

Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE Rosh Hashanah 5783/2022

HOLY HABITS

(Rosh Hashanah, First Day)

About two weeks ago, my amazing wife Jill - trying to help her stressed-out rabbi husband - shared some beautiful Torah and a book she had just read, which she thought would be good for a Rosh Hashana talk. The Torah and the book were about habit formation - how to get rid of bad habits and how to develop and keep the right ones. I loved the idea and thought it was such an appropriate topic for Rosh Hashana, but honestly, I didn't think I could personally speak on this topic. I have just not been a very good role model when it comes to habits lately. This summer I began noshing salsa and chips late at night, not getting enough sleep, and watching way too many Instagram reels. I still get upset about things that should not bother me, and I am perpetually late to appointments and meetings. So, at first, I said - there's no way I can speak about developing good habits this Rosh Hashana. Then I thought to myself: who better to speak on this issue than someone struggling themselves? So, whatever I share with you today is not something I am teaching from a place of mastery or success, but rather something I'm also working on and from which I hope you can benefit. So, thank you Jill and my friend Rabbi Efreim Goldberg for some of the Torah ideas and to James Clear, author of "Atomic Habits" which is a must-read.

Changing a habit or any behavior or quality within our personality is not as easy as you think. The founder of the Mussar movement (ethical development) Rabbi Yisrael Misalant famously said that it is easier to master 100 pages of Talmud than to change one *midah* (quality) in our personality. Change looks easier than it is. People always on time often say to people who always come late: "hey, just come on time" or to others who get upset too easily: "no need to raise your voice" or "just be more patient". Easier said than done. The problem is we are creatures of habit, and the momentum of our default bad habits carry us through our day which is mostly made up by our habits: studies show that 45 percent of our reported daily activities are habitual! And since habits form outside the realm of thought, we are often unaware of how much we do in life is controlled by them. The good news is that the flip side is also true. If we develop good habits, whether it's brushing our teeth before we go to bed or beginning our day with prayer - that also becomes our default, and then our lives change for the better. The great Torah Sage Rav Yitzchak Hunter (1906 -1980) taught that after the creation of the earth, the next most miraculous thing is the creation of a new habit.

So how do we make changes in our habits?

What the Torah and secular literature seem to both say is by getting to the root, understanding *why* we do what we do, and ultimately *how we look at ourselves*. Referring to the mitzvah to eradicate the corrupt ways of the Canaanite nations who inhabited the land of Israel, the Torah says: *Abeid Teabdun* - "Destroy, destroy" their institutions of idol worship and the corrupt behavior which surrounded it. Why the double language "destroy, destroy"? Rashi answers: *abaid v'achar kach teabdun* - destroy and afterwards destroy again - to eradicate an immoral behavior you can't just do away with the surface activity, you must get down to its root cause and destroy that too. You can keep cutting weeds all day long, but if you don't get to the roots, the weeds will just grow back. So, asking ourselves: What is it about me, what is it about my personality, my identity that is at the root of this poor habit? So, if the example is always coming late, do I come late because I see myself as a lazy person, or is it that I view my day as being about me and therefore I don't really think how me coming late affects other people. James Clear in Atomic Habits writes that true and lasting behavioral change only takes place when you experience an *identity change*, when the new habit becomes part of your identity. It's not just that you start coming on time, but you start seeing yourself as a different person. If the reason you come late is laziness - start viewing yourself as a motivated person. If you come late because you are not thinking about others - start seeing yourself as a considerate and thoughtful person. Then it will start feeling out of character for you - a motivated person to be lazy or out of character for you - a considerate person to disregard the feelings of others. That's how you stop being late - not just once or twice, but a permanent change in behavior - by looking at ourselves differently.

And it works the same way when trying to create positive behaviors. If I want to read more books in the coming year, the goal is not to simply read a book but see myself as a reader. The goal is not to run a marathon but to become a runner. It's the difference between focusing on the verb versus the noun, so it's not just - I donated generously to some cause in which I believe, but I gave *because* I'm a generous person. I didn't just do a mitzvah, no I'm a spiritual person and therefore I do mitzvot. Become the noun, identify with the personality type, and then the verb, and the action will follow. Our behaviors are reflections of our identity.

When we identify with a certain value, we are more likely to engage in behaviors that reflect those values. People who vote are more likely to believe in voting, people who go consistently to the gym - more likely to value being fit and healthy. The focus is not on the dieting (the verb) but on being a healthy person (the noun) - the behaviors are just a means to get there. And it works the other way too: it's *pastnisht* (inappropriate) for someone who considers themselves a healthy person to nosh late at night, or someone who sees themselves as an athlete to go weeks without hitting the gym ... or for a person of reason to fly off the handle when they get angry. If you see yourself as a moral, you're less likely to steal or cheat on your taxes, and if you see myself as a spiritual person, then you're also more likely to follow spiritual practices like meditation and Torah study, observing Shabbat or praying on a regular basis. The only question is how do we see ourselves?

This lesson is powerfully demonstrated by the biblical figure Joseph, who after being sold as a slave down to Egypt, found himself in the home of the aristocrat Potifar. And every day when Mr. Potifar was out of the home the very attractive Mrs. Potifar tried to seduce Joseph. Here was Joseph, young and handsome, alone in a foreign country, away from his family and somehow no matter how much she tried, Joseph refused her advances. What gave Joseph the strength to not give in? The Sages teach it was because he saw the "dmot yonko shel aviv" - the "image of his father" Jacob. My teacher Rabbi Riskin suggested this could mean that since Joseph was in a wealthy home, it may have been the first time he ever saw a mirror and therefore the first time he saw his own reflection which resembled his father, and so Joseph saw his father and heard him say: "Joseph - you can do this or Joseph - you're better than this". But another way of reading the phrase is to break up *dmot yonkno* - "an image of himself" from *shel aviv*, "of his father", meaning Joseph remembered the positive image that his father had of him. The affirming image his father raised him with gave Joseph the strength to withstand the temptation. His identity as a moral and upright person, nurtured by his father, was the root of his positive behavior.

If we have a positive vision of ourselves, we are more likely to behave in an upright manner. The proof of our identity is our behaviors: If you come to synagogue, or you pray every day - it's proof you are a spiritual person. If you study every day, it's proof you are studious. And it works the other way around too: if you have a low self-image, you will probably prove that to yourself through poor habits. That's why next week on Yom Kippur when we recite the *Viduy*, the confessional when we admit sins we've committed throughout the year, (ie-*Ashamnu, Bagadnu* ...) we never call ourselves sinners. We want to identify as good people who make mistakes and sin, but who are fundamentally good - which is what Jewish tradition teaches. This is not just psychology, it's also theology. We may sin at times, but fundamentally that's *not* who we are.

But what if we don't have a positive sense of self? What if we never had a parent like Jacob or some mentor who instilled a positive sense within us? Our generation struggle with self-esteem. Habits can also help with this because the most practical way to change the way you see yourself is to change *what you do*. And so, each time you learn a bit more about your Judaism, that is one step closer to seeing yourself as learned, each time you practice kindness, that's one step closer to becoming a kind person and each time you reach into your pocket to help someone less fortunate or support a worthy cause - you become a generous person - that's how we change our identity. And that is what Rosh Hashana is for - to decide the person we want to be in the coming year and to make prove it to ourselves through our habits and actions.

And here's some more good news. The kinds of actions we need to take to become new people in the coming year need *not* to be so dramatic. In fact, it's just the opposite. Research shows that the smaller the habit, the more likely it is to last and ultimately impact your identity. The Jewish Sages famously said (Chagiga 17) - *tafasta merubah lo tafasta* - if you try to take on too much you end up with nothing. Radical change generally does not last. Small and steady is the way to go. Small changes in our habits compound the same way money does. Clear gives an amazing example of a pilot

flying from LA to NYC and at takeoff, the pilot adjusts the nose of the plane just 3.5 degrees south - a tiny change. That slight change kept up over the hundreds of miles resulting in the plane landing, not in NY but Washington! Small changes over a long period of time are the way to go.

The problem is we dismiss small changes because we don't immediately see results. If you save a little money now, you're still not a millionaire. If you go to the gym three days in a row you can still feel out of shape. This also makes it easy to let a bad habit slide: if you eat unhealthy today, the scale doesn't move much. If you procrastinate a little now, there's usually time to finish it later. But like compound interest, over time you will see real change.

A rabbi friend shared that one of his congregants by the name of Karen was talking to one of her friends looking to figure out the role of Shabbat in her life. At the time, Friday nights and Saturdays were no different for her friend than any other day of the week. So, Karen said: "do something different for Shabbat. Light the candles every week, sit down to a nice dinner, make the Kiddush, and turn off the cell phone off even for just two hours. Just chose one thing - it doesn't have to be a big thing, but whatever it is stick to it!" Her friend chose Shabbat candles, which she did for a few months, and then of course she wanted more. Karen's friend added Shabbat Dinners and then eventually lunches, she started going to synagogue and now she is completely Sabbath observant! Little things sustained over a period of time add up.

And so, to recap: to get rid of a bad habit - *abaid taabdun*, we need to get to the root of why we do what we do, asking ourselves what is it about me, what is it about my personality, my identity that is at the root of this poor habit? And to adopt a new good habit - we need to improve our own sense of self and prove that new identity to ourselves through our actions and behavior. In a nutshell that's what Rosh Hashanah and the whole High Holiday season *is* about: what kind of people do we want to be in the coming year? Is it to be a more sensitive person, then - what act of *Chesed* can I now start doing? If it's to be a more religious person, what new mitzvah can I start observing? Or, if I see already see myself as a religious person, what area could use strengthening so my actions align with my self-perception? And finally, whatever actions we choose to add - remember: *tafasta meruba tafasta* - if you grab onto too much, you'll end up with nothing. Choose one mitzvah that pertains to your relationship with God: Shabbat, Prayer, maybe reciting a blessing before we eat and one mitzvah that pertains to your fellow human being: charity, acts of kindness, getting more involved in the MJE community. And no matter how little change you see in yourself after you start - don't give up. Change is happening, even if you don't feel it. This is especially true of prayer or any other mitzvah that may not resonate or move us, but the Kabbalah teaches that every mitzvah has an impact on the person observing the mitzvah and even on the entire cosmos - literally bringing the world closer to its spiritual source, to Hashem.

One final point: Environment. The greatest impact on habits is the people around us. Clear says nothing perpetuates a good or bad habit more than the tribe to which you belong. When you join a book club or a biking group it supports and sustains your reading and biking. The shared identity with others reinforces your personal identity and helps you sustain the desired habit. The Rambam in Hilchos Deos (Laws of Character Traits) wrote that it is natural for us to follow what those around us are doing, and so if we hang out with people who routinely badmouth their coworkers and friends, that's probably what we will start doing ourselves. But if we hang out with people who are kind and sensitive, who donate blood and volunteer for causes, that too will rub off on us. Choosing our friends is choosing our identity.

Clear says we tend to imitate the habits of three social groups: "the close" (family and friends), "the many" (the tribe) and "the powerful" (people of fame and prestige), and he recommends joining the tribe where your desired behavior is the norm. That's precisely why belonging to a community like MJE can be so helpful in developing the right habits. Not to toot our own horn, but MJE is a special place. We're a community of spiritual seekers, people looking to connect to something beyond ourselves and so hanging out with our tribe will enable you to pick up some good habits.

Let's use this Rosh Hashanah to envision the best version of ourselves and let's prove that new identity by ridding ourselves of some of our bad habits and creating some good ones for the coming year. And may new identity ultimately serve as a merit for God to bless us all with a year of good health, happiness, purpose, and meaning. Shannah Tova.