
PERSONAL GROWTH

IN JUDAISM II

Making it Happen

This is the second Morasha shiur addressing personal growth in Judaism. In the first class, we saw that the Torah attaches great importance to the idea of personal growth and character refinement, which are fundamental parts of Judaism. In this class, we will explore the specifics of how to go about achieving personal growth. We will see that self-improvement is a lifetime endeavor to integrate the lessons learned from Torah study and mitzvah observance.

- Which hurdles might prevent us from actualizing our potential?
- Which strategies should be implemented to achieve personal growth?
- Where can one find concepts related to personal growth in Jewish texts?
- How can I jump-start and maintain a daily effort to improve my character?

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INTRODUCTION. TODAY IS THE GREATEST DAY OF YOUR LIFE!

The first Morasha shiur on personal growth established how critical personal development is to actualize our purpose in life. This class offers a framework and strategy for growth. How should we view the opportunity of each day to build toward this goal?

Today is the greatest day of your life, because today is the only day that exists. All your earlier days are part of your mind's memory bank. All the future days haven't occurred yet. So today just has to be the greatest day of your life. The way you experience the day will be different if you decide to view it as the greatest day of your life, right now. Today is the only day that you get to choose what you will think, say, and do today.

So think about it: What are some meaningful things you could think, say, and do – according to your reality – today, on this special day of your life?

Consider some small actions, taking a real step forward, that you could possibly do. Even if you don't actually do them today, thinking about doing them elevates you – today. We never get to choose the exact nature of each day. God will send us unique challenges every single day. So the exact challenges that you experience today will be experienced only one time. Today is the only day of your life that you will be able to excel in utilizing today ...

*People who strive for spiritual awareness will be able to keep growing and developing each day. (Based on Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Life is Now*, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 33-34 and Rabbi Reuvan Leuchter, *Morasha*.)*

OK, let's get to work ...

SECTION I. THE LABOR OF A LIFETIME

We have learned about the importance of personal growth and the goals for which we must strive. But how are these goals achieved? The process is not a simple one. Mending one's character flaws and negative dispositions is no easy task. The difficulty of making a true change in a person's inner nature is well-known. Mark Twain wrote in this spirit that "old habits can't be thrown out the upstairs window. They have to be coaxed down the stairs one step at a time." Although our goal is perfection, the Jewish approach is also to take one step at a time, continuing on a path of growth throughout one's life.

1. **Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, *Ohr Yechezkel (Darchei Avodah)*, p. 182 – It is easier to know the Talmud by heart than to uproot a single character trait.**

It is extremely difficult to uproot the force of negative character traits; as Rabbi Yisroel of Salant famously stated – it is easier to know the entire Talmud by heart than it is to uproot a single negative trait from its root. This is particularly so because we do not possess only one trait, but many, and each of them is deep and profound [and they are all connected to each other – observation from Rabbi Reuvan Leuchter]. Certainly then, the labor is great, without any measure.

קשה מאד עקירת כח המדות, ומפורסמים דבריו של הגרי"ם ז"ל כי קל יותר לידע ש"ס בעל פה מאשר עקירת מדה אחת משרשה, ובפרט כי לא רק כח מדה אחת בנו אלא מדות רבות ועמוקות [והם כולם קשורים זה בזה – הערת הרב ראובן לויכטר], וודאי שהמלאכה מרובה לאין שיעור.

Despite the difficulty involved in personal growth, the Torah teaches us that it is imperative for every person to constantly strive to grow.

2. Vilna Gaon, Proverbs 15:24 – The imperative for constant growth.

A person is called “one who is moving,” because he must always progress from one level to another. If he does not ascend, he will inevitably fall, Heaven forbid, for it is impossible for a person to maintain the same level of personal standing.

האדם נקרא הולך שצריך לילך תמיד מדרגא לדרגא ואם לא יעלה למעלה ירד מטה מטה ח"ו כי בלתי אפשר שיעמוד בדרגא חדא.

Despite the tremendous importance of devoting one's entire life to personal growth, no person should feel discouraged if he has failed to achieve any self-improvement until today. It is never too late to begin working on one's self – or to continue striving to improve, even if one has failed in past attempts.

3. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, Introduction to T'nuat HaMussar, p. 316 – It is never too late.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter once went to a shoemaker to have his shoes repaired. The hour was late and darkness had already descended. Noticing that the candle was burning out, the rabbi realized that the shoemaker might have trouble repairing the shoes in the dim light, and suggested that perhaps the work could wait till the next day. “Don't worry,” replied the shoemaker, “I can work very well by candlelight. As long as the candle burns, it is still possible to fix the shoes.”

Rabbi Yisroel immediately recognized the deep significance of the shoemaker's words, and repeated them over and over. As long as the candle burned, he could repair what was broken. Likewise, as long as the spark of life still flickers in a person, that person can still repair his ways. One should never despair.

מסופר על רבי ישראל מסלנט שהיה צריך לתקן את סנדלו. היתה זו שעת ערב מאוחרת ורבי ישראל תהה האם יוכל הסנדלר לעבוד בתנאי חושך, והציע לו שימשיך את מלאכתו למחר. “אל דאגה, רבי,” ענה הסנדלר. “אפשר לעבוד לאור הנר, וכל זמן שהנר דולק, אפשר עוד לתקן.”

רבי ישראל התרשם מאד מדבריו של האיש, וחזר עליהם שוב ושוב: “כל זמן שהנר דולק, אפשר עוד לתקן - כל זמן שהנשמה בקרבך, אתה יכול להתעלות ולתקן. אין מקום להתייאש.”

Once we understand that self-improvement is a lifelong task, we must realize that we should not think of it in grandiose terms. The proper way to improve oneself is to make slow but steady progress, constantly taking small steps and improving himself even in the most minute way.

4. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. II, p. 189 – Working with “small deeds.”

It is normal for a person who wishes to rectify the world to think of a grand method that encompasses great breadth, or of a global organization for peace or justice. Someone who wishes to mend himself also thinks of great and impressive actions of kindness or holiness. What completion can arise from small deeds, which barely require effort to accomplish?

כרגיל, אדם הרוצה לתקן את העולם חושב על שיטה החובקת זרועות עולם, או על אירגון עולמי לשלום או לצדק. הרוצה לתקן את עצמו חושב גם כן על מעשים גדולים וכבירים של חסדים או קדושה. אבל מעשים זעירים שאינם מכבידים כלל על האדם – איזו שלימות יכולה לצמוח מהם?

Yet, the truth is that a person is built specifically from small deeds. The practice of medicine serves to illustrate the point: The quantity of the active ingredient in a given medicine is tiny, perhaps one milligram. If the medicine would contain a larger amount of this ingredient, it would cause someone damage rather than heal him. He might even die. ...

This is the first principle of working on oneself: by no means should the method of labor be burdensome.

אולם, האמת כך היא: דווקא ממעשים קטנים נבנה האדם. ונקח לנו ראייה מחכמת הרפואה: הכמות של חומר מרפא בתרופה אחת היא זעירה עד מאד, אולי מיליגרם. אם התרופה היתה מכילה כמות יותר גדולה, היא היתה מזיקה לאדם במקום לרפאותו, ואולי היתה אפילו ממיתה אותו ...

זהו היסוד הראשון בעבודה המוסרית: אין לעסוק בשום אופן במעשים המכבידים עלינו.

Naturally, working on self-improvement cannot be expected to be easy. Self-improvement is difficult work and can often be strenuous. But it is also not meant to be overwhelming or even burdensome. The path to personal growth consists of baby steps. If you find that your own path toward personal growth seems like an impassable mountain, then you might just be setting your ambitions too high for the initial steps.

5. **Based on Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Gateway to Happiness, p. 378 and Rabbi Reuvan Leuchter, Morasha – If you feel that you are not making sufficient progress, do not become discouraged. Even tiny improvements are worthwhile.**

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 Reuvan 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.

The basis of this life long process of self-improvement is self-knowledge. Each person is different, and each has different areas of character to refine. That obviously means that each person's path to personal growth is different. In order to embark on that path, a person must first understand in which areas he needs to improve.

6. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur I, p. 141 – The beginning of personal growth is in profound self-knowledge.**

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.

בתחילת כל עבודה עצמית עומדת ההכרה העצמית. מי שלא זכה לה מעודו – שער העבודה הפרטית סגור בפניו. הוא יחיה בשלוה את חייו הרוחניים, ייכשל כאשר רבים נכשלים, יעשה מעשים טובים ככל אדם מישראל – ואין הקב"ה מקפח שכר כל בריה. בן-עליה ואיש אמת לא יהיה.

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.

מי שזוכה להכרת-עצמו, מוכרח על-ידה לבא לידי עבודה פוריה ולידי שינויים מעמיקים, בהנהגה ובמדות.

7. **Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot De'ot (The Laws of Conduct) 1:1 – Each person is different.**

There are many different types of conduct that a person can have, each person being different, and even far removed, from the other. One person might be quick to anger, while another is calm and never becomes angry, or perhaps only once every several years. One person might be exceedingly haughty, and another extremely humble. One person might be lustful, chasing perpetually after the fulfillment of his cravings, while another is of pure heart, and does not desire even the few things that the body requires. One man might covet wealth, remaining dissatisfied even with all the riches in the world ... another might spend and lose his money willingly and consciously. This is also the case with all other forms of conduct.

דעות הרבה יש לכל אחד ואחד מבני אדם וזו משונה מזו ורחוקה ממנו ביותר יש אדם שהוא בעל חמה כועס תמיד ויש אדם שדעתו מיושבת עליו ואינו כועס כלל ואם יכעס יכעס כעס מעט בכמה שנים ויש אדם שהוא גבה לב ביותר ויש שהוא שפל רוח ביותר ויש שהוא בעל תאווה לא תשבע נפשו מהלוך בתאווה ויש שהוא בעל לב טהור מאד ולא יתאוה אפילו לדברים מעטים שהגוף צריך להן ויש בעל נפש רחבה שלא תשבע נפשו מכל מומן העולם ... ויש שהוא מאבד כל ממונו בידו לדעתו ועל דרכים אלו שאר כל הדעות.

8. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur II, p. 178 – The need for intellectual discernment.**

Someone who wishes to develop his character traits must utilize the skills of intellectual astuteness. If in study of the Torah, such as the order of Nashim and Nezikin, a person must be intellectually capable in order to understand his learning, all the more so concerning conduct and character traits. In this matter there is no room for mistakes, and it demands a high level of discernment.

הרוצה לגשת לעבודת מוסרית מוכרח להיות למדן. אם בסדר נשים ונזיקין צריך להיות למדן כדי להבין צורתא דשמעתתא על בורה, בהלכות דעות ומידות עאכו"כ. כי אין לך מקום לטעויות ואין לך הכרח לדקות ההבנה כמו במידות.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ⇒ Self-improvement is an extraordinarily challenging task. Changing even a single character trait is considered more difficult than absorbing the entirety of the Talmud.
- ⇒ We are not expected to achieve the ideal of character refinement overnight. Rather, it is a lifetime pursuit. A person is expected to be constantly engaged in growth and character improvement. However, even a person who has not yet engaged in personal growth – or who has attempted to do so but has met with failure – should realize that it is never too late to begin.
- ⇒ Self-improvement is not achieved through grand, sweeping changes and major transformations of one's personality. The key to self-improvement lies in taking small but steady steps.

- ∞ In order to properly engage in self-improvement, a person must know himself. Since every individual has a different personality and nature, the areas in which a person must strive for self-improvement are different for each individual. Consequently, a person must develop his own self-knowledge in order to understand what is his own personal path toward refining his character.

SECTION II. TORAH AND HALACHAH HELP PERSONAL GROWTH

We have seen that Judaism considers character refinement a step toward a truer understanding and fulfillment of the Torah, as well as it being the mitzvah of “to walk in all of His ways.” The reverse is also true: Not only does refining one’s character improve one’s connection to the Torah, the study of Torah and the fulfillment of its commands help improve one’s character.

PART A. THE TORAH IS THE KEY TO SELF-IMPROVEMENT

The source of our poor character traits – known as the *yetzer hara* or the evil inclination – is a force that is not all bad. The Midrash states, “If the evil inclination did not exist, then a man would not build a house, he would not marry a woman or produce progeny, nor would he conduct business” (Bereishit/Genesis Rabbah 9:7). The *yetzer hara* is a vital force that keeps the world running properly, and its drives must be channeled into productive endeavor. How do we do that? Through the study and fulfillment of the Torah.

1. Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, *Twerski on Spirituality*, Shaar Press, pp. 20-21 – The ethical significance of religious observance.

The Midrash states that when Moses ascended to heaven to receive the Torah, that [the angels said that] they [the Jewish people] were certain to transgress it, and that therefore it should be given to them, i.e., to the Divine angels. God then said to Moses, “Rebut their argument.” Moses said to the angels, “The Torah says, ‘You shall not covet your neighbor’s belongings.’ Are you capable of desiring something that belongs to another angel?” By enumerating the Torah prohibitions, Moses demonstrated that the Torah can only be given to “mere mortals,” because its laws do not apply to and cannot be relevant to angels. This Midrash tells us that we were given the Torah with its many prohibitions precisely because we have the desires for the things and acts that are forbidden.

In observance of Torah, we restrain ourselves from its prohibitions, very often by suppressing the unacceptable drives. However, there is also the possibility of channeling these drives toward desirable goals, and rather than simply suppressing them, using their energy for positive accomplishments.

To learn how to channel unacceptable drives toward desirable goals, see Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, *Ohr Yisroel*, Letter 30.

2. *Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud)*, Kiddushin 30b – Torah is the antidote for the evil inclination.

God said to Israel, “My children, I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah as its antidote. If you occupy yourselves with the Torah, you will be saved from its hands, as it

הקדוש ברוך הוא אמר להם לישראל בני בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי לו תורה תבלין ואם אתם עוסקים בתורה אין אתם נמסרים בידו שנאמר הלא אם תטיב שאת ואם אין אתם עוסקין בתורה אתם נמסרים בידו שנא'

is written, “If you will better yourself, you will be forgiven” (Bereishit 4:7). But if you do not occupy yourselves with it, you are given into its hands, as it is written, “Transgression lies in wait at the door.”

לפתח חטאת רובץ.

It is important to realize that when the Talmud calls the Torah “the antidote” to the evil inclination, this means that all forms of self-improvement are rooted in the Torah. It is illogical to seek other methods of combating the evil inclination; after all, God Himself has revealed to us how to defeat it!

3. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:6 – Virtue comes with the Torah.

An ignoramus [in Torah knowledge and practice] cannot be pious.

לא עם הארץ חסיד.

4. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal), Mesillat Yesharim (The Path of the Just), Ch. 11 – God gave us the Torah in order that we should occupy ourselves with it to achieve perfection.

...[God] gave us His holy Torah, and instructed us to occupy ourselves with it in order that we should achieve perfection.

...ה' (ש) נתן לנו את תורתו הקדושה וצונו לעסוק בה להשיג על ידה שלימותנו:

Perhaps there are other avenues outside of Judaism that lead to perfection?

5. Ibid., Ch. 5 (translation by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein, Feldheim Publications) – Only the Torah will enable us achieve this goal.

It is self-evident that if the Creator has fashioned for this affliction (the yetzer hara) only this remedy (Torah), it is impossible under any circumstances that a person be cured of it through any other means. One who thinks to save himself without it is mistaken, and will recognize his mistake only in the end, when he dies amidst transgression. For the evil inclination exerts great force against a person, and without his being aware of it, grows and waxes stronger, and comes to dominate him. A man may resort to all the devices imaginable – if he does not adopt the remedy which was created for him, namely the Torah, as I have written, he will neither recognize nor feel the intensification of his illness until he dies in transgression and his soul is lost.

והנה פשוט הוא, שאם הבורא לא ברא למכה זו (יצר הרע) אלא רפואה זו (תורה), אי אפשר בשום פנים שירפא האדם מוזאת המכה בלתי זאת הרפואה, ומי שיחשבו להנצל זולתה, אינו אלא טועה, ויראה טעותו לבסוף כשימות בחטאו. כי הנה היצר הרע באמת חזק הוא באדם מאד, ומבלי ידיעתו של האדם הולך הוא ומתגבר בו ושולט עליו. ואם יעשה כל התחבולות שבעולם ולא יקח הרפואה שנבראה לו שהיא התורה, כמו שכתבתי, לא ידע ולא ירגיש בתגבורת חליו אלא כשימות בחטאו ותאבד נשמתו.

This impact of the Torah is a mysterious phenomenon. How, exactly, does this work? How does Torah study impact on a person's traits and cause him to develop a more refined character?

6. **Chazon Ish, Emunah V'Bitachon (Faith and Trust), Ch. 4 – The Torah serves to perfect our character traits in two distinct ways: 1) following *halachah* (Jewish law) teaches discipline, and 2) the study of the Torah connects our souls to a higher spiritual realm and thereby refines us.**

The practice of being particular in the performance of halachic details, which goes against a person's natural leanings, creates a habit of placing the staff of rule in the hand of wisdom, and the reins in the hand of the mind. It empowers the heart to be continuously subdued to the inner sense of a higher conscious, and conditions him to be a man of spirit, utterly distant from all vulgarity ...

If the Torah corrects character traits by virtue of its toil and by the acquisition of its wisdom, as the laws of the spirit dictate, there is a further aspect of the Torah, a light beyond human cognition whose revelation in the Torah cleanses a person's soul, and sensitizes him to taste the subtleties of wisdom and the pleasantness of light. He therefore loves humility by nature, and, conversely, hates haughtiness; he loves kindness and hates cruelty; loves patience and hates anger. For the entire being and desire of a wise person is to correct his character traits, and he is greatly distressed by his bad inclinations. A wise person feels no greater pain than when he stumbles in a base character trait, and feels no greater joy than the joy of correcting his character traits.

ההרגל בדקדוק הדין נגד מדותיו הטבעיות ונגד נטיותיו בתולדתו, מרגילין אותו לשום את שבט מושלים בכף התבונה ואת הרסן ביד השכל, ומגבירים בלבו ההכרה התמידית להכנע להרגש הפנימי ולמצפון האציל, ומכשרתו להיות איש הרוח, ומרחיקתו מן הגסות תכלית הריחוק ...

ואם התורה מתקנת המדות בעמלה ובקנין החכמה כמשפט חקוק בחק הנפש, עוד יש בתורה סגולת אור אשר לא יושג בשכל אנושי, ואשר אור הסגולה הזה מאיר ומזכך את נפש בעליו לראות אור נוגה ונועם טוב טעם ודעת, ואוהב את הענוה בטבעו, ושונא את הגבהות בטבעו, אוהב את החסד בטבעו, ושונא את האכזריות בטבעו, אוהב את הסבלנות ושונא את הכעס, כי כל ישעו וחפצו של החכם לתקן מדותיו ומצטער על נטיותיו הרעות תכלית הצער, ואין כאב לחכם ככאבו על הכשלו במדה של גנות, ואין שמחה לחכם כשמחתו על תיקון מדותיו.

In addition to the effect that Torah **study** has upon a person's character, Torah **observance** also helps to inculcate certain tendencies in a person that lead to spiritual development. Observing the mitzvot helps a person learn that his own desires and whims must sometimes be set aside in order to obey a will other than his own – the Will of God.

7. **Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, "Law and Morality in Jewish Tradition," in *Essential Essays on Judaism*, p. 37 – The ethical significance of religious observance.**

[W]hat appears to be purely religious observance has its ethical relevance through its indirect education of the material element in man. Through its creation of a physical awareness of an "other" and its demands, the system of religious observances educates the body for behavior that is not exclusively egocentric. The "purely religious," therefore, always has indirect influence on moral practice. In obeying the "ritual laws," which regulate the relationship between man and God, one indirectly brings greater order into one's relationships with other people. In a sense, by establishing habitual awareness of an "other," the indirect method achieves a measure of man's liberation. The claims on man which attempt to enslave him are innumerable – claims of his own nature, of economic forces, of social convention. But a system of law that teaches man to say a limited "no" to the promptings of his own nature and to the urgings of economic need, as well as to the dictatorship of social custom, and that at the same time develops within him an inclination to say "yes" to the commands of an authority that is not of this world, helps man to establish his independence in facing

the world. Man is not required to refuse the claims of the world on him, but he may now withdraw himself from their pressure, and put some distance between himself and their importunings; he may now pause before committing himself. The discipline of living, which is one of the aims of religious observance, makes man free by enabling him to act in the world rather than react to it.

It must be emphasized that the Torah's ideal of personal growth is not merely a separate goal in addition to the observance of the Torah and its commandments. Rather, the ideal of self-perfection is **part** of our general responsibility to keep the Torah and mitzvot.

8. **Matisyahu Rosenblum, based on ideas heard from Rav Aharon Lopiansky – Personal growth achieves its full meaning only as part of the larger framework of Torah.**

By now we have seen that Judaism is much more than mitzvot such as Shabbat and kashrut. Character refinement and personal improvement are a vital part of the Torah. But understanding that Judaism is *also* concerned with character refinement and has its own “personal growth” literature is not enough. Even seeing that literature as superior because it grows from Divinely given roots and is therefore deeper and purer than other such literatures still misses an essential point. It is not enough to understand that Judaism like all cultures has an interest in personal growth in addition to its otherworldly mitzvot. We must see that personal growth and those otherworldly mitzvot together form one organic whole.

Our forefather Jacob dreamt of a ladder with angels ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28:12). This was a vision of the Torah; the numerical value in Hebrew of Sinai where the Torah was given is the same as the Hebrew word for “ladder” i.e. *sulam*. That ladder stretches towards heaven with its feet firmly on the earth. The Torah guides us in personal improvement and other areas that interest all societies such as civil law, marriage and family because these are all an integral part of how the ladder of the Torah stands on the ground of human life in this world. These are the lower rungs of the ladder. The more refined one is as a person, the more honest one's business dealings and the healthier one's family life, the better one can climb the ladder to really connect to higher and more transcendent dimensions through one's Torah study and mitzvot. Otherwise one may be doing the right actions but the essential man himself is not growing. One can remain very small while doing mitzvot and even learning *kabbalah*; unanchored to this world one may even get rather strange as one tries to float up to an other-worldly existence. The real man formed from the earth must refine his earthiness, not just flee from it.

On the other hand, one also should not just stay on the ground living a life that is a bit healthier but still completely confined to the mundane; one must try to climb higher. And just like the angels also descended that ladder, one's study of Torah and fulfillment of mitzvot should allow one to always come down and add dimensions of light and refinement to one's this-worldly life in business, marriage and personal development, achieving a holiness not of other-worldly mysticism but of a more profound life always connecting to this worldly reality. Thus what the world thinks of as personal growth receives a new meaning in the Torah as a crucial element of a larger process of growth in which a man grows in stature until he himself is a ladder connecting heaven and earth.

PART B. MITZVOT LEAD TO CHARACTER REFINEMENT

Both the study and fulfillment of the mitzvot make a direct impact on one's character development. For example, an entire section of the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) is devoted to the detailed laws of financial dealings; thus, honesty in business dealings is not only a matter of character, but a full-fledged halachic obligation. The Chofetz Chaim organized the laws concerning negative speech about our fellows.

Furthermore, he also wrote *Ahavat Chesed* (The Love of Pursuing Kind Deeds) describing the parameters of the responsibility to help those in need, for example – through inviting guests, giving *tzadakah* (charity) and loans, visiting the sick, comforting mourners, and arranging and attending funerals. There are also many texts establishing guidelines to help one speak the truth, honor parents, not resent one's fellow, reduce anger, enhance marital and family relationships, and more.

(See the *Morasha shiurim* on *Bein Adam L'Chavero* for a range of mitzvot that directly lead to character refinement.)

But the impact of the mitzvot on character development is even broader. A good character can be developed even by those mitzvot that do not seemingly relate to acts and deeds that are clearly virtuous. This is because there are certain positive attributes which are developed by the performance of many mitzvot and which are, in fact, a primary goal of those mitzvot. While the reasons for the mitzvot are in essence beyond the comprehension of our human intellect, many of the greatest rabbis through the ages – such as the Rambam in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, the Ramban (Nachmanides) in his commentary on the Torah, and the Ra'ah in the *Sefer HaChinuch* – have described the logic (the *ta'amim*) – behind the various mitzvot so that we are able to approach their performance with greater understanding. In many of the mitzvot, these rabbis have discovered *ta'amim* that relate directly to personal growth and character development.

1. Rambam, Hilchot Temurah 4:13 – While all of the mitzvot in the Torah contain endless layers of hidden meaning, sometimes completely beyond our comprehension, they do lead to character improvement.

Even though all the statutes of the Torah are *gezeirot* [meaning rules with no reason given for them] as we have explained ... it is fitting to contemplate them and any logic that you can find in them you should ... And most of the laws of the Torah are only pieces of advice from afar, from the Great Adviser, on how to rectify our character traits and straighten our actions ...

The Mahari Kurkus [a commentary on the Rambam] comments on this last statement: “Nevertheless, there are certainly deeper reasons for this [i.e. last statement] and for all of the mitzvot because we were not commanded only to correct our character traits ... he [the Rambam] did not write this precisely, because [the mitzvot] are “exceedingly high” and have many facets to them ... rather it is fitting to say that the fulfillment of the mitzvot brings about the perfection of a person's character traits, in addition to the hidden dimension that they have, which is known to those who understand the inner dimension of the Torah, as it is written, “Her paths are paths of pleasantness and all her ways lead to peace” (*Mishlei/Proverbs 3:17*).

אע"פ שכל חוקי התורה גזירות הם כמו שביארנו ... ראוי להתבונן בהן וכל שאתה יכול ליתן לו טעם תן לו טעם ורוב דיני התורה אינן אלא עצות מרחוק מגודל העצה לתקן הדעות ולישר כל המעשים...

מהר"י קורקוס שם: ד"ה רוב דיני התורה אינן אלא עצות כו'. מ"מ ודאי שיש עוד טעמים פנימיים לזה, גם לכל המצוות, כי לא נצטוו לבד לתקן דעותיו ... בודאי לאו בדוקא כתב כן, כי גבוה מעל גבוה (קהלת ה ז), וכמה פנים לפנים ... אלא כך ראוי לומר שבקיום המצוות נמשך לאדם תקון דעותיו מלבד מה שיש בהם מן הסוד הנעלם וידוע ליודעי חן מהו דכתיב (משלי ג יז) דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום.

Let us explore a number of mitzvot which superficially seem to have no connection to character development, yet when explored, provide insight into our personal growth.

The Torah has a number of rules regarding items which a person must treat with sanctity and occasionally donate to the Temple or the Kohanim. Whenever a fruit tree is planted, any fruit it produces for the first three years is forbidden, and the fruit of the fourth year must be treated with sanctity; it must be brought to Jerusalem and consumed there. The Torah requires gifts to be given to the Kohanim from grain that is harvested, dough that is baked, the first fruits that are harvested every year, and wool that is shorn from sheep; all of these items are considered consecrated and must be given to the Kohanim. Similarly, the Torah details a set of laws regarding gifts made to the Temple, many of which come about when a person consecrates any of his possessions to be used for the Temple's upkeep or the sacrificial services. The Rambam shows us the tremendous positive impact that these mitzvot have on the character of a person who performs them.

2. **Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (The Guide for the Perplexed), III:39 – The commandments in the Torah regarding gifts to the Kohanim and the Temple are meant to instill in a person the attribute of generosity and to diminish one's appetite for material pleasures.**

As for the fourth year fruit of planting ... it falls into the same class as the precepts of [separating] the tithe, challah, the first fruits, and the first portion of the fleece; since the first portion of every produce has been assigned to God in order to strengthen one's attribute of generosity and diminish one's appetite for eating and for acquiring possessions...

Similarly, all the commandments that we have enumerated in laws concerning [the consecration of items or their value] deal with charitable donations, some of which go to the Kohanim, and some for the upkeep of the Temple. Through all this, likewise, a person acquires the attribute of generosity, and the result is that a person will spend his money freely in honor of God, and will not be miserly. For the most destructive element that exists among people is because of their pursuit of money, and the great desire to add to their wealth and honor.

אבל נטע רבעי עם מה שיש בו מריח ע"ז והתלותו בערלה כמה שזכרנו, הוא נוהג מנהג התרומה והחלה והבכורים וראשית הגז שהוא ליתן ראשית כל דבר להשם לחזק מדת הנדיבות ולמעט תאות המאכל וקנות הממון

וכן המצות אשר ספרנום בהלכות ערכין וחרמין כולם הולכים על דרך הצדקות, מהן מה שהוא לכהנים, ומהן מה שהוא לבדק הבית, ובכולן ג"כ יגיע לאדם מדת הנדיבות, ושיבוז האדם לממון לכבוד השם ולא יקפוץ יד, כי רוב ההפסד הבא במדינות בין בני אדם, אמנם הוא מפני החריצות על הממון והרבות ממנו ורוב התאוה להוסיף נכסים וכבוד.

Another mitzvah in the Torah applies to a person who comes across a bird's nest containing a mother bird along with her eggs or chicks. The Torah forbids taking the eggs or chicks in the presence of the mother bird; instead, the Torah commands us to send the mother bird away and then collect the eggs or chicks. Among the given reasons for the mitzvah is character refinement.

3. **Ramban, Devarim 22:6,7 – In addition to Kabbalistic explanations, the Ramban sees this mitzvah as a means for character development.**

"When you happen upon a bird's nest" – This too is a clearly understood mitzvah, like that of not slaughtering a mother and her calf in one day (Vayikra/Leviticus 22:28), since the reason for both is in order that we should not have a cruel disposition and fail to be empathetic ... And the

כי יקרא קן צפור לפניך: גם זו מצוה מבוארת מן אותו ואת בנו לא תשחטו ביום אחד (ויקרא כב כח), כי הטעם בשניהם לבלתי היות לנו לב אכזרי ולא נרחם והכוונה בכלם לטוב לנו ולא לו יתברך ויתעלה, אבל כל מה שנצטוונו שיהיו בריותיו צרופות ומזוקקות בלא סיגי מחשבות רעות ומדות מגונות

intention behind all of the mitzvot is to benefit us, not God. Rather, all that we have been commanded is so that His creations should be purified from improper thoughts and ugly character traits ...

Some mitzvot are intended to inculcate certain spiritual values or attitudes into those who observe them. For instance, many of the mitzvot observed on Pesach are intended to help us internalize the freedom and nobility which the Jewish people achieved at the Exodus. In this context, the Sefer HaChinuch reveals an important principle, which explains much of the impact of mitzvot on our personal growth.

4. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #16 – The prohibition against breaking a bone of the Pesach offering is intended to instill nobility.**

... Among the roots of this mitzvah is to remember the miracles of the Exodus, as we have written concerning other mitzvot. This mitzvah is also an offshoot of the aforementioned root principle: it is not honorable for the sons of kings nor for important people to chew on bones and break them like dogs. Such an act is only fitting for poor people, who are ravenous. Therefore, at the time when we became the treasured of all the nations, a kingdom of princes and a holy nation, and every year on that same date, it is fitting for us to do actions that reveal that we too have reached the great and elevated level that we attained at that time. And as a result of the action that we do and the similarity [to the level that was reached then], that level will be permanently fixed in our souls.

... משרשי המצוה, לזכור ניסי מצרים, כמו שכתבנו באחרות. וגם זה גזעו מן השורש הנזכר, שאין כבוד לבני מלכים ויועצי ארץ לגרר העצמות ולשברם ככלבים, לא יאות לעשות ככה כי אם לעניי העם הרעבים. ועל כן בתחלת בואנו להיות סגולת כל העמים ממלכת כהנים ועם קדוש, ובכל שנה ושנה באותו הזמן, ראוי לנו לעשות מעשים המראים בנו המעלה הגדולה שעלינו לה באותו שעה. ומתוך המעשה והדמיון שאנחנו עושין נקבע בנפשותינו הדבר לעולם.

5. **Ibid. — Torah and mitzvot shape our actions, refining our thoughts and emotions.**

And do not think to argue, my son, and ask why should God give us so many mitzvot to remind us of the miracle, when just mentioning it once will remind us of it so that our descendants will not forget it. It is not wisdom that causes you to argue thus, but rather youthfulness. Now, my son, listen carefully and understand and I will teach you a basic principle in the Torah and the mitzvot. Know that a man is shaped by his actions, and his heart and all of his thoughts always follow his actions, whether good or bad. Even a completely evil person whose every thought is evil – if he arouses himself and expends effort and constantly involves himself with Torah and mitzvot, even if he does not do so for the sake of Heaven, he will immediately

ואל תחשוב בני לתפוש על דברי ולומר, ולמה זה יצוה אותנו השם יתברך לעשות כל אלה לזכרון אותו הנס, והלא בזכרון אחד יעלה הדבר במחשבתנו ולא ישכח מפני זרענו, כי לא מחכמה תתפשני על זה, ומחשבת הנער ישיאך לדבר כן. ועתה בני אם בינה שמעה זאת, והטה אזנך ושמע, אלמדך להועיל בתורה ובמצוות. דע כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו, ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עושה בהם, אם טוב ואם רע, ואפילו רשע גמור בלבבו וכל יצר מחשבות לבו רק רע כל היום, אם יערה רוחו וישים השתדלותו ועסקו בהתמדה בתורה ובמצוות, ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב, ובכח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות

turn towards the good, and because of his actions he will destroy his evil inclination, because one's desires follow his actions.

6. **Based on Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, Growth Through Torah, Bnay Yakov Publishers, p. 168, and Rabbi Reuven Leuchter – The concept of self-creation can be applied to any form of personal growth.**

This concept of the Sefer HaChinuch (discussed above) is a basic one for becoming a better person. Even if you are not able to have elevated thoughts at first, force yourself to behave in the way in which you hope to eventually become. If you want to become a giving person, even though you are inwardly very selfish, you will eventually succeed if you continue to behave in a giving manner. This is the self-creation principle. You create yourself by your behavior. Awareness of this will enable you to improve yourself in any area in which you are deficient. Make a plan to perform as many actions as possible that would touch the positive traits you want to develop. After acting positively for a long enough time, your thoughts will become consistent with those actions and you will become a positive person.

While some mitzvot affect a person's character by virtue of the fact that the mitzvah itself constitutes a virtuous act, other mitzvot impact a person's character on a much deeper level. The prohibitions of eating non-kosher animals and birds, for instance, superficially seems to be completely unrelated to the concept of character development. But according to many commentators, there is a fundamental connection.

7. **The Gaon of Vilna (Explanation of the Aggadot of Chazal, Bechorot 8b).**

There are two signs of a kosher animal; chewing the cud and possessing split hooves. And the explanation is as the early generations said, "Every bird that kills is impure." The explanation is that when one eats something, the nature of the one who eats is changed by the nature of what is eaten ...

And all sins have their root in the trait of desire, as it says that the commandment "Do not desire" includes all the [rest of the Ten] Commandments and the entire Torah ...

Every bird that kills prey shows that it lacks the quality of satisfaction with what it has, [and this is central] as it says (Makkot 24) "Chabakuk came and established the entire Torah on one principle: 'The righteous person lives through his faith.'" This refers to the quality of being satisfied with what one has. So too with regard to animals [the signs of kashrut relate to whether the animal possesses this quality, just as with birds]. The sign of chewing the cud demonstrates that the animal is satisfied with the food it already has; and the split hoof shows that it does not rip its prey, but rather lives from the food in its trough.

ענין סימני טהרה שני סימנים מעלה גרה ומפרסת פרסה. והענין כמו"ש הקדמונים כי בעוף אמרו כל עוף הדורס טמא. וענין כי מאכילת הדבר כפי מזוג המאכל כן יהיה טבע האוכל כי אבר מחזיק אבר ...

וכל העבירות והחטאים הכל מחמדה כמו"ש כי לא תחמוד כולל כל הדברות וכל התורה כמו שהאריכו בזה, ועיין בדבריהם.

וכל העוף הטורף טרף הוא סימן שאין בו מדות ההסתפקות, וכמו"ש (מכות כד) בא חבקוק והעמידן על אחת וצדיק באמונתו יחיה (חבקוק ב) והוא ההסתפקות וכן הוא בבהמה סימן מעלה גרה שמסתפק במאכל שבקרבו וכן מפרסת פרסה הוא סימן שאינו דורס וטורף טרף אלא גדל על אבוסו.

8. The Purple Jacket People – Class by Rabbi Benzion Klasko and Rabbi Azriel Birnham – The commandments refine us.

Every commandment of the Torah has a dimension of making us better and more refined people. This is obviously true of mitzvot that the rest of the world agrees to, such as not killing (though it might interest you that in the Torah this [prohibition] goes much deeper and says that one cannot embarrass one's fellow since that is like killing him). What will surprise you is that there is such a dimension even in mitzvot that would seem at first glance to have nothing to do with our moral behavior. Would you think that the prohibition of wearing a combination of wool and linen would have anything to do with your character traits? But you should know that the first sections of the Torah contain many stories which are supposed to show us how we should behave and many of the mitzvot link us back to those stories.

Early in Genesis we find the story of Cain and Abel. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. One day Cain had an idea. He saw clearly that he was dependent on God for the success of his crops and thought it would be wise to pay Him off. Therefore, he sacrificed some flax stalks. God was not impressed with this sacrifice which was not done from any real gratitude but as a sort of *quid pro quo* and did not accept Cain's sacrifice. Abel, however, saw what Cain had done and was also inspired to sacrifice. But his intentions were very different. He thought about how much God had done for him and, deeply moved by his gratitude, sacrificed his best sheep. God was pleased and accepted Abel's sacrifice. Now Cain had two choices, would he learn from Abel and do better or would he eliminate the competition? He chose the latter course and killed his brother.

Now when the Torah tells us to keep wool and linen separate, it is telling us to keep Abel's approach very distinct from that of Cain. Abel learned from his brother's example and was inspired to do better. This is the trait of *kinas sofrim*, a spiritual jealousy in which other people's achievements inspire one to achieve greater heights. Cain, however, showed a bad jealousy. Instead of being inspired to improve, he acted to destroy what was better than him. The Torah uses this prohibition to influence us to use only spiritual jealousy. Furthermore, the Torah wants us to keep a clear difference between Cain's selfish, business-like approach reaction to God's help and the true gratitude and love that Abel showed.

While we have examined only a small selection of the 613 mitzvot, we can understand that all the mitzvot have some positive effect on our character traits. There are endless reasons underlying each of the Torah's mitzvot, but as we have seen, many of them contain hidden benefits for the development of our characters – whether or not those benefits meet the eye.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⌘ Though it would be a serious distortion to see the Torah as merely an ancient self-help book, it certainly does help personal growth in a number of ways.
- ⌘ Living life according to halachah requires a degree of discipline and self-control that helps in all areas of life.
- ⌘ Even mitzvot that have no overt connection to this realm are meant in various ways to have some effect on character.
- ⌘ The fact that the Torah exists on a higher dimension of reality means that its study and the fulfillment of its mitzvot connects one to a higher spiritual world, and this can help every person become less subject to his personality flaws.

SECTION III. PERSONAL GROWTH LITERATURE IN THE TORAH

PART A. LEARNING FROM BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

Personal growth is a topic of obvious interest to any thinking human being. The kinds of topics now discussed by self-help and pop psychology books have been a focus of the wise men of every civilization since the dawn of history. Given what we have seen of the central role that character refinement and personal growth play in the Torah, it should come as no surprise that there is a vast literature in Jewish sources directly concerning this topic.

The Torah narrative, from the creation of man until the closing words of the transfer of the leadership of the Jewish people to Joshua, is infused with themes and details from which major lessons are learned on how to develop ourselves as good – and even righteous – people.

The following are a few examples of the innumerable moral lessons that can be derived from Biblical narratives.

1. **Rashi, Bereishit 13:3 – Avraham's journeys teach a lesson in not deviating from one's previous positive ways.**

"He traveled on his journeys" – When he returned from Egypt to the land of Canaan, [Avraham/Abraham] stayed in the same guest houses where he had stayed on his way to Egypt. This teaches us proper conduct: a person should not change the place where he stays [lest it cast aspersions on his previous hosts].

וילך למסעיו" - כשחזר ממצרים לארץ כנען היה הולך ולן באכסניות שלן בהם בהליכתו למצרים למדך דרך ארץ שלא ישנה אדם מאכסניא שלו.

2. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Shiurei Chumash, p. 137 – The story of Avraham's hospitality to the three angels is a veritable guidebook in *chesed* (loving kindness).**

The book Maalot HaTorah quotes the Gra who says that the 613 commandments are only general categories, but there are endless specifics. His proof is that there are many parts of the Torah that do not contain commandments at all. We see that in this chapter, since this chapter does not contain any of the 613 commandments, but there is nevertheless an entire instruction book of *chesed* here. Avraham, a 100-year-old man who was dangerously ill on the third day after his circumcision, was looking for guests. When no one came, he was so distressed that God sent him angels for guests. The Talmud (Shavuot 35b) derives a halachah from this: that hosting guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence... This chapter was written to teach **how** to perform an act of *chesed*.

בספר מעלות התורה מובא בשם הגר"א שתרי"ג מצוות הם רק כללים, אבל פרטים יש בלי שיעור. ראיתו, שהרי הרבה פרשיות בתורה אין בהם מצוות כלל. בפרשה זו רואים את זה, שהרי בפרשה זו אין מצווה מהתרי"ג מצוות, ועם כל זה יש כאן שולחן ערוך שלם של חסד. אברהם אבינו, זקן מופלג בן מאה שנה, חולה מסוכן ביום השלישי למילתו, והוא מחפש אורחים. כשאין אנשים, הוא מצטער עד כדי כך שהקב"ה מביא לו מלאכים כאורחים. בגמרא (שבועות לה, ב) למדו מכאן הלכה, שגדולה הכנסת אורחים יותר מהקבלת פני השכינה....

פרשה זו נכתבה כדי ללמד איך צריך לעשות מעשה חסד.

The entire Book of Bereishit communicates lessons in personal growth.

3. **Rabbi Yissocher Frand, An Offer You Can't Refuse, p. 120 – The Book of Bereishit teaches us the quality of uprightness.**

The topic discussed in Sefer Bereishit is *yashrus*, righteousness, being a *mentsch*. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 25a) has another name for Sefer Bereishit. It is *Sefer HaYashar*, the Book of Righteousness, or *Sefer Yesharim*, the Book of the Righteous, because it contains the chronicles of Avraham, Yitzchak (Isaac), and Yaakov (Jacob), who represented the epitome of righteousness.

The Netziv expands on this thought. The greatness of the Patriarchs lay not only in their superb righteousness and piety in their relations with the non-Jewish people. They treated all these people so honestly and properly that they earned their deep admiration. The entire world acknowledged them as righteous. The non-Jews were not aware of Avraham's observance. They never saw him put on *tefillin* or stand a long *Shemoneh Esrei*. But they did know how he spoke to them, how he looked at them, how he treated them, how he dealt with them. And they saw in him an admirable righteousness.

How do we take the message of righteousness and apply it to contemporary life?

4. **Ibid. pp. 123-124 – Examples of *yashrus* for today's world.**

"Be a *yashar*. That is what the Torah wants from you. Being a *yashar* means acting with integrity, doing the right thing even if the letter of the law does not demand it from you.

You go house hunting, and a real estate person spends a month of Sundays taking you from house to house. And then something comes up, and you can cut a deal without the agent, thereby saving yourself a few thousand dollars. Are you obligated to give anything to the agent? No. But is it right? ...

Being a *yashar* means not parking in the handicapped spaces. Being a *yashar* means never double parking, even if you only have to run in for a minute to get your suit from the dry cleaners. Why should the person you trapped stand there waiting, with you nowhere in sight?

Being a *yashar* means not honking your horn in a residential neighborhood late at night. Why should people be disturbed in their homes just because you can't be bothered to get out of your car and knock on the door of the person you are summoning?

Being a *yashar* means not taking seventeen items to the express line for ten items or less and rationalizing that six bottles of apple juice are really one item. Being a *yashar* means not putting your shopping cart on line to secure a place and then running back a few times to get the rest of the items on your shopping list ...

Lessons for personal development are found throughout the Chumash.

5. **Devarim 13:5 – Cleaving to God.**

Follow after the Lord, your God ... and cleave to Him.

אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו... ובו תדבקון.

6. **Rashi, *ibid.* – What is meant by cleaving to God?**

"Cleave to Him" – [This means:] cleave to His attributes: Bestow *chesed*, visit the sick, and bury the dead, just as God does.

ובו תדבקון – הדבק בדרכיו: גמול חסדים, קבור מתים, בקר חולים כמו שעשה הקב"ה.

PART B. ADDITIONAL JEWISH TEXTS ON SELF-IMPROVEMENT

There are additional Jewish texts that help guide our personal growth. The written Torah contains the book of Proverbs, which seems to parallel the advice for personal growth given by the wise men of other cultures. The Oral Torah includes Pirkei Avot, an entire tractate of the Mishnah, which is devoted to the topic of how to improve one's character. The rest of the Talmud and Midrashim also contain countless statements and discussions by the Sages regarding the topics of personal growth and character development. Consequently, as we discussed in the first Morasha shiur on Personal Growth, it is precisely in this area, where the Torah seems most similar to secular wisdom, that it emphasizes the Divine origin of ethical behavior and character improvement.

This is not to say that the Torah belittles the value of the human intellect. The Talmud writes (Megillah 6b) that there is much wisdom among the nations of the world. Furthermore, we are encouraged to use our own reasoning abilities to determine the proper path in life. The Chovot HaLevavot (Duties of the Heart) writes at length that guiding one's life by halachah alone without using one's mind is an inferior way to live. But although we must make use of our intellect, we must also recognize its limitations. The Chovot HaLevavot explains why it is necessary to use a Torah framework in our decision making.

1. Chovot HaLevavot, Sha'ar Avodat HaElokim, Ch. 3 – The human mind when left to itself can veer far away from the truth.

I must clarify the positive influences of the Torah: ... One of them is that a person is a combination of a soul and a body, made with traits that can bring him to devote himself to pleasures and to sink in animalistic desires until his intellect no longer influences him. Man also has traits that impel him to separate from this world and abandon his responsibilities toward the improvement of society because of the inconsistency of his situation in the world and the many wounds and sorrows it contains, so that he only focuses on a lofty spiritual world.

Neither perspective is praiseworthy. The first is wrong because it destroys the structure of the world, and the second is wrong because it ruins a person in this world and the next. And it was from the Creator's mercy and awesome generosity to man that He gave him something that would show him how to guide himself in both worlds: a set of laws that takes a middle path between the intellect and one's desires. And this is our trustworthy Torah, which preserves the proper balance between the revealed and the hidden, giving a person what he needs from his this-worldly desires but keeping his reward for the next world ...

ואני חייב לבאר מעלות התורה אחד מהם, כי האדם מורכב מנפש וגוף, ונוצר במידותיו המביאות אותו לידי התמסרות לתענוגות ולשקוע בתאוות הבהמיות, והתרת קשר השכל מעליו. וגם יש בו מידות המביאות אותו לידי פרישות בעולם הזה, ולידי הזנחת [התעסקותו] בישובו של עולם, בגלל התהפכות המצבים בו וריבוי הנפגעים והיגונות, והתעסקותו בעולם השכלי העליון.

ושתי ההשקפות אינם משובחות. שכן האחת מביאה לקלקול סדר העולם, והשנית מביאה להפסדת עניני האדם בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא. והיה זה מחמלת הבורא יתברך ועוצם טובתו על האדם שחנן אותו [בדבר] שבו יתקין ענינו ויסדר מצבו בשני העולמות, - בסדר חוקים שהוא אמצעי בין השכל והתאוה, והיא התורה הנאמנה, השומרת על הצדק הגלוי והנסתר, שנותנת לאדם חלקו מן התאות של העוה"ז ושומרת לו שכרו באחריותו

The Chovot HaLevavot above establishes a fundamental principle. The Torah guides us towards personal improvement by leading us along a path between the two extremes of material excess and total rejection of the material.

2. **Rabbi Ken Spiro, WorldPerfect, Simcha Press, p. 8, – An example of secular wisdom, not guided by the Torah.**

Seneca, the famed Roman philosopher and writer, developed a lengthy treatise on the control and consequences of anger. In it, he draws the distinction between anger and wisdom, using the following example:

Children also, if weak and deformed, we drown, not through anger, but through the wisdom of preferring the sound to the useless.

Here we see another vital need to base our attempts at self-improvement on the Torah's wisdom, and not on our intellects alone. Non-Torah thinkers are capable of tremendous insights and wisdom, but they lack an objective framework to keep their thinking in check. The human mind alone is capable of the greatest distortions of morality, turning hideous atrocities into accepted "ethics," as we saw in Nazi Germany, for example.

The study of proper character and its development has always been a major focus of the contemporary Jewish tradition Mussar movement founded by Rabbi Yisroel Salanter (1810 - 1883). Many of Judaism's greatest recent authorities have addressed issues that are relevant to the topic, and many have written major works concerning the topic of self-refinement. One can view these works as a "personal growth literature" of the Torah.

See the Recommended Additional Reading list for a collection of books that offer specific pathways toward personal growth and development.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ∞ The Torah narrative, from the creation of man until the closing words of the transfer of the leadership of the Jewish people to Joshua, is infused with themes and details from which major lessons are learned on how to develop ourselves as good – and even righteous – people.
- ∞ Proverbs and Ethics of the Fathers are Jewish texts that especially relate to self-actualization. The Talmud and Midrashim are filled with discussions by the Sages regarding personal growth and character development. The contemporary Mussar movement, founded by Rabbi Yisroel Salanter in the 19th century, underscores the Jewish commitment to strive for perfection by studying Torah and working to refine our character.

SECTION IV. JUMP-STARTING A DAILY, SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO PERSONAL GROWTH

How does one achieve the valued ideal of personal growth? What are the steps that must be taken in order to bring about the desired changes in one's character? It is of crucial importance to have a plan for a consistent, daily investment of effort for self-improvement.

1. **Rambam, Shemoneh Perakim, Ch. 4 – Personal growth calls for constant effort.**

The complete person must constantly remember his character traits, weigh his actions, and

האדם השלם צריך לו שיזכור מדותיו תמיד וישקול פעולותיו ויבחן תכונות נפשו יום יום, וכל מה שיראה

examine his personality every day. If he sees himself leaning toward an extreme, he should quickly heal that tendency and not allow the bad trait to strengthen itself when he repeats a misdeed ... Similarly, he should devote his attention constantly to his base character traits and seek to cure them.

נפשו נוטה לצד קצה אחד מן הקצוות, ימהר ברפואה ולא יניח התכונה הרעה להתחזק בשנותו מעשה הרע ... וכן יניח לנגד עיניו המדות הפחותות אשר לו וישתדל לרפאותם תמיד.

In truth, it is impossible to formulate an exact program of personal development that will fit every person. For a person to engage in self-improvement, he must develop a program of growth tailored to fit his individual personality and needs. Nevertheless, there are some basic components that are central to anyone engaged in an effort to grow and change. Among these components are: the study of texts dealing with these ideas (mussar works), introspection, and *cheshbon hanefesh* – making a personal accounting of one's conduct.

2. **Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Alei Shur, Vol. I, p. 88 – One must have a daily session in the study of texts dealing with ethical and personal development.**

The foundation of ethical education is not listening to lectures or reading articles. Rather, it is a fixed daily session devoted to “studying one's personality on a daily basis,” by learning works of mussar regularly, in depth, and with constant review, in the same manner as Torah study. Whatever people say, write, or advocate in the name of “mussar” is merely a detail associated with this central point: the requirement to dedicate a daily period for the study of mussar and a personal accounting ...

Experience has shown that a person who sets aside time to study mussar every day will change for the better without realizing it – in his behavior, concern, and ambition to reach higher levels in Torah.

יסוד החינוך המוסרי אינו בשמיעת שיחות וקריאת מאמרים, אלא בקביעות יום-יומית, המיועדת “לבחון תכונות נפשו יום-יום”, על ידי לימוד ספרי מוסר ברציפות, בעיון, ובחזרה תמידית, כמשפט לימוד-תורה. כל מה שמדברים, כותבים, מטיפים והוגים בשם “מוסר” אינו אלא פרפראות לנקודה המרכזית הזאת: החיוב להקדיש יום-יום זמן ללימוד המוסר וחשבון הנפש...

מהנסיון ידוע שהקובע זמן ללימוד מוסר יום יום, משתנה הוא לטובה מבלי שירגיש בכך – בהתנהגותו, בזהירותו, ובשאיפתו לדרגות התורה.

Merely studying the texts, however, is not enough. One must ponder the ideas they contain and analyze how to apply them to life. An investment of time and energy in regular, serious introspection can be the catalyst for incredible personal growth.

3. **Ibid. – Through introspection, a person can recreate himself.**

A creative force that is shared by everyone however, is introspection. There is no one who cannot, when he is in a state of calm, reach a state of focus on his spiritual condition, the course of his actions, and the goal of his life. Such introspection is a genuine act of creation. The person himself becomes renewed by it.

כח יוצר שהוא נחלת כל אחד ואחד – הוא ההתבוננות. אין לך אדם שלא יוכל להגיע להתרכזות, מתוך מנוחת נפש, במצבו הנפשי, במהלך מעשיו ובמגמת חייו. התבוננות כזאת יש בה משום יצירה ממש. האדם עצמו מתחדש על ידה.

4. **Ibid. – The required introspection has two stages: delving into the subject matter being studied, and applying it to one's life.**

Introspection has two stages. First we must delve into the book we are learning or into one statement of our Sages, to understand the topic, just like when we study Talmud. At this stage, we must be particularly careful not to understand the subject matter as allegory that cannot be interpreted on its plain level. The first principle in the study of mussar is that the Torah does not contain pure allegories ...

In the second stage, the student must compare what he learned from the Sages or from the book with his own situation and reality, and he must attempt to ascertain to what degree he is distant from what he has learned, and what are the factors that cause that.

להתבוננות יש שני שלבים: בראשונה מתעמקים בספר שלומדים או במאמר חז"ל אחד, להבין צורת השמעתתא כמו בלימוד גמרא. בשלב זה צריכים להזהר בפרט שלא לדון את הדברים ל"מליצות" שאין להבין אותן כפשוטן. ההנחה הראשונה בלימוד מוסר היא שאין מליצות בתורה....

בשלב השני משווה הלומד את מה שהבין מתוך המאחז"ל או הספר עם מצבו ומציאותו וישתדל לקבוע באיזו מדה הוא רחוק מהדברים ומה הגורמים לכך.

The study of the relevant texts and introspection into their contents should help a person develop an understanding of his spiritual goals, as well as an idea of how he needs to change in order to attain them. But how does a person make sure that he is truly on the path of personal growth? He must continually assess his spiritual level, making an accounting of his thoughts and deeds in order to determine to what extent he is fulfilling the requirements of spiritual growth. When performed regularly, this accounting, known as a *cheshbon hanefesh*, is a key to achieving and maintaining one's spiritual goals.

5. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Mesillat Yesharim, Chapter 3 – Evaluating our behavior as businessmen would appraise an investment.**

The rule is that a person should inspect all of his actions and monitor all of his ways so that he does not leave himself with a single bad habit or trait, and certainly not a transgression. I see a need for a person to make a daily accounting of his ways, just like prominent businessmen constantly weigh their business dealings so they do not become ruined. He should designate times and hours for this so that his deliberation should not be sporadic, but rather with great consistency, for it is very effective.

כלל הדבר: יהיה האדם מעיין על מעשיו כולם, ומפקח על כל דרכיו שלא להניח לעצמו הרגל רע ומדה רעה, כל שכן עבירה ופשע. והנני רואה צורך לאדם שיהיה מודקדק ושוקל דרכיו דבר יום ביומו כסוחרים הגדולים אשר יפלוסו תמיד כל עסקיהם למען לא יתקלקלו, ויקבע עתים ושעות לזה שלא יהיה משקלו עראי, אלא בקביעות גדול, כי רב התולדה הוא.

6. **Yehuda Mendelson, "Becoming a Professional Jew," The Jewish Observer, 1993 – Just as a successful businessman diligently assesses profits and losses, a person who wishes to succeed spiritually must make regular evaluations of his spiritual level.**

We must measure the seriousness of our spiritual agenda by comparing it to ambitious financial endeavors. A concise set of professional standards characterizes any serious commercial venture on the corporate scene, and cavalier schemes conducted less professionally run the risk of financial ruin. Those same standards also characterize any serious spiritual endeavor.

How does a CEO (chief executive officer) approach a large-scale business venture? He closely monitors profit and loss; and he must be uncompromisingly, unflinchingly realistic. These two factors are of prime significance to any CEO ... and to every Jew. Businesses exist to realize profit, and maximizing gains comprises the “business” of business. Still, no business can profit without accurately reading both the commercial environment and its own fiscal profile. A corporate chief must precisely identify unmet needs, recognize efficient paths for providing the required goods or services, note when conditions change; and he must know his company’s financial strengths and limitations.

This sort of detailed profit tracking, environmental analysis, and accounting, demands constant attentiveness and continual evaluation. A responsible corporation head does not just peruse the daily business headlines. He monitors the critical statistics, searching for hints of profit and warnings of loss. He works the numbers over and over, calculates all possible permutations, plans for any eventuality, and looks for that fleeting opportunity to seize success.

CEOs also rarely work in total isolation. They often contract consultants to assist in many phases of the data collection, analysis and forecasting. They also spare no effort in their preparation, and engage tirelessly in preparations for preparation, etc. They theoretically launch every stage of a projected venture numerous times before daring to risk any loss.

And last, and possibly most important, people who are serious about success are tenacious. They launch more than just a venture; they launch an establishment. So they commit fixed hours to their endeavor and maintain that commitment at almost any cost. By working occasionally – only when it is convenient – the amateur reveals his capriciousness. He reveals that he doesn’t really care about success ...

7. **Ibid., – Spiritual accounting: gaining clarity on what God expects from us, what we have achieved, and where we need to improve.**

An integral part of our Jewish tradition is the reward we receive for fulfilling the mitzvot, and taking responsibility for their transgression. Consequently, before Rosh Hashanah, we must clarify where we stand in the balance of mitzvot and transgressions. This is a two-step process. First we must attempt to recognize God’s expectations, in their entirety, and then we must discover where we have excelled and where we have floundered. This constitutes part of the art known as “cheshbon hanefesh” (spiritual accounting).

Tragically, we are not accustomed to evaluating our spiritual endeavors in a painstaking, professional manner. Can anyone accurately report on how his current spiritual profile differs from that of five years ago? Can anyone detail his latest spiritual achievement or failure, and identify its root cause? Do people notice which behaviors and environmental factors influence their relationship with God? One cannot understand Judaism nor grow spiritually without such proper evaluation.

While the above excerpt was clearly written with preparation for the High Holidays in mind, it is nevertheless an apt analogy for the need for self-assessment throughout the year.

When embarking on a path of personal growth, it is advisable to choose only one area or trait to develop or improve at a time. A person who attempts a major overhaul of his entire character is prone to failure. Furthermore, working on one trait will have an effect on one’s entire personality.

8. **Rabbi Yosef Hurwitz, Madreigas HaAdam (quoted in Consulting the Wise by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, p. 315) – Working on one trait alone will affect all of a person's traits.**

If a person has many faults in different areas and is confused about where to start, he should take any one trait and work specifically on it. All character traits are dependent on each other. If you correct one trait, this will automatically be a stepping stone to correcting other traits. It takes self-discipline to correct a trait. To overcome a fault, your intellect must rule over your desires. This factor will help you correct many other traits.

There are many different areas that a person can choose to address, and each person should choose an area that he feels is most appropriate for him to work on. Some examples of traits and attributes in which a person can endeavor to refine his character are: kindness, controlling anger, judging others favorably, desisting from destructive speech, humility, and faith in God. Many of these issues are the topics of other Morasha classes.

There are many Jewish texts, both classic and more recent, that can be studied to this end. A recommended reading list follows at the end of this class, although it is by no means exhaustive. Certain classic works such as Orchos Tzaddikim consist of individual chapters devoted to each character trait, but there are many classic works, such as Mesillat Yesharim and Chovot HaLevavot, in which a person can find discussions of all of these topics and more. There are also many contemporary works on these topics. For instance, with regard to refraining from destructive speech, Rabbi Yisroel Meir HaKohen Kagan (the Chofetz Chaim) authored a famous pair of works: Sefer Chofetz Chaim on the laws of forbidden speech and Sefer Shmirat HaLashon on the underlying philosophy and importance of the injunction. Many English books have been written that translate and expound large parts of these books.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ∞ The three components of a daily program of personal growth are: study of relevant texts, introspection, and a rigorous personal accounting to determine whether one is meeting one's spiritual goals.
- ∞ The introspection itself consists of two parts: the meaning and significance of the material being studied, and its application to one's life.
- ∞ A personal accounting is a key component of spiritual growth, just as businesses must continually assess their profits and losses to ensure that they are operating efficiently and profitably.
- ∞ Work on only one trait at a time. You will not be successful if you try to address more than one; and working on one trait will have a positive impact on your entire being.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHICH HURDLES MIGHT PREVENT US FROM ACTUALIZING OUR POTENTIAL?

Personal growth is a massive endeavor that constitutes a lifelong task. A person should not expect to see drastic improvement overnight. Often, people who work on improving themselves may become discouraged by a perceived lack of progress. It is important to remember that self-improvement happens in tiny increments and one should be satisfied with even minuscule progress. Eventually, the improvements will accrue.

On the other hand, a person who has not attempted to engage in self-improvement – or who has tried but failed – may feel that since self-improvement is a lifetime endeavor, there is no point in trying if he is starting late. In such circumstances, it is important to remember Rabbi Yisroel Salanter's insight: As long as a person is still alive, it is never too late to work on oneself.

WHICH STRATEGIES SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED TO ACHIEVE PERSONAL GROWTH?

The key to self-improvement lies in the Torah. Engaging in Torah study and keeping the mitzvot will bring about character development because the discipline required for both learning Torah and mitzvah fulfillment teaches a person to subjugate his emotional impulses to the dictates of his intellect. Furthermore, Torah study connects a person to a higher spiritual realm, which exerts a positive influence on his character. The observance of many mitzvot also helps to instill positive traits and values in a person.

It is also necessary to use one's own intellect to determine how to improve oneself. Following the Torah's dictates alone is not sufficient. On the other hand, a person must always subjugate his own intellect to the Torah's wisdom. The human mind, when left unchecked, is capable of severely distorting the correct priorities.

There is a vast body of self-improvement literature available within the realm of the Torah and its commentaries. Studying these important works and implementing their counsel will often bring a person to the heights of self-improvement.

WHERE CAN ONE FIND CONCEPTS RELATED TO PERSONAL GROWTH IN JEWISH TEXTS?

Lessons for personal growth can be derived from many areas of the Torah. One of the underlying reasons for many mitzvot is the positive impact that they exert on our characters. The narratives in the Torah about the Patriarchs, the Creation of the world, and the Exodus from Egypt all convey many important lessons and themes relating to self-improvement. And there is a vast body of Jewish literature that directly discusses self-improvement, including parts of the Bible and Talmud, as well as numerous works authored by great Torah scholars throughout the ages. The Mussar movement places a particular emphasis on character refinement and development.

HOW CAN I JUMP-START AND MAINTAIN A DAILY EFFORT TO IMPROVE MY CHARACTER?

In order to proceed on a path of personal growth, it is crucial to have a daily plan. One should choose one character trait or area to work on improving and study a text that is relevant to that area. This study should be accompanied by introspection in order to understand, internalize, and apply the material one studies. It is also valuable to conduct a daily personal accounting, evaluating whether one is meeting his spiritual goals.

Today is the greatest day of your life!

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING AND SOURCES

The following is a list of some books, both classic and contemporary, that can be studied in the pursuit of personal growth. There are many other Jewish texts that can also be useful.

Iggeret HaRamban — The famous letter of Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, which is also a basis of an English book by the same name

Chovot HaLevavot — Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakud

Orchot Tzaddikim

Mesillat Yesharim — Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

Chofetz Chaim; Shemirat HaLashon; and Ahavat Chessed — Rabbi Yisroel Meir HaKohen Kagan

Erech Apayim – Avraham Yellin Veingrov

Emunah V'Bitachon — Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (the Chazon Ish)

Michtav M'Eliyahu (Strive for Truth) — Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler

Sifsei Chaim — Rabbi Chaim Friedlander

Alei Shur — Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe

Let Us Make Man — Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski

Gateway to Happiness, and Gateway to Self-Knowledge — Rabbi Zelig Pliskin