**Chapter One**

 **Get Happy**

The happiest person I have ever met was my husband’s grandmother. She recently passed away at the age of ninety-five. When she was alive, she always had a smile on her face. As soon as you saw her you couldn’t help but feel the joy radiating from within her. She was active, always in high spirits, and usually had a joke to share.

Once, wanting to crack the mystery of her never-fading smile, I asked her, “Savta Senior, what’s your secret? How are you always so happy?” With a twinkle in her eye she responded with a chuckle.

 “Secret? It’s really no secret. Just don’t think about the bad things in life. Only focus on the good. That’s it.”

The more I contemplated her words, the more I realized the profundity of her advice. We choose how to perceive and interpret the events in our life, and we can choose to look at the positive.

When God created the world, the Torah says, He “saw that it was good.” Over the course of creation, this phrase is repeated seven times. One might think it would have been sufficient to state it once at the end of creation, to wrap things up. So why does the Torah repeat the phrase over and over?

We human beings are hardwired for critical thinking. This amazing capability allows us to assess the world around us in an intelligent way. But this trait can also color our perspective and cause us to see the world through a negative lens. The Torah repeats the phrase, “God saw that it was good” to emphasize the point that we need to constantly be focusing on the good – every single day.

That’s the key to happiness.

Reframing is a powerful technique that can turn any negative situation into something positive. Visiting my parents in Atlanta, I saw a beautiful piece of art hanging above the mantel. Although it was small, it looked like it had come from an expensive gallery. I asked my mother, “Where did you get this? It’s beautiful!”

She laughed and said, “Oh that? I picked it up at a garage sale for five dollars. It had such an ugly frame, so I had it reframed. The frame cost a fortune, but the art cost practically nothing.”

We have been blessed with the incredible power to reframe and train ourselves to put things in proper perspective. Our lives are comprised of thousands of images and experiences which we may view as ugly. But if we can take the time and energy to approach them in a different way, these images can be transformed into beautiful works of art. The key is in the frame; by putting time and effort into our reframing, we can see our lives for the masterpieces they really are.

For example, imagine you’re standing in line at the pharmacy waiting to pick up your prescription. There are ten people in front of you, and you have to wait and wait. Apparently, it’s the pharmacist’s first day on the job. If you want your medicine, it’s going to take some time. How do you feel?

Situations like these can be incredibly frustrating. As the anger builds, you hear yourself saying, *I’m wasting my time*! As the minutes tick by, your anger level increases.

Now try to reframe the situation. Are you *really*wasting your time? Here’s your opportunity to work on mastering patience and anger management. This can become a very meaningful endeavor for self-improvement.

Reframing has the power to change the way we look at the world around us, from something as simple to standing in line at the pharmacy to the most powerful events in our lives. Practice reframing with your kids. Throw out a scenario and ask them how they can reframe it and look at it in a positive way. The more you get into the habit of seeing the good, the happier you will be.

This was SavtaSenior’s secret.

*"Savta Senior" (Miriam Lindeberg, z”l) passed away on December 4, 2016, just shy of her 96th birthday. She died unexpectedly yet peacefully in her apartment in Jerusalem. She was healthy, happy, and had a sharp mind for all of her days. We attribute her longevity to the fact that she always saw the good, no matter what the circumstances. May this article serve as a reminder for how we all can really live life to its fullest, in happiness.*

 *Dedicated to the memory of Miriam bat HaRav Tzvi Shalom, z”l*

**Chapter Eleven**

 **Small Choices, Big Changes**

After I taught a class on spiritual growth, a student shared with me her personal weight loss story. Though she now looked fit and radiant, for years she’d been unsuccessful in her attempts to slim down.

In the past she’d engaged in crash diets, breaking them every time. Then she changed her *perspective*. It was no longer about numbers on a scale, an unrealistic time limit, or altogether cutting out certain food groups. Instead it was about overall healthy living. She slowly made changes until her whole body was transformed.

She attributed her success to her “mini” decisions. For example, choosing movement instead of remaining sedentary or opting for healthy food instead of curling up on the couch with ice cream. Each small moment built upon the other. Her small choices are what led to big changes.

Her success story contains the secret to all types of growth – physical, spiritual, financial, you name it. The small decisions we make in life are the ones that create the biggest change.

Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller shared the following insight. During World War II, Jews knocked on the doors of gentiles, begging their neighbors to hide them. In each case the non-Jew saw a trembling Jewish family and had moments to decide whether or not to guard them. Actually, that enormous decision wasn’t made right then, but *years* before.

The huge decisions we make are determined by all the small positive choices we make throughout our life – choices that are so small we don’t really think of them as significant to our growth. Every time non-Jews in Europe gave a seat on a bus to a pregnant woman or smiled at a stranger, they strengthened their kindness trait. These seemingly inauspicious acts flexed and built their spiritual kindness muscles so that by the time a Jewish family came knocking on their door, they didn’t vacillate.

In fact, after the war, when these righteous gentiles were interviewed and asked, “How did you summon the strength to hide Jewish families?” they replied as though the answer should have been obvious: “How could we not?”

The pivotal decision to hide Jews, at great risk to themselves and their own families, was formed by lifelong smaller decisions that created the type of person who could say yes to such a request.

So too we slowly transform ourselves through the choices we make in our daily lives.

There are treadmills that can calculate the climbing distance of the person exercising. One such machine has a screen that displays images of various landmarks. Based on your incline and speed, it determines how many feet you have “climbed” in relation to the building. Surprisingly, a person can be halfway up the Statue of Liberty or even the Eiffel Tower quite quickly. In life, the key to significant growth is to create a “small incline” of small choices for ourselves.

The operative word is *small*; otherwise we don’t end up following through. Putting an incline at 7+ on that treadmill will definitely create an intense exercise experience. Yet every step can feel treacherous and contribute to an abbreviated workout. I once noticed that when the incline was on .5, I was still able to reach significant heights. I hardly felt the difference in intensity and could continue walking for long stretches while still reaching vertical heights.

When people try to take on too much, they often lose it all. My toddler loves to play with a toy called Magna-Tiles and is never satisfied with the number of tiles she has. When she reaches for more, she inevitably drops what was originally in her hand. So too with spiritual growth: when you take too much upon yourself it’s easy to lose it all.

We see this played out with New Year’s resolutions, when so many people attempt to overachieve. As mentioned, the way to successfully fulfill our resolutions, whether physical or spiritual, is to set “mini goals.” Perhaps the best approach is to choose something so small that you hardly consider it a goal.

A teacher of mine had sage advice. “Pick something small, but I’m talking *really* small. Take a resolution you are thinking about and cut it in half. Then take that half and cut it into an eighth. Only work on that new, smaller resolution.”

To illustrate, I had a student who was deeply inspired by the concept of making *berachos*before eating. At the time, she rarely did so and couldn’t fathom how it would be possible for her to remember to say a blessing every time she ate.

After I shared my teacher’s advice with her, she decided to make a *berachah*only on one flavor of yogurt: strawberry. As you can imagine, initially she wasn’t saying *berachos* very often. But it was such a miniscule goal that she was able to stick to it. Slowly but surely she added to this “mini” resolution until she reached her ultimate goal of reciting a blessing over all foods.

When we take small *mitzvos* upon ourselves it almost goes unnoticed, even to us. Yet we are not alone in being oblivious to the growth: the *yetzer hara* also has trouble detecting such small steps.

Israeli pilots on their way to rescue hostages in Entebbe in 1976 and to destroy Saddam Hussein’s nuclear reactor in 1981 flew relatively close to the ground in order to escape detection by enemy radar. Similarly, with baby steps we can fly, undetected, below the *yetzer hara*’s radar system.

When we try to take too much upon ourselves the *yetzer hara* intervenes, and we can end up crashing. But the small choices we make tend to go unnoticed, both by ourselves and by the *yetzer hara*. Only when we look back do we realize how far we’ve flown.

Moving in small steps is the key to big spiritual and physical success.

**Chapter Forty-Three**

 **The Ketchup Escapade**

My precocious, headstrong preschooler (or, as we like to say, “threenager”), has recently been asking for ketchup to accompany every morsel of food she eats. Not only does she insist on it for foods typically eaten with ketchup, like hot dogs and French fries, but also with more unusual fare – like cucumbers. (For fear of making you queasy, I’ll spare you more details of her other concoctions.)

One evening at dinner, I brought her a plate with a hot dog and bun laced with her usual ketchup. Rather than showing appreciation or even indifference, she cried out in an exasperated voice, “I don’t want the ketchup! Ew!!”

I was shocked and frustrated by her reaction. Her needs and wants felt like a moving target. Since my whole family eats dinner together, I had other children to feed simultaneously. I remained calm as she asked (read: demanded) me to wipe the ketchup off, and – just to be certain there was not a trace left – to wash the hot dog. She also requested a fresh bun, because God forbid she should see any leftover ketchup markings.

I quickly performed damage control and in no time her hot dog was as good as new.

Dinner continued and as the meal progressed, I bet you can’t guess what she asked me for…

I thought. “After she made a stink about not wanting the ketchup, she *wants some now*?!”

Apparently, she had wanted the ketchup only on her plate, not touching any of her food. (Because that would just be silly, right?) Yet, by the end of dinner, she was meekly asking if I could help her put ketchup on her second hot dog.

If that is not full circle, I don’t know what is.

Although at times I do get outwardly frustrated, this time I managed to remember that she is just a child with developing tastes. In fact, her behavior reminded me of an experience I had when I was expecting her…

I was at a restaurant, and I ordered minestrone soup. With my pregnancy-induced heightened taste buds, the soup was the best I had ever eaten. I enjoyed it so much, in fact, that I insisted on going back to the same restaurant the next night, and ordering it again. Yet, less than 24 hours later, I had a sip of the exact same soup and almost spit it out because it tasted so horrible to me. I even asked the chef if he had made a mistake, and he assured me that he had used the same recipe for the past eleven years. This memory of my own vacillating taste buds helped me control my annoyance towards my daughter.

Parenting is a 24/7 job that tests our limits and patience like nothing else. Sometimes the “in the moment lesson” is just that parenting can be frustrating. But there is a secondary lesson to be gleaned: When we do something wrong or annoying, we make all sorts of excuses. Judging ourselves in a favorable way comes naturally; it is extending benefit of the doubt to others that is a challenge.

On another occasion, I was going about my routine while my then nine-month-old was crawling and exploring on the floor. I walked towards the closet and saw a paper hanger cover from the dry cleaner’s lying sloppily in my baby’s path. I started to fume. I thought, “How could my husband just leave a dangerous hanger on the floor like that? Doesn’t he know our baby could get hurt?”

Then I realized that it was my dry-cleaning wrapper and hanger. I had left it there. Suddenly, every excuse came to mind: I was in a rush; I didn’t realize; I needed to attend to the crying baby, etc.

When it came to judging myself I was extremely generous, but unfortunately I did not extend the same courtesy to my husband. One way to help ourselves judge others as we would judge ourselves is to think of the following quote from Rabbi Zalman Mindell: “If I were you, I would be you.”

What he means is this: If I were your age – with your personality, experiences, life situation, background, and income – I would be doing exactly what you are doing right now.

This type of benefit of the doubt helps tremendously. Judging favorably is not about making up unrealistic excuses: “She is late because an elephant was crossing the street and blocking traffic.” It has to be believable. The best way to make it believable is to connect current events to something that once happened to us.

The next time that you are in a position where you are doing something that others could easily misjudge you, make a mental note of what your reason was. For example: *I left the dry cleaning hanger on the floor because the baby was crying and I had to run to her*. Then take that excuse, file it in your mind, and extend that excuse to someone else, almost like “paying it forward.”

This applies to even the most mundane of situations, such as a simple text. Suppose you intended to text someone back – you even wrote up the response, but didn’t have the chance to press send. Or perhaps you thought you sent it, but your finger missed the send button. Days later you realize the text never went through.

The next time someone doesn’t respond to you, remember your personal excuse from the previous experience. When you are late because of factors like traffic, a hard time picking out clothing, or a child needing something as you were on our way out, you should also file that reason and use it with regard to someone else. With those excuses in mind, it becomes easier to judge your friend with favor.

This type of dan lekaf zechushelps tremendously. It is the only way that I was able to remain calm with my daughter during the ketchup episode. Because I remembered my own erratic taste buds fluctuating during my experience with the minestrone soup, I was able to judge her as I would judge myself.