

## NLE RESOURCES HIGH HOLIDAY DISCUSSION SESSION

### *Transforming Character*

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

According to Jewish thought and Jewish law, the period known as the “High Holiday Days,” or Days of Awe – Yomim Noraim – are propitious opportunities for personal change and growth. Yom Kippur in particular is the day wholly dedicated to intense personal introspection, when we each take a serious look inward and commit to a practical plan to aspire to fulfill our awesome potential. Is it possible to assert that people possess the ability to transform their character and behavior? Otherwise, without free will, everything in life would be predetermined.

#### How Would You Respond?

Consider the following scenario: Two prominent universities recently appointed academics with criminal records for felonies (discussed in the two cases below). Triggered by the potential problems that can arise from such appointments, you have been selected by the president of your university to chair a committee to establish criteria for the acceptance or rejection of similar candidates. What criteria would you propose?

#### Background Cases

##### Case A

*Michelle Jones was released last month after serving more than two decades in an Indiana prison for the murder of her 4-year-old son. The very next day, she arrived at New York University, a promising Ph.D. candidate in American Studies.*

*Ms. Jones got pregnant at 14 after what she called non-consensual sex with a high-school senior. Her mother responded by beating her on the stomach with a board, according to the prosecutor who later handled her case, and she was placed in a series of group homes and foster families. In a personal statement accompanying her Harvard application, Ms. Jones said she had a psychological breakdown after years of abandonment and domestic violence, and inflicted similar treatment on her own son, Brandon Sims.*

*The boy died in 1992 under circumstances that remain unclear; the body was never found. Two years later, during a stay at a mental-health crisis center, Ms. Jones admitted that she had buried him without notifying the police or Brandon’s father and his family. At her trial, a former friend testified that Ms. Jones confessed to having beaten the boy and then leaving him alone for days in their apartment, eventually returning to find him dead in his bedroom.*

*In a breathtaking feat of rehabilitation, Ms. Jones, now 45, became a published scholar of American history while behind bars, and presented her work by videoconference to historians’ conclaves and the Indiana General Assembly... N.Y.U. was one of several top schools that recruited her for their doctoral programs. She was also among 18 selected from more than 300 applicants to Harvard University’s history program. But in a rare override of a department’s*

authority to choose its graduate students, Harvard's top brass overturned Ms. Jones's admission after some professors raised concerns that she played down her crime in the application process.

Elizabeth Hinton, one of the Harvard historians who backed Ms. Jones, called her "one of the strongest candidates in the country last year, period." The case "throws into relief," she added, the question of "how much do we really believe in the possibility of human redemption?" (Eli Hager, [New York Times and the Marshall Project](#), September 13, 2017)

## Case B

Shon R. Hopwood was not a particularly sophisticated bank robber. "We would walk into a bank with firearms, tell people to get down, take the money and run," he said the other day, recalling five robberies in rural Nebraska in 1997 and 1998 that yielded some \$200,000 and more than a decade in federal prison.

Mr. Hopwood spent much of that time in the prison law library, and it turned out he was better at understanding the law than breaking it. He transformed himself into something rare at the top levels of the American bar, and unheard of behind bars: an accomplished Supreme Court practitioner. He prepared his first petition for certiorari — a request that the Supreme Court hear a case — for a fellow inmate on a prison typewriter in 2002. Since Mr. Hopwood was not a lawyer, the only name on the brief was that of the other prisoner, John Fellers.

No one was hurt in Mr. Hopwood's bank robberies, but he and his accomplices "scared the beak out of the poor bank tellers," Judge Richard G. Kopf of Federal District Court in Lincoln, Neb., said in sentencing him to prison in 1999. The judge was skeptical about Mr. Hopwood's vow that he would change. "We'll know in about 13 years if you mean what you say," Judge Kopf said. The law library changed Mr. Hopwood's life. "I kind of flourished there," he said. "I didn't want prison to be my destiny. When your life gets tipped over and spilled out, you have to make some changes."

Hopwood's new job as a tenure-track faculty member at the Georgetown University Law Center is only the latest improbable twist in a remarkable life: ... [He's] written a legal petition for a fellow inmate so incisive that the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case, done that again, earned undergraduate and law degrees and extremely competitive clerkships, written a book, married his hometown crush and started a family.

He joined Georgetown on a teaching fellowship about a year-and-a-half ago, working with students on cases in the appellate clinic. "He sees issues others don't, strategies that others don't," said Steven Goldblatt, director of appellate litigation. "He understands the problems of incarceration in a way that somebody who just studies them as an academic is not able to get," said William Treanor, the law school's dean.

Hopwood is still, at 41, haunted by guilt and regret for his crimes. But he is an optimist by nature, and he has accepted that he can only change the future. Now his primary goal is to help people, whether by serving as a reminder that you can turn your life around, by giving students an understanding of the real impact of the law, or, he hopes, by influencing the criminal justice system. (Adam Liptak, [New York Times](#) February 10, 2010 and Susan Surluga, [Washington Post](#), April 21, 2017)

These powerful cases reflect upon the actions, character and capabilities of all people. We are not perfect. Granted we may not have been jailed, pulled aside for speeding, or even chastised for inappropriate public behavior, but we've all done things that are not optimal. The Yomim Noraim are the opportunity when we honestly face ourselves by evaluating our actions during the past year and resolve to be better people. It is as if G-d is asking each of us to chair our own committee to

identify, establish and implement criteria to best direct our life. The following questions and source texts can help begin that journey.

### Questions and sources for discussion:

#### Do we possess free will?

The first hurdle to ascertain if people can change is whether or not we are equipped with the basic ability to make choices. Are man's actions pre-determined by one's environment and/or DNA, or do we possess the ability to exercise free will?

#### 1. Stephen Hawking, cited in Julian Baggini, *Freedom Regained*, University of Chicago Press, p. 2.

The initial configuration of the universe may have been chosen by God, or it may itself have been determined by the laws of science. In either case, it would seem that everything in the universe would then be determined by evolution according to the laws of science, so it is difficult to see how we can be masters of our fate.

#### 2. Rambam (Maimonides), *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Teshuvah 5:2-3.

Don't even consider that which the fools of the world say – that God decrees whether a person will be righteous or wicked from the time he is created. 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 over 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 incumbent 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;" that is, the choice is in your hands, and you have the ability to perform any acts that are humanly possible, good or bad.

#### 3. Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, *Sifsei Chaim*, Emunah & Bechirah, Vol. II, p. 17.

Each person has a spiritual soul that is connected to God above. In this world, God places the spiritual soul into the body of the physical person. It is true that the powers of nature were created by rules of cause and effect, but the soul of the spiritual person, which is connected to God above, is beyond the rules of reason.

The soul is not enslaved to any natural laws, but only to doing the will of God. Although a person has unique capabilities and characteristics which challenge or facilitate his freedom to choose, the choice between good or bad comes about through the spiritual soul, which is not compelled by the person's constitution.

#### Does having free will imply that it is incumbent upon us to change?

#### 4. 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?

**5. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur I*, p. 141.**

Self-knowledge is the prerequisite for any self-improvement. If one does not know himself, the gates of self-improvement are shut tight before him. 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 he will not be a person characterized by self-growth.

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

**6. Rav Tzadok HaKohen, *Tzidkat HaTzadik*, 130.**

Even though man has free choice, 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 constitutes a new creation, ex nihilo.

**7. 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... So too, man himself has the strength to conquer his evil nature and even change it to good through study and habit.

If we posit that we can in fact change and improve our character, is there a framework and process to accomplish that? Yes, and in Judaism it’s called “teshuvah.”

**What is teshuvah?**

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

One of the most common words in your prayer book is “sin.” It’s not a very pleasant sounding word. Certainly no one wants to look at himself or herself as a sinner. In Hebrew, the generic term for sin is *chet*. This term literally means “to make a mistake.” Sins, no thanks. But mistakes – sure – we all make mistakes.

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.

**9. Rabbi Mordechai Becher, *Gateway to Judaism*, ArtScroll Publishers, p. 136.**

אלוקי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה היא, אתה בראתה, אתה יצרתה, אתה נפחתה בי ...

*My God, the soul you have given me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You breathed it into me ...*

Teshuvah, literally translated means “return.” We believe that the soul is intrinsically pure and began its sojourn in this world in a state of purity. Mistakes and wrongdoings are departures from the essential nature of the human soul. Therefore when a person has done something wrong, the process of teshuvah is really that of going back to his or her true essence.

Since the Torah contains a *mitzvah* of teshuvah, by definition a person is *capable* of change. The components of teshuvah are regret for one’s behavior, cessation, confession, resolution for the future, and if necessary, asking forgiveness from others (Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah, 2:2. 9).

**How can we begin the process of change that leads to character transformation?**

**10. Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein, *Teshuvah*, Mosaica Press, p. 53.**

One of the most fascinating elements to appreciate regarding the teshuvah process, as well as most meaningful, is just how radical an act of real teshuvah is. The very fact that one is doing teshuvah means he realizes there are things he needs to do teshuvah for. This itself is a radical realization, for it is all too easy to refuse to recognize that one has any deficiencies at all. One who has this mindset has essentially enacted a policy of “no change.” To be open to the idea that some things might need changing, and moreover to actively seek them out, is nothing short of revolutionary!

**11. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Teshuvah – Restoring Life*, p. 20.**

A person who is roused by the call to teshuvah and infused with the desire to turn away from transgression is almost never able to change himself overnight; he cannot immediately turn into a different person. And his desire to change is fragile. It is likely to fade or even disappear with the passage of time. Rav Yisrael Salanter’s advice is a realistic response to this problem. By committing himself to perform a small action, a person’s desire to change will be maintained and eventually turn into an ongoing process. According to this understanding, Rav Yisrael’s approach is not unlike the popular cliché that great achievements begin with small steps.

**12. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Teshuvah – Restoring Life*, p. 22.**

Rav Yisrael’s advice is that we take a modest step, but one that initiates a change in *the direction* of our lives. The small action we choose touches a fundamental chord and unleashes positive drives and qualities latent in our personalities. And with the release of these energies there is a shift in the trajectory of our lives. If we can effect such a change for ourselves, even small, we will emerge into an altogether different reality. Life’s challenges and difficulties will still arise, of course, but from this new angle we will approach them from a different position to our previous immersion in transgression, when sparks of change were

but latent. Thus on the basis of a small action, there is great potential for growth and transformation.

**13. Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Teshuvah – Restoring Life*, pp. 128, 144, 150.**

The prerequisite for teshuvah is to work on the *amira ne'ima* approach – to develop a natural association with certain mitzvos and to discover ways in which they resonate with our current perspectives and apply to our life. Only then will we be in a position to commit to a small yet meaningful and lasting change in our actions. At that point, the behavioral change we have adopted will be underpinned by a strong personal identification and connection to the particular mitzvah we are working on. It will not feel like an alien imposition. This will enable us to overcome the difficulties which invariably accompany any attempt to carry out behavioral change. Developing this natural association ignites our resolve to implement the action we have committed to. In this way, our personal drives and propensities will be transformed, eventually being aligned with our pure inner will to fulfill the Torah...

The purpose of teshuvah is to change our lives and live according to the demands of the Torah. Given that there is a deep intrinsic relationship between our soul's root source and the holiness of the Torah, learning and attaching ourselves to the Torah is the central component in the work of teshuvah.

**14. Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, *The Jerusalem Kollel***

We look to modify behavior that demonstrates a change in our *attitude*.

**To what extent should we resolve to change this Yom Kippur?**

**15. Based on Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, *Gateway to Happiness*, p. 378 and Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, *Ner Le'Elef*.**

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.

**16. Rabbi Yisroel Miller, *What's Wrong with Being Happy*, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 147-148.**

It is well known to historians that the American Revolution succeeded not because George Washington knew how to win a battle – he didn't – but because he knew how to lose. He was defeated again and again, and the American Revolution is a story of one Colonial retreat after another. But Washington did know how to retreat, how to hold his army together and keep his ragtag forces from disintegrating, so that if an opportunity for victory ever arose he would be ready. He kept on failing and retreating for five years, but he never gave up; and when his big chance finally came at the siege of Yorktown he was prepared, and he won.

Anyone interested in his or her own life, anyone who has seriously tried to become a better person and who has done battle with the *yetzer hara*, the inclination to do evil, knows that that the analogy is apt. If we can only keep up the fight, even if it is only small-scale guerrilla warfare, then we are showing G-d we are still here for Him...

The frustrated idealist thinks, "Okay, you tell me not to give up on my dreams, and I should not abandon holy ideals even if I am completely divorced from them in practice. But what is all that dreaming worth, when I compare it to the deeds of a tzaddik, a righteous Jew who truly lives the Torah every day?"

The Baal Shem Tov's answer (taking the liberty of paraphrasing it in contemporary terms) is that if you note the winning times in a marathon race, you will find that they are measured in hours: 3 hours and 10 minutes, 2 hours 50 minutes and so on. How can a marathon runner be proud of winning a race in a couple of hours, when some Olympic races are over in a matter of minutes? The answer, of course, is that a runner's accomplishment is not judged only by his finish time; it is judged by his finish time compared to the distance he has to cover, and any run over a longer track takes more time and is judged accordingly.

In the same way, each person on earth has his own race to run. Some of us are given a short track, others have a marathon, still others have strategically placed stones and potholes along the way. Each person's place in the Divine Plan is different from that of everyone else, and each of us has a unique way of sanctifying G-d's Name. You may feel far from Torah, with endless miles to run, but since the greatest tzaddik does not have your exact situation, even he cannot create the same holiness that only you can.

If you are "at the ends of the heavens," [D'varim 30:4] very far away but still trying to grab on, then the Torah says, "misham, from there," from your unique vantage point and hardship G-d will help you; because no one else can demonstrate sanctity the way you do, when, with your uniquely individual difficulties, you refuse to drop out of the race and you keep on going, no matter how far away the finish line may be.

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