

Can A Person Change?

BASED ON RABBI YAACOV HABER AND THE OU PARDES PROJECT & THE MORASHA SYLLABUS

A central theme of the High Holidays is to take stock of our character traits and potential, and to make resolutions to refine our personality. In light of Divine judgment and the chance for forgiveness, we may be more motivated during the High Holidays than the rest of the year to attempt to improve our ways. In hope of repairing relationships with others, we ask their forgiveness and resolve to act better in the future. But is change really all that easy to accomplish? We can make all the resolutions we like, but can we really change?

How Would You Respond?

Scenario One

The jury on which you are serving is deadlocked. The defendant, accused of using and selling drugs, faces a long jail term. He says he's been clean for a long time, that he was framed by other dealers in the neighborhood. Witnesses for the prosecution say an addict never truly shakes an addiction. Your vote will set the defendant free or send him to jail. The evidence is inconclusive. Your decision depends on one factor – whether a onetime junkie can truly change. Do you believe he can? How do you vote?

Scenario Two

You are about to enter a business deal requiring a major financial investment, with a prominent businessman whom you have known for several years. You also know that the well-known businessman was convicted for fraud early in his career and was sentenced to a prison term. But a newcomer, also a prospective part of this deal, knows nothing of this man's criminal record. The prominent businessman has worked hard to clear his name since then, keeping a spotless record, contributing to many worthy causes, claiming that he has been rehabilitated since his foolish, youthful mistake. What advice do you give the newcomer? Do you mention the conviction? Do you consider that information confidential? Do you believe that the businessman has truly learned his lesson?

Scenario Three

After three months of dating the person you consider your bashert (your predestined life partner), you are about to become officially engaged. Your personalities click. You share common interests. But there is one problem. Your temper. You tend to fly off the handle and yell when you are under pressure. "That's me," you say. "My family is yellers." Your "bashert" will agree to the engagement only on condition – that you curb your temper. You want to do this, but don't know if you can. Is it possible to change a lifelong trait?

Sources for discussion:

Do we have the free will to change ourselves?

1. Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith, *Animals and Free Will*, Shmooze, pp. 82 -84

Human beings have much in common with animals. They eat, breathe and sleep; we eat, breathe and sleep. Are we different? Or is a human being just a walking, talking gorilla? A dog wakes up in the morning and decides what to consume first – his water or his Purina. A human being also wakes up and decides what to eat for breakfast – some cereal or a bagel.

Humans and animals both seem to make decisions. What is the difference? Do dogs worry about going on a diet? “My gosh,” cries Fido, “I’ve got to control this appetite!” Do they question whether it’s right to finish off the last drop of milk and not leave any for their kennel-mates? Does a dog wake up in the morning plagued with existential questions like, what is my purpose in life? Does he worry how he is making a difference with his life, or if he is actualizing his potential?

We do have a lot of things in common with animals, but free will is not one of them. Choosing your favorite ice cream or what to eat for breakfast is a matter of preference, not free will. Free will is the choice between good and evil. To exercise your free will, the choice must include a moral dimension and precipitate a struggle between right and wrong. Only mankind has the ability to discern right from wrong and to make moral judgments. It is this ability that makes human beings responsible for their actions.

When we hear the news of a shark attack, we don’t blame the shark. We know he’s just doing what comes naturally. We don’t suspect the shark chose to attack out of evil intent and really could have called upon his nobler instincts and spared his victim. But when a human being attacks, he is held accountable for his actions. A choice was made, and he is responsible.

Free will is mankind’s unique and crowning distinction. The Torah says that only mankind was created “in the image of God.” Yet God doesn’t have an image! It means that only mankind has the true freedom and independence that comes with the power of choice. In that way we resemble God, who is completely free and independent.

The next time you encounter a moral dilemma, use your free will. You can rise above your baser instincts and ennoble your life through choosing good. We have the choice to strive to be good, not animals. This is our unique responsibility.

2. Rambam (Maimonides), Mishnah Torah, Laws of Teshuva 5:2-3

Don't even consider that which the fools of the world say – that God decrees on a person from creation whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is not so. Every person has the potential to be as righteous as Moses, as wicked as Yeravam, wise, foolish, merciful, cruel, miserly, noble, or any other trait... God does not decree that a person will be good or bad. Accordingly, the sinner himself is at fault. He should weep and lament regarding his sins and the corruption he has brought to his soul...

Since the choice is in our hands and we have willingly done evil, it is upon us to repent and abandon our wickedness, for this too is in our hands. This is an important principle and is the foundation of the Torah and the mitzvot, as it is written, "Behold, I have presented before you today – life"; meaning, the choice is in your hands, and you have the ability to perform any acts that are humanly possible, good or bad.

Does having free will mean that it is easy to change?

3. Rav Tzadok HaCohen, Tzidkat Hatzadik, 130

Even though man has free choice, nevertheless he is not capable of changing his inner roots or being; as the Talmud says (Sanhedrin 44) a Jew even after he sins remains a Jew because his roots and very essence are holy. The Talmud also says in the name of Abaye, "We have been taught that a good person can never become evil." Similarly an evil person cannot become a good person. This however does not preclude change because through repentance and prayer one can invoke mercy from above and become an entirely new person. This becomes a new creation, ex nihilo.

4. Rav Yisroel Salanter, Birurei HaMidot

One should not say, "Whatever God has created is unchangeable"; nor should one say, "If He has planted within me bad character, how can I hope to uproot it?" This is not so. The character traits of a person can be conquered and even changed. We find that even animals can be tamed, their nature changed and their evil roots uprooted. So too, man himself has the strength to conquer his evil nature and even change it to good through study and habit.

What can we do if we have negative personality traits that are seemingly impossible to change?

5. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 156

Rabbi Chanina said to his disciples, "He who is born under the constellation of the sun will be distinguished...He who is born under Mars will be a shedder of blood."

Rav Ashi observed, “Either a surgeon, a thief, a slaughterer or a circumciser.” Rabbah said, “I was born under Mars.” Abaye retorted, “You too inflict punishment and kill.”

6. Vilna Gaon, Even Sheleima 1:7

Even one whose nature is evil should not go against his nature completely, for he will not succeed. He should rather channel his nature to a straight path. For example, if one was born under the constellation of Mars and his nature drives him to spill blood, he can channel his energy to the good. Instead of being a murderer he can become either a ritual slaughterer or a ritual circumciser. As the verse says, “Educate a child according to his traits; even when he is old he will not turn astray from it.” (Mishlei/Proverbs 22:6)

To what extent should we change?

7. The Vilna Gaon, Even Sheleimah, Chapter 1

Man was created in order to refine his negative character traits. If a person does not do this, then why is he alive?

8. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur I, p. 141.

Self-knowledge is the prerequisite for any self-improvement. One who does not know himself – for him the gates of self-improvement are shut tight. He will live his spiritual life in peace, he will fail as many fail, and will perform good deeds like every man of Israel – and God does not deny the reward of each individual. But a person of self-growth and truth he will not be.

Someone who reaches self-knowledge is forced by it to embark on a trail of fruitful labor and profound change, in behavior and in disposition.

9. Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, Rosh HaShanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit, Leviathan Press, p. 102

The issue on Yom Kippur (and throughout the year) is this: How do we correct the mistakes of our past and avoid repeating them in the future? If we can understand this, then we possess the key to unlocking an enormous reservoir of latent potential for greatness that would otherwise lie dormant.

This is teshuvah. The common translation of teshuvah is “repentance.” Again, a rather foreign sounding idea. The proper translation of the word teshuvah is “to return.” Teshuvah is an animated technique for locating the rationalizations that lie at the root of our mistakes: recognizing them, dealing with them, and eliminating them.

10. Based on Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway to Happiness, p. 378 and Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Morasha

When working on improving yourself, it is easy to become discouraged because you do not see sufficient progress. Keep trying and do not give up. Every small amount of improvement is a success (Rabbi Reuven Dessler; T'nuat HaMussar, Vol.V, p. 174).

Learn to appreciate even the most minute improvement. If you become angry one time less than before or with less intensity, that itself is improvement. If you speak a little more kindly to others, that is improvement. If your prayers are ever so slightly improved, that is improvement. The more pleasure you feel with each drop of improvement, the more likely you will keep trying to improve. Nor should you become discouraged by failure, for every time you fail, you will have learned something about yourself that can help you grow in the future.