person's negative desires and perspectives. (Sanhedrin 26b) King Solomon tells us, לְתַאֲוָה יִבְקֹשׁ נַפְרָד בְּכָל-תּוֹשִׁיָּהּ יִתְגַּלֵּעַ One who seeks desires will become a loner, and in all of his Torah, he will become wrong. When you are not content, when you believe you deserve more, when you are not happy, when you want something and you can't wait for it, your heart is not a good heart. And not only do you lose your friends, but you lose your resourcefulness and learning capacity as well.

THE MITZVAH OF TACT

Subtle or seemingly minor grammatical changes can give a completely new meaning to words. The laws of dikduk of the Hebrew language are extremely important, and unfortunately, most people who know Hebrew neither learn them nor know them. A common mistake people make about Lashon Hakodesh is believing that it can be translated literally into English. When I teach Hebrew to American yeshiva students in Israel, I offer them a thousand dollars if they can tell me the English meaning of a word in Hebrew they say all the time. The word אַת.

There is no translation for the word אַת. The word is not there to mean something, but to link an active verb with a noun. וַאֲהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' וַאֲהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' וַאֲהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' *And you should love Hashem, your G-d.* Why do you need the word אַת there? The word אַת means nothing. It is used directly after an active verb to link it to its object. תְּבִיא אֶת הַכִּסֵּא *Bring the chair.* תִּשְׁתֶּה אֶת הַמַּיִם *Drink the water.*

This one word, the word אַת, or the lack of it, can change the whole meaning of a sentence. For example, the passuk וַאֲהַבְתָּ לְרַעַךְ כְּמוֹךְ אֲנִי



ה', *And you should love your friend like yourself, I am G-d.* If the meaning was supposed to be that one should love others as much as he loves himself, then the verse should have read *ואהבת את רעך כמוך*, *And you should love your friend like you love yourself.* Instead of the *את* rule, the passuk inserts a *ל*, which means, "And you should love to your friend like you love yourself." How do we explain this? (see Maharsha, Shabbat 31a)

The Torah is not telling us to love our friend the same amount that we love ourselves, for it also says, *וזי אחיד עמך*. And Rabbi Akiva learns from here, *חייך קודמים לחיי חבירך* (Bava M. 88b). *Your life comes first, before your friend's.* But the Torah is telling us something else. Hillel explains it *דעלך סאני אל תעשה לחברך*: that which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend. (Shabbat 31a) And this complements what is said in the beginning of the passuk, *לא תקום ולא תטר* *Do not take revenge, do not hate in your heart.* But you do not have to love him like yourself. You just shouldn't do to him what is hateful to you. Put yourself in his place. Try to understand him and make up excuses for him, like you would want others to make up excuses for your own shortcomings, and pardon *you*. And this is the secret to overcoming the nearly unstoppable drive of revenge and hatred. The only way to understand it is by thinking out of the box, detaching yourself from thoughts of what he has done to you, and reminding yourself that you, also, do wrong. You would not want someone to repay you, even if it is deserved, for your wrongdoing. (ר' יוסף בכור שור. A student of Rabbeinu Tam.)

If you look through Talmud, you will notice that the rule of *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*, *Love your friend like yourself*, is mentioned regarding very strange laws. For example. How Bet Din carry out a death sentence on a person who is legally deserving of it. The court makes great effort to find the least painful way of meting

out the necessary punishment required by law, because of the passuk *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*. *What?! But he is not my friend! He is a Rasha!* The point is the same, though. We are not saying, here, that you have to love him like yourself; we are saying that you have to feel with him, empathize with him, out of the box. How would you feel, if you were in his place, if *you* were the one who stepped out of line? And you would not want to be meted out the punishments you deserve, to the extent that you deserve them.

The other law that the Talmud learns from this passuk is regarding your wife. Not that you have to love her like yourself – something that is impossible – but that you have to feel with her, understand what she is feeling. Don't do to her what you would not want to be done to you. For example, respect her privacy. Don't put her in a situation where you may discover something that you don't like about her (see Niddah 17a). Don't put her into the position where you are married to her, but do not love her. (Kiddushin 41a) A woman who feels that her husband does not love her would prefer to end her life!

One of the secrets of a happy marriage is that each partner fulfills his duty: the woman has to make sure that her husband is happy to come home to see her, and the man has to make sure that she is sorry to see him leave. For this, you need to think out of the box, out of *your* box. There is actually a word that we use in English that describes these duties, and most of us do not know what it means. The word is tact.

What does tact mean, in English? Tact is behavior that shows you are sensitive to how another person feels in a given situation. Tact is a keen sense of what to say or do to avoid giving offense; it is a skill in dealing with difficult or delicate situations. It is a kind of mind reading, of what is appropriate, tasteful, or aesthetically pleasing. It's the gift of saying

the right thing, because you understand what the situation calls for.

Abraham Lincoln once said that tact is the ability to describe others as they see themselves. Bad taste is simply saying the truth, before it should be said. Tact is the art of making a point, without making an enemy. No tact is doing someone a favor, while reminding him that you are doing him a favor.

Even in honoring parents, if you are not tactful, you do not earn any mitzvah, no matter how hard you try. If you make your parents feel that you are going out of your way for

them, that is the worst feeling you can give them. The amount that you went out of your way for them does not come close to how much they went out of their way for you. And the last thing any parent wants is to *feel* they are on the receiving end of their children, the ones that they always gave to. (Kiddushin 31a)

We have a mitzvah to acquire this nature called tact. ואהבת לרעך כמוך. And if tact is a mitzvah, that means that tact is a learnable skill. And it is one of the most central mitzvot in the Torah.

REPROACHING THE SINFUL RIGHTEOUS

A certain psychologist was concerned as to exactly how to respond to a patient who confesses his sin, looking for acceptance and understanding. *“On the one hand, if I do a “blame shift” or lighten the severity of the sin, allowing the patient to feel that he **could** face himself in the mirror, then I may be transgressing the mitzvah of giving rebuke. And if I tell him that he was wrong, then things could get much worse. The solution I found so as not to be sitting by passively while the person is pouring out a litany of his transgressions is to ask him if he thinks that what he did was the right thing to do. Then, I show him genuine respect for coming and telling – admitting – his failures and mistakes. This somehow helps the person feel comfortable and not embarrassed to see me even after therapy.”*

Many times we hear about the mitzvah of giving rebuke and wonder: should I be saying something to the child? Should I tell the person just how bad his/her actions are?

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 31a) tells us that the repetition of the words הוכח תוכיח , *rebuke and rebuke*, comes to teach that one must rebuke even one hundred times! There are

different ways to understand this. One approach is that sometimes the person giving the rebuke is not worthy of saying what needs to be said. And at other times, the person who sinned is not ready to hear what he is supposed to hear. It may be that only after one hundred times both prerequisites can be met: that a person can actually say what needs to be said to the person who really needs to and can hear it.

This is an interesting twist on that piece of Talmud. However, I have found the following to be very valuable. The passuk says הוכח תוכיח : Rebuke your friend, and do not bring sin upon yourself because of it. This can be interpreted to mean that if you do **not** give rebuke, **you** are guilty of sin. When understood on a basic level, this can seem stressful. However, there is a deeper meaning here. The words ולא תשא עליו חטא also mean “do not put a sin **on him**”. The Chavot Yair (also see Zohar) explains this to mean that when one gives rebuke, he should not let the person feel that he is a רשע, a wicked person. Rather, he should say things that can uplift him – “such acts are not befitting either for you or for your level of character”. Do not make him

feel as if he is a sinner; rather, that he is a righteous person who has sinned. An external act – ולא תשא עלינו חטא – that is not to be identified with the one who performed it. Labeling a person with a title of “sinner” or

רשע causes the person to feel disabled, disarmed and depressed.

HOW HOLY ARE YOU?

Take out a minute to answer the following questions: How holy are you? What was the holiest moment you felt in your life? Who was the holiest man you ever met and got to know?

This is the type of question that many of us have never thought about. While I was writing this article, I posed these questions to someone, and this was his reply. *“The holiest moment of my life was when I came to ninth grade dormitory yeshiva and experienced great difficulty in the new surroundings. I prayed to G-d with all my heart, and I felt that a certain prayer that I made, with fervor and tears, had pierced the heavens and was answered. When a person reaches a holy point, he comes back to himself, he connects with himself. He reaches out to the person he should be.*

“The holiest man I ever met was my ninth grade rabbi. He was not necessarily the smartest or most knowledgeable in Torah, but he was holy. He was holy because he was separated from this world, and had more self control (than other people). He was not only realizing the truth – he was the truth. His התבטלות, self-deprecation, to Hashem in his actions, thoughts and emotions all gave me this holy feeling about him.”

These words struck me. I did not think that common people thought about this question or connected holiness to their life story. Parashat Kedoshim starts off with exactly this topic: the commandment to become holy. However, there is a difference of opinion as to exactly how we understand this and to what it is

referring. The Ramban learns that holiness is the act of separating oneself from overindulgence in permissible pleasures. Rashi learns here differently. Rashi understands that when the Torah tells us that one should be holy, it says so right after discussing forbidden marital relations. The way for one to become holy, according to Rashi, is through refraining from such relations and from anything that may bring one to such a position. This includes keeping one’s eyes from seeing things that can lead us astray – refraining from thoughts that may bring one to temptation. According to Rashi, this is what holiness is about- a clear mind from such thoughts and a lifestyle where we do our utmost to avoid being associated in any way with unhealthy, forbidden desires.

The question, though, is obvious. Why is it that only those refraining from this specific transgression merit holiness? When someone does not steal or does not kill and refrains from anything even remotely associated with such behavior – why does that not make him holy? And why, just by **refraining** from doing what the Torah considers abomination and unholy, does one become holy?

R’ Yerucham Levovitz, zt”l, explains that there is a great difference between refraining from stealing and refraining from forbidden marital pleasures. The desire for marital pleasure is one that every healthy human being has inside him from the minute when he is born; it grows and develops throughout all the stages of life. It is a great thing for a person to

overcome this powerful, almost irresistible drive, and therefore, one can merit a level called holiness by the Torah through doing so. Refraining from a desire to steal or kill will not render one holy, for it is something that is not an inborn, human desire. The antonym of lust is holiness!

THE ART OF BECOMING THE BEST VERSION OF YOURSELF

Parashat Acharei Mot, opens with the discussion of how Nadab and Avihu died while inappropriately entering the Mishkan, and how Aharon and all future Kohanim Gedolim are to serve on Yom Kippur in the Holy of Holies and remain alive. Acharei Mot is also the Torah portion read on Yom Kippur. The Be'er Heitev, mentions the Zohar and Arizal, that someone who cries with tears because of the loss and death of Aharon's sons on Yom Kippur, is promised that G-D WILL FORGIVE ALL OF THEIR SINS, AND THEIR SONS WILL NOT DIE IN THEIR LIFETIME. (O"H 621a)

R Chaim Shmulevitz asks, how are we expected to cry for the loss of Aharon's sons, no matter how great they were. Even for very close relatives, people eventually stop crying, ten years, 20 years, 50 years later. גזירה על המת (See Moed K. 19a) שישתכח מן הלב So how are we supposed to feel bad for the loss of Nadab and Avihu? Also, one can ask, how are we supposed to feel bad over the loss of the 24,000 students of R' Akiva during the days of Sefirat HaOmer?

R. C. Shmulevitz brings the part of Talmud that brings shivers down my spine. When R' Eliezer ben Hurkenus got sick, R' Akiva and his friends came to visit him. (R' Eliezer B. H. was originally R' Akiva's teacher and one of the greatest Rabbis ever. He was initially a student of R' Yochanan Ben Zakai, a student of Hillel, but later became a Shamai school

From here, it is apparent that if a person does not actively, consciously work on restraining himself from these specific things, his natural penchant – that of man – is to be corrupt in these matters.

student. He argued with all the other Rabbis and proved them his halachic position by bringing G-d on his side by showing how nature will reverse as proof of his opinion. Still, R' Yehoshua and the other Rabbis outnumbered R. Eliezer. Under the guidance of R' Gamliel, head of the Rabbis of the day, R' Akiva was sent to inform R' Eliezer, in the gentlest way possible, that from that moment on, R' Eliezer is to be excommunicated. See B. Metziah 59a-b). Now, as R' Eliezer's life was ending, he told the rabbis who came to visit him about the torturous deaths they would endure. R' Akiva asked, "What type of death is waiting for me?" R' Eliezer said in his Ruach Hakodesh, "Yours will be the worst death of all." Rashi explains, "Because since your heart is the most open heart to learn Torah, and you could have learned so much more Torah from me." And alas, R' Akiva, at the age of 119, had one of the most brutal deaths of mankind, his flesh pulled off his body with metal rakes and weighed in the marketplace. (Sanhedrin 68a)

How could R' Akiva be punished for not learning more Torah?!? Wasn't R Akiva the greatest rabbi we ever had? Didn't Moshe Rabbenu ask G-d that R' Akiva is more appropriate to receive the Torah than himself? (See Menachot29b) Nonetheless, R' Akiva is punished for not learning the Torah he could have learned from R' Eliezer B. H. R' Akiva was the conduit to pass the Oral Torah on to

future generations. He was held accountable for not learning the Torah of R' Eliezer, being the level he was on.

Even if you are a shepherd and the best shepherd you could be, maybe you can be a R' Akiva? And even if you are a R' Akiva, maybe there is more you could be? Even Shmuel the prophet, who was equal to Moshe and Aharon put together, (מִשָּׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וְשְׁמוּאֵל בְּקִרְיָאִי,) but Shmuel started off as an average, B, student, “not smart and not dumb.” (See Berachot 31b) To show that no matter how average and below you might be, you are held accountable to learn your best, to be your best, because you never know how great you can become.

This is how a person can cry and feel bad for the loss of the sons of Aharon, and for the loss of the 24,000 students. Nadab and Avihu, were in some ways, closer to G-d than Moshe and Aharon. (See Rashi Vayikra 10;3) Imagine if we would not have lost Nadab and Avihu, how much they could have impacted us until today, just like we are still affected by Moshe Rabbeinu till today! Crying over the loss of these great men is, in essence, crying over how great WE could have been. And if we regret and cry over not becoming the greatest we

Selfie Steps to becoming the best version of yourself:

1. Get yourself the best education, read and learn the best sefarim and books, and surround yourself with the best Rabbis and mentors. Ignorance is bliss, only regarding materialistic pleasures. If you don't know, you are not missing out. But when it comes to spirituality, personal development, and anything else important, ignorance is **not** bliss. As Chafetz Chaim teaches in the introduction to Mishna Berura 3, if you do not constantly learn the laws of Shabbat, you are most probably desecrating the Shabbat. If you do not constantly learn the laws of Lashon Hara, you are most probably speaking Lashon Hara. Coronavirus has taught us the hard way that ignorance creates diseases and pandemics. Ignorance destroys cities. Ignorance of nutritional facts of what you eat and what a healthy lifestyle is dependent on will shorten your life. Ignorance makes it impossible for you to retire or for you to help set up your children to succeed in life. Ignorance is NOT bliss. What you don't know will not only hurt you. It will tragically affect your life. What you don't know will leave your life empty. We are affected by whatever we know and more affected by what we don't know.

could be on Yom Kippur, G-d will forgive all of our sins, and our sons will learn the value of life!

All of the Oral Torah we have today is what we have from the remaining five students of R' Akiva, R. Meir, R. Shimon Bar Yochai, R' Yehuda Bar Ilay, and others. Imagine how much greater we could have been if the other 24,000 would have remained! We are not feeling bad about the people we lost. We are to feel bad for the people WE could have become.

Judaism teaches that there are two types of regret. דין וחשבון. Judgment and accounting. There is a regret over things that we've done wrong. דין. And there is regret for who we could have been. חשבון. Our Rabbis teach that the greatest rebuke at the end of days is that G-d shows each person how great they could have become. יוסף קטנן של שבטים היה ולא היו יכולים לעמוד בתוכחתו, הה"ד ולא יכלו אחיו לענות אותו כי נבהלו מפניו, לכשיבא הקדוש ברוך הוא ויוכיח כל אחד ואחד לפי מה שהוא, שנאמר (תהלים נ) אוכיחך ואערכה (Breshit R. Vayigash) When the brothers saw how great Yosef, who was the smallest of them, became, the Tribes could not answer that rebuke of how they did not reach how great *they* could have become.

2. Leaders in personal development teach that we are affected by our dreams and pulled by our vision of the future. The best version of you, the you that lives a life that is full of inspiration and motivation, is the you that lives by design and not by default. The greatest you “happens” when you live according to your greatest imagination, most significant goals and values and thrive, and not just manage to survive. Imagination is the human resource that helps us build, invent, develop, cure, and anything else you can imagine. This is one explanation of what it means that man is created in G-d’s Image. G-d does not have an image, for He is limitless and endless. But He imagines and creates, סוף דבר במחשבה תחילה, and in that way, we are similar to Him. Most successful people usually have a “long-term perspective.” They think 5 – 10 years in advance, and they are not skimpy on their dreams; they live with their most significant purpose and are therefore ready to adapt to any change thrown at them, as they are magnetized to their goals. As King David tells us in Tehillim, וְהָיָה כְּעֵץ שֶׁתּוֹלַע עָלָיו פִּלְגָּי מַיִם אֲשֶׁר פְּרִיּוֹ יִמָּן בְּעֵתוֹ וְעֵלְהוּ לֹא-יִבּוֹל וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר-יִצְטָח יִצְטָח: They are likened to an oak tree, with a firm foundation, they know where they are going, they know how to get there, and no storm or winter can take them down.
3. Unfortunately, most people believe that becoming the greatest you can be, depends on hard work alone. *This is far from the truth.* It is true that whatever we practice most in life, we will be the best in that thing. But if you don’t love what you are doing, you will become the best at what you hate. Most people live their lives with the rush, rush, rush, busy being busy, not being ruthlessly honest enough to ask themselves, “Busy doing what? Rushing for what purpose?” Most people get stuck in the wheel of life: Seek work to eat, seek to eat to have energy, and seek energy to work more, and around we go again.
4. To become the best you can be, you need enough courage and optimism to live with the uncertainty that you will reach your “high steaks” goals. You need to be able to overcome the fears of “What if I can’t make it and fail? What if I waste my time?” Studies say that we should have dreams that we think we have only a 60% chance of success, not 100%. The fear that if I fail, everything I ever worked for will be for nothing is precisely the thing that you need to keep you motivated!

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