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פנו דרך

Clearing a Path for Teshuvah

A Practical Guide
to Lasting Change

Rabbi Levi Lebovits

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**A Practical Guide
to Lasting Change**

**Rabbi Levi Lebovits
The Vaad Project**



A Community Initiative of Yeshiva Toras Chaim, Denver

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Leadership & Learning – Our Legacy

Rabbi Yitzchok Wasserman
Rosh Yeshiva

Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan
Rosh Yeshiva

כ"י אלול תש"פ
September 9, 2020

In these short pages, Rabbi Lebovits has managed to distill the essence of "Teshuvah," the means by which a person can transform himself, to change his outlook and aspirations. The step-by-step instructions are a great means by which to accomplish this goal. Rabbi Lebovits is to be congratulated on this major accomplishment.

יצחק ווסרמן

יצחק ווסרמן

ישראל מאיר קגן

ישראל מאיר קגן

Clearing a Path for Teshuvah

Introduction

Elul isn't meant to be a time of frustration and discouragement.

It's supposed to be an uplifting time. An empowering time. A time when we cleanse ourselves, renew our commitment to our Creator, and transform into better Jews.

Many of us dream of an Elul experience like the one described above. We understand how badly we need to change. We yearn to reconnect with our Creator, to progress in our avodas Hashem.

But we're discouraged. We don't feel motivated enough, or confident enough, to embark on such a taxing journey. Why? Because every year, no matter how much effort we invest, our carefully selected kabbalos (resolutions) seem to unravel in a depressingly short amount of time.

It's hard to throw ourselves into the work of teshuvah when a niggling inner voice keeps whispering that we won't succeed. It's disheartening to feel as though every Elul finds us back at square one. Why should the current year be any different?

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This Elul, instead of asking “why,” let us ask, “how?” How can we make this year different? How can we finally create lasting changes and truly transform into better Jews?

Rav Yisrael Salanter, renowned father of the Mussar Movement, used to set himself one very specific goal for the Yamim Noraim (High Holidays). He would spend the entire forty-day period between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur preparing himself to emerge from that holiest day with one kabbalah ketana, one small resolution that he felt certain he could maintain.

If his resolutions were always small, why did they need to be built on forty days of preparation? Because Rav Yisrael’s primary goal was to ensure that his commitments lasted. He understood that this one sliver of lasting progress, this single permanent step in the right direction, would set him on a path of continuous teshuvah and growth for the year to come.

This kuntres (booklet) guides us how to clear our own path to lasting teshuvah. How to finally break that frustrating cycle of unsustainable growth. Based on the teachings of Rav Reuven Leuchter shlita, these pages help us develop the tools we need to truly effect lasting change. Eye-opening insights and practical advice will empower our teshuvah journey and enable us to experience a truly meaningful Elul and Yamim Noraim.

Levi Lebovits
Elul 5780

Step 1

Explore Your Inner World

“For this mitzvah is not hidden, nor is it distant from you. It’s not in the heavens... nor is it across the sea... Rather, the matter is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart to perform it.” (Devarim 30:11-14)

According to the Ramban, this foundational posuk refers to the mitzvah of teshuvah. If so, what does it mean that teshuvah is “close” to us?

We live in a results-oriented world, where value is measured by tangible, quantifiable accomplishments. We’ve unconsciously applied this attitude to our Judaism as well. We’ve become accustomed to thinking that teshuvah is primarily about correcting our actions, about doing things right.

In our rush to produce results, we tend to forget one important fact: that our behavior comes from somewhere. Our actions are outgrowths of our internal world – our thoughts, feelings, perspectives, biases and drives. These internal factors influence every aspect of our conduct – including our struggles with avodas Hashem. Therefore, mending our ways entails more than simply changing our external behavior.

Real change requires that we address the underlying thoughts and drives responsible for our struggle. If we ignore

those thoughts and drives, jumping to adopt behaviors beyond the reach of who we are inside, we won't be able to support lasting change.

Take the example of one who struggles to fit Torah study into his schedule. As Yom Kippur approaches, seeking to make a significant improvement, he takes on the serious commitment of daily Daf Yomi study.

At first, the inspiration of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur keeps him attending his daily shiurim. As the weeks pass, however, his drive begins to peter out – as does his commitment. A few months later, he finds himself back at square one, with nothing to show for his earlier idealism and effort. He attempted to reach a goal that his internal world wasn't ready to sustain – and therefore failed to make lasting progress.

The Ramban is teaching us that in doing teshuvah, we should be focusing on that which is *close* to us – our internal world. We should be exploring the inner causes of our struggles and working from within outward.

The Mesillas Yesharim (Perek 4) echoes this idea by defining teshuvah as “akiras haratzon,” the uprooting of one's will. Teshuvah must target one's desire to do an aveirah, not simply the actual action of the aveirah. When we find ourselves struggling with any given area of Torah, our first step toward teshuvah must be to look inside ourselves and identify the source of that struggle.

Finding and remedying the internal tension behind our weaknesses means that we have laid the foundations for lasting change. We've converted ourselves into people who indeed possess the ability both to reach and to remain on the level we would like to attain.

Exercise: Choose an area of Torah life with which you struggle. Instead of jumping toward resolutions to “do things differently next time,” take some time to reflect on your internal world. What inner factors are prompting your behavior?

What feelings or desires might be influencing your decisions? What personal traits might be triggering your resistance? Asking yourself these questions will help you pinpoint exactly where to focus your teshuvah efforts.

Step 2

The Real You

We've discovered our first step toward lasting teshuvah: delving into our inner worlds and identifying the source of our struggles. Eager to make headway on our teshuvah journey, we hasten to begin our first exercise – only to find ourselves vigorously resisting the self-exploration. Why? What makes this step so difficult for us?

Simply put, we are afraid of exploring our inner selves, fearful of what we might find. We dread the idea of admitting to our shortcomings. Why? Because we live in a heavily results-oriented world. Western culture has trained us to measure our worth based on our successes and failures. Our value derives from the sum total of our accomplishments – or lack thereof.

This attitude affects our spiritual lives as well. To our minds, our worth depends on *how much* we accomplish in Torah and mitzvos. When we daven with kavanah, learn diligently, and refrain from lashon hara, our value increases. When we fall short of our ruchniyus (spiritual) goals – wasting our time, missing davening, and succumbing to anger and jealousy, we become lowly and worthless.

This attitude runs completely contrary to the Torah's estimation of our worth. Our value rests not in what we do or what we have but in the simple reality of *who we are*. By creating us in His image, Hashem instilled inestimable great-

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ness into each and every one of us. He bestowed upon us the power to create, to affect the entire world and influence its direction – just as He does.

This greatness is our essence. Unchangeable and unassailable, it will always be the core of who we are. Our actions don't add to or subtract from this innate value. They simply reflect whether or not we are actualizing the greatness within us.

With this perspective in mind, our shortcomings need no longer threaten us. Admitting to a flaw no longer diminishes who we are. It simply alerts us to the fact that we are squandering the opportunity to actualize the incredible potential within us.

The great ba'alei mussar of old felt very comfortable confronting their shortcomings, dedicating their lives to exploring and addressing them. In fact, in his sefer *Or Yisrael* (Michtav 10), Rav Yisrael Salanter asserts that awareness of one's deficiencies, far from prompting denial or avoidance, actually motivates him to repair them. Recognizing the true extent of our glorious potential breeds within us a desire to realize that greatness. With this desire alive within us, every new weakness we discover spurs us to work on ourselves and move closer to the greatness within our reach.

Rabbeinu Yonah (Shaarei Teshuvah 1:10) identifies this concept as the basis of regret over committing an aveirah. Realizing the potential Hashem has granted us to achieve greatness makes us feel deeply regretful when we fail to actualize our gifts.

If we can set aside our Western-influenced scale of self-worth and instead embrace the Torah's perspective, we will be able to eliminate much of the despair and denial impeding our teshuvah journey. We must internalize that our shortcomings do not define us – that they are simply failures on our part to actualize the fathomless greatness within us. This realization will reduce our resistance to self-exploration –

and inspire in its place a desire to discover our shortcomings and rectify.

Exercise: Think back to a moment in your life when your true greatness expressed itself. Perhaps you were learning and managed to truly lose yourself in the bliss of Torah study. Perhaps you davened a particularly sincere tefillah which left you feeling fulfilled and close to Hashem. Maybe you stifled your anger at a loved one and instead brought them closer with patience and positivity.

Savor the memory of that experience. Dwell on it for a few minutes. As you do, observe that during that experience, your true self emerged as you expressed the essence of your neshama. Remind yourself that any lesser behavior simply indicates a failure to live up to who you truly are. Recognizing this will spark within you a true desire to remedy your shortcomings and draw closer to the greatness inside you.

Step 3

“The Buck Stops Here!”

The insights that we’ve gathered thus far have empowered us to discover and acknowledge our flaws. Now, we face a new challenge – our natural desire to justify our actions and avoid taking responsibility for them.

We humans are avid players of the “blame game,” constantly shifting responsibility for our own misdeeds onto anything and everyone besides ourselves. We blame our upbringing, which failed to prepare us properly for avodas Hashem. We blame our friends, teachers, and family members for their lack of support or negative influence. We even go so far as to blame Hashem, bemoaning the faulty traits and trying circumstances He has allotted us. These justifications enable us

to deny responsibility for our past actions – bringing our teshuvah journey to an abrupt halt.

The world around us has conditioned us to believe that we depend completely on outside factors to prompt and fuel our growth. We rely on motivational speakers and spiritually rousing events for inspiration. We depend on our environment, community, peers and mentors to stimulate and support self-development. We tell ourselves that true growth is only possible when one possesses just the right personal qualities and influences. We argue that without the presence of these helpful factors, success is beyond us – thereby absolving ourselves of responsibility to change.

Our excuses do hold a certain degree of validity. Without inspiration, support, and inborn gifts, growth can indeed be extremely difficult. Ultimately, however, hiding behind even the most well-founded excuses will only hurt us. We, and we alone, are responsible for our growth and for our misdeeds. No matter how compellingly we justify our mistakes, the damage caused to our spiritual status cannot be rectified until we ourselves take the initiative to make things right.

The Talmud (Avodah Zara 17a) powerfully illustrates this point through the story of Rebbi Elazar ben Durdaya. After a lifetime immersed in extremely serious aveiros, Elazar ben Durdaya was moved to repent. Aware of the magnitude of his sins, he begged the world's mighty natural features – the mountains and valleys, the heavens and the earth, the sun, moon and stars – to pray for mercy on his behalf. After each in turn denied his request, he came to the realization that “*Ein hadavar taluy elah bi*” – “This matter (of teshuvah) depends on me alone.” Nothing and nobody other than he was responsible for the state of his soul.

Outside inspiration can be very helpful. Encouragement, support, and personal gifts certainly have their place. Ultimately, however, growth only occurs when we ourselves step forward and take action. In Pirkei Avos (1:14), Hillel Hazakein

famously states: “*Im ein ani li, mi li?*” “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Rabbeinu Yonah interprets his words to mean, ‘If I do not galvanize myself to grow, who else will galvanize me?’ No matter how powerful, outside inspiration is fleeting – and therefore insufficient. Only when we learn to motivate ourselves, when we internalize that responsibility for our growth rests exclusively on our shoulders, will we be able to effect lasting change.

Exercise: Call to mind the area of Torah life with which you’ve been struggling. List all possible excuses that will allow you to avoid responsibility for the issue. Some may sound silly, others compellingly valid. No matter their nature, listen to each one seriously.

When you’ve finished, remind yourself that despite all these justifications, the proverbial buck still stops with you. You and you alone are ultimately responsible to address and correct your shortcomings.

How does that sense of accountability touch you? Does it seem harsh? Frightening? Stimulating? Empowering? Before you move on, take a moment to contemplate your reaction.

Step 4

Road Signs, Not Roadblocks

After completing the exercise above, some of us might have found ourselves feeling resistant. After all, many of us do face significant challenges. We find it difficult to understand how Hashem can hold us to such severe standards of accountability when we’ve been dealt such a limiting set of circumstances.

How can we address these feelings? By strengthening and refining our emunah in the concept of hashgacha pratit.

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Many understand hashgacha pratis as the simple belief that everything that happens comes from Hashem. We thank Him for the good things and resign ourselves to accepting the difficulties He sends us. When life doesn't go our way, we comfort ourselves with the thought that we will one day see Hashem's wisdom in hindsight and things won't seem so unfair.

Hashgacha pratis, however, is not simply meant to serve as a passive reaction to life. On the contrary, it's meant to stimulate an active response on our part. Hashgacha pratis doesn't only show us what Hashem does *for* us. It also illuminates what Hashem wants *from* us.

Each one of us, explains the Ramchal (Derech Hashem 2:3), bears a unique purpose in Hashem's kingdom that only we can fulfill. Hashem specifically designs every aspect of our lives to enable us to carry out our mission. The challenges we encounter are custom-tailored to activate the unique greatness within us.

For example, writes the Ramchal, Hashem might make someone poor in order to help him develop a sense of satisfaction with the little his Creator has given him. In other instances, He might make someone wealthy, offering him the chance to become a giver and have mercy on those with less.

We defend our suboptimal behavior with countless compelling excuses: "How can I be a respectful, loving spouse when I'm married to such a difficult person?" "How can I clear more time in my day for Torah study? I barely make ends meet with the extensive hours I work." "How can I be careful with my speech when doing so will make me a social outcast?"

Hashgacha pratis teaches us that these excuses, the very factors that we claim hamper our ability to do right, have actually been handpicked by Hashem to stimulate the precise growth He wants to see from us. He isn't asking us to grow *despite* our excuses, but *because* of them. Our specific per-

sonality, capabilities, upbringing, experiences and circumstances are exactly the recipe we need to make our intended contribution to His master-plan.

We need to view our challenges not as *roadblocks* but as road *signs*, directing us toward success in our unique mission. Internalizing this perspective simply leaves no room for excuses. We, with all our lacks and disadvantages, are exactly where we are meant to be. Our task is to grow specifically within the framework of who we are.

Hashem involves Himself so personally and thoroughly in our lives because He wants us to succeed. He wants us to grow into our unique best selves, and gives us everything we need to make that happen. Appreciating this reality gives us the courage to stop bemoaning the obstacles in our path and instead begin to work on surmounting them.

Exercise: Think back to a time in your life when you truly felt Hashem's guiding Hand. Was it when you found your spouse? When you obtained your dream job? When you managed to emerge unscathed from a frightening situation?

Focus on this memory and the assurance it affords you of Hashem's involvement in your life. Now, remind yourself that Hashem is equally involved in the rest of your life. Your stresses, defeats and disappointments are also part of His love-filled plan to draw out your potential.

Regard this recognition as the backdrop for your teshuvah journey. Everything about you, every mistake you've made, every challenge you grapple with, plays a crucial role in helping you actualize the unique greatness within you.

Step 5

Discovering Your “Mi’odness”

“Ein hadavar talui elah bi.” Not only have we come to accept this truth; we’ve also learned to embrace it through our newfound understanding of hashgacha pratis. Armed with renewed motivation, we forge ahead with our teshuvah journey – only to be confronted with yet another roadblock: our fear of failure.

Oftentimes, real teshuvah seems impossibly difficult. The enormity of the work involved makes successful change seem like a faraway dream. These thoughts take a steep toll on our motivation to pursue teshuvah. After all, why should we invest precious energy and effort into a venture that may only bring us shame and disappointment?

How can we alleviate this very real concern? How can we motivate ourselves to press on in our work despite feeling doomed to failure?

Remedying this issue requires a two-pronged approach. To begin, let us refer back to Rabbeinu Yonah’s earlier insight, where he explains that regret over our aveiros stems from recognizing the vast potential for greatness within us.

This insight reminds us that we tend to grossly underestimate our potential for growth. To gain a clearer picture of our true abilities, we can refer to posuk 31 in the first perek of Bereishis: “And Hashem saw everything that He had done, and it was *tov mi’od* – very good.”

Our Sages observe that “mi’od,” used here to mean “very,” contains the same three Hebrew letters (mem, alef, and daled) as the word “adam” – man.

What is the relationship between “adam” and “mi’od”?

“Mi’od,” “very,” is a word that suggests abundance without limits. Unfettered by amounts, it conveys a sense of endless magnitude. At our core, our Sages explain, we humans are “mi’od.” We are endless – endless in the depth of our strength and in our capacity to grow.

Our personal perception of our abilities affords us but a miniscule glimpse into our true essence. Layers upon layers of greatness reside within us, waiting for us to bring them to light. Every day – truly every moment – affords us another opportunity to further raise our limits and achieve greatness.

Next time we feel overwhelmed by our failures and limitations, let us remember that we are so much more capable than the limited beings we perceive ourselves to be. We *do* have the strength to overcome our challenges. We *do* possess the skill and creativity to successfully address our struggles. When internalized, this realization will inject us with the boost of confidence we need to rouse ourselves and resume our journey along the path of teshuvah.

Exercise: Connect with your “mi’od’-ness.” Sift through your memory for a time when you accomplished something you thought was truly beyond you. Perhaps you surprised yourself by comprehending an extremely difficult piece of Torah. Perhaps you overcame a painful grudge and forgave, or even reconciled with, the subject of your hard feelings. Maybe your “mi’od” moment saw you controlling yourself in the face of powerful temptation.

Whatever the details, this moment should highlight a time when you drew upon never-before-discovered inner strength in order to achieve a higher level than you’d ever imagined yourself reaching. Taking a few moments to relive this memory will help you build your belief in yourself and in your ever-present ability to transcend your limitations.

Step 6

Bold as a Leopard

Recognizing our “mi’odness” serves as an excellent first step toward eradicating our fear of failure. What happens, however, when we realize that we may very well fail to actualize that potential? How can we motivate ourselves to keep hiking along the path of teshuvah when we might never reach the end of the road?

Our Sages solve this quandary with one clear instruction: “Hevei az kanamer: be bold as a leopard... in doing the will of your Father in Heaven.” (Avos 5:23)

Leopards are deeply familiar with failure. Despite its fierce, powerful reputation, the leopard actually proves terribly ineffective as a hunter. In general, only ten to fifteen percent of his quests end in successful kills. His dismal record, however, never seems to prevent him from trying again. Despite the slimness of his chances for success, he throws every ounce of his strength into pursuing each target he detects.

This is the “boldness” of the leopard – the daring to acknowledge the overwhelming possibility of failure, and persevere despite it. The azus (brazenness) to deliberately push forward in defiance of rationality and reason.

Chazal desired that we utilize this same azus in our dealings with the yetzer hara. When that wily fellow highlights the impossibility of a mitzvah, our Sages advise us to answer him with the boldness of the leopard: “Yes, I very well may fail. But I won’t allow that fact to keep me from trying.”

This attitude, of course, begs a question: why *should* we try so hard? What makes our efforts valuable if we are virtually doomed to failure? To answer this question, let us recall our earlier realization that Western culture has instilled us with a

heavily results-oriented mindset.

In the eyes of the Western world, effort holds value only to the extent that it produces a measurable outcome. In the Torah's eyes, however, success in life is not determined by the visible amount of feathers in one's cap. Life is about serving our Creator, about nurturing our relationship with the most important Figure in our lives. In a relationship, love and esteem are measured not by tangible gifts or favors, but by the effort, care and self-sacrifice that goes into those favors. That is what determines how much interest, respect, and appreciation the giver feels.

Take the example of two men whose wives both dream of owning a specific designer watch. The first man, a wealthy tycoon, sends his assistant to the nearest department store and within hours presents a gift-wrapped package to his wife. The second fellow, a poor laborer, spends three years saving up for the watch by working extra shifts and going without the few poor luxuries he had previously allowed himself – only to be robbed on the way to the department store and compelled to return to his wife empty-handed.

Who produced more tangible results? The wealthy man, of course. But whose actions showed an astronomically greater amount of appreciation for his wife? The poor laborer's. While he couldn't fulfill her material dream, the care and effort he invested in her wishes enhanced their relationship in the truest way possible.

Hashem does not measure our spiritual success based only on the results we produce. He cherishes every bit of work we invest in His service, regardless of whether that work leads to a perfect outcome. It is our effort that demonstrates our love and devotion to Him. Our willingness to attempt even the most "impossible" mitzvos conveys to Him that His wishes are important to us. The value and esteem we express through our toil gives Him tremendous nachas, regardless of the outcome of our efforts.

These ideas clarify why Rav Yisrael’s admittedly small kabbalah serves as sufficient teshuvah. Rav Yisrael explains that according to Chazal, we don’t require complete teshuvah to merit atonement on Yom Kippur. We must simply be *engaged in the process* of teshuvah. Hashem does not desire perfection or completion. He simply wants us to demonstrate that we value His wishes and consider them worthy of our effort.

In the Heavenly economy, effort is the currency of choice. Instead of despairing when success seems out of reach, let us remind ourselves of the boundless value Hashem attaches to every step we take along our teshuvah journey. The end of the road is not Hashem’s focus. As long as we are progressing, we are succeeding.

Exercise: Think of a task or activity that you are certain you can’t do – and do it anyway. You should ideally choose something in the realm of avodas Hashem, but any mundane activity will do as well. This action will stretch your “azus” muscle, your ability to defy the rational inner voice informing you that the task ahead of you is impossible.

Savor the sense of power your actions afford you. Relish the satisfaction you glean from pushing against the odds, even when results are negligible. These feelings and ideas will help you silence your fear of failure and pursue teshuvah with confidence.

Step 7

Living “Hayom”

In several places throughout the Torah, the word “hayom” (“today”) seems to receive special significance. As we read in Shema, *“V’hayu hadvarim ha’eileh asher anochi mitzavicha*

hayom al livavecha.” Other examples include the Jewish People’s arrival at Har Sinai – “**Bayom hazeh ba’u Midbar Sinai,**” and Moshe Rabbeinu’s instructions to follow Hashem’s commandments – “**Hayom hazeh Hashem elokecha mitzvicha la’asos.**”

In his commentary on all of these pesukim, Rashi explains that the word “hayom” teaches us an important lesson: to constantly view the Torah’s words as if they were new to us – as if Hashem had just spoken them for the first time.

How can we view the Torah’s ancient words as new? How can we approach mitzvos as novelties? We’ve been following the very same mitzvah routine every single day for years, decades, centuries. We can recite the words to most tefillos and berachos in our sleep – and very often, we do. Our avodas Hashem has become lackluster and robotic because of this constant repetition. Under such conditions, how can we possibly relate to Torah life as new and fresh?

To answer this question, we need to make a simple but fundamental mind-shift. We must learn to appreciate that every day and every moment we experience is completely new, never having occurred before and never to occur again.

Just as every moment presents an entirely unique experience, every action does as well. The Shacharis we davened this morning was not simply another Shacharis. It was this morning’s Shacharis, a brand new and completely unique event. Candle-lighting this coming Friday night won’t just be another week’s candle-lighting – it will signify the never-offered-before opportunity to sanctify this week’s completely unique Shabbos. Ultimately, we have no need to “make our mitzvos new.” Each mitzvah we perform is already new in itself!

We tend to make the mistake of looking at our actions simply as repetitions of what we’ve done in the past. Instead, we need to put aside our memories of all the other times we’ve performed mitzvos and experience each one as its own inde-

pendent event. We need to live “hayom,” in the present moment. Because when we focus fully on the mitzvah at hand and engage in the experience without relating it to past or future events, we produce mitzvos filled with intent, sincerity, and connection to Hashem.

Interestingly, the Torah invokes the word “hayom” when speaking about teshuvah as well: “*Ki hamitzvah hazos asher anochi metzavecha **hayom** lo niflais hi mimcha etc.*” What role does the “hayom mindset” play in the teshuvah process?

When many of us attempt a teshuvah journey, we do so lugging years’ worth of baggage. We wonder how people like us, weighed down by such a long history of sin and failed teshuvah, can possibly succeed in making things right.

If we would adopt a “hayom mindset,” however, we would realize that our history has no bearing on the present. That at any instant, we can drop our baggage and choose to do teshuvah. Our past record matters not an ounce to how we utilize the current moment.

Snapping at our spouse or child in the morning does not have to mean a gloomy day. If we would learn to live each moment separately, we would realize that each new instant affords us another opportunity to switch to a calm, happy attitude. Or to gather our distracted thoughts and concentrate on the last few sections of Shemoneh Esrei. Or to switch mid-conversation to a topic that doesn’t involve lashon hora.

Or, to stop focusing on our past mistakes and make a decision to do teshuvah.

Exercise: Choose a mitzvah that is part of your daily routine, like laying tefillin, davening Mincha, bentching, or even washing netilas yadayim. Today, when you perform that mitzvah, ignore your past and future experiences and approach the mitzvah as if for the first time. Focus on it; savor it; experience it fully.

How did you do? Did you find that this experience changed

the way you related to the mitzvah? How did it feel to live completely in that unique moment?

Step 8

From Enemy to Ally

We've armed ourselves with the recognition of our innate greatness. We've learned how to free ourselves from the shackles of our past and our fear for the future. We're nearly ready to begin the actual process of change. First, however, we must take a moment to acquaint ourselves with the ultimate root of our challenges – the yetzer hara.

Our basic childhood understanding of the yetzer hara paints him as an intolerable enemy, a dark, dangerous menace with whom we must constantly be engaged in battle. The feelings he inspires within us must be squelched and condemned. The slightest suggestion on his part requires harsh censure.

This understanding does carry truth. Our ultimate goal in life is indeed to gain control of our yetzer hara and live according to Hashem's will. Unfortunately, however, existing in a constant state of inner conflict can become extremely exhausting. If our teshuvah strategy consists of nothing more than continuous fighting, we will eventually grow fatigued – and lose our grip on our growth.

How are we to remedy this issue? How can we successfully ward off an ever-present enemy without crumbling from exhaustion?

According to Rav Yisrael Salanter, we can do so quite simply – by turning our enemy into our friend.

In Michtav 30 of Or Yisrael, Rav Yisrael introduces us to

a concept called “tikkun hayetzer.” Tikkun hayetzer, which literally means fixing or improving our yetzer hara, calls for swaying the yetzer hara toward the Torah’s point of view. By helping him relate to the unparalleled sweetness of living b’derech Hashem, we can inspire within the yetzer hara an actual desire to act in accordance with Hashem’s will.

The tikkun hayetzer approach views the yetzer hara not as an enemy to be obliterated but as a disbeliever to be enlightened and won over. His protests aren’t the rejections of a flat-out opponent, but the hesitations of someone who simply doesn’t see the value in choosing good. Within his resistance to mitzvos, we can hear a challenge: “Prove me wrong. Convince me. Give me a good enough reason to make the right choice.”

If we can answer this challenge, if we can truly convince the yetzer hara to “buy into” avodas Hashem, we will no longer feel constantly torn between what we “want” to do and what we “have” to do. We will become people whose will is aligned with Hashem’s will – who want to do what’s right not just intellectually, but with our emotions and preferences as well.

In Rav Yisrael’s words, tikkun hayetzer enables us to truly serve Hashem b’simcha, freed of inner conflict and wholeheartedly drawn toward Torah and mitzvos. Once we reach this state, lasting teshuvah becomes natural.

Exercise: Start conditioning yourself to perceive the yetzer hara’s protests as challenges. The next few times you attempt to do a mitzvah and feel resistance, mentally rephrase the yetzer hara’s voice. When you experience thoughts like “**I don’t want to** get out of bed for Shacharis/apologize to my spouse/sit down with a sefer,” remind yourself that the yetzer hara is *really* saying, “**Give me a good enough reason to** get out of bed/apologize/open my sefer.” Making this inner switch will help us begin to trade a life of internal conflict for one of inner harmony and eagerness to grow.

Step 9

Give Him a Voice

Tikkun hayetzer, our newfound formula for lasting teshuvah, involves convincing the yetzer hara of the sweetness of Torah. How can we accomplish this? How can we convince the yetzer hara to “buy into” avodas Hashem?

Say you were a board member at a company or organization. You’ve come up with an innovative idea which you know will be met with resistance by your fellow board members. How will you go about convincing your skeptical friends of your idea’s merit?

You might start by opening a conversation with them and allowing them to voice their doubts and concerns. You’ll listen sincerely to their apprehensions and demonstrate that you understand their viewpoint.

The Gemara in Bava Basra (78b) teaches us that “those in control of their yetzer hara” advise the rest of us to make a certain mental accounting called the “cheshbono shel olam.” In this accounting, we are to weigh “the loss of a mitzvah against its gain and the gain of an aveirah against its loss.”

At first glance, these instructions seem puzzling. If our Sages devised this cheshbon to convince us of the benefits of following the Torah, why didn’t they simply tell us to weigh the gain of a mitzvah against the loss of an aveirah? Also, aren’t we supposed to be keeping the Torah simply because Hashem commanded us to, not for personal gain? And even if we were to focus on our own interests, how could our Sages suggest that mitzvos cause us losses and aveiros benefit us?

To answer these questions, of course we’re meant to serve Hashem simply because He commanded us to, without focusing on personal gain. This idea, however, resonates only

with our yetzer tov, our logical, spiritual side.

The cheshbono shel olam was designed to help us deal effectively with our yetzer hara, who remains unmoved by spiritual ideals. By instructing us to take into account the “loss” of a mitzvah and the “gain” of an aveirah, this cheshbon reminds us to give the yetzer hara a voice – which, as we mentioned earlier, helps pave the way to successful persuasion.

An example: imagine that we find it challenging to refrain from lashon hara. Wishing to remedy this flaw, we put the cheshbono shel olam into practice. First, we invite the yetzer hara to voice his side of the story. His priorities are clear: pursuing pleasure, comfort and satisfaction in the simplest, easiest ways possible. Therefore, we aren’t surprised when he protests that sharing a juicy bit of lashon hara feels satisfying and enjoyable, while holding back causes us to lose out on that enjoyment.

It’s important to note that the yetzer hara rarely communicates his full feelings. He might share that he finds lashon hara enjoyable – but he doesn’t always tell us why. If we want to successfully market avodas Hashem, however, we need to acquire a thorough understanding of the yetzer hara’s grievances. We need to ask ourselves: what lies behind the yetzer hara’s thought process? What is it that makes lashon hara so irreplaceably pleasurable?

After serious thought, we might conclude that lashon hara provides much-desired social acceptance and camaraderie. We might discover that diminishing others’ positive qualities enables us to feel better about ourselves despite our own ideal traits or behaviors. Friendship and self-acceptance are important human needs. Our yetzer hara has determined that lashon hara serves as a quick, easy route to fulfilling those needs – and he sees no reason to abandon this comfortable strategy.

It remains our task to provide the yetzer hara with an appealing second option. Armed with a thorough comprehen-

sion of his concerns, we can now begin to craft an argument for teshuvah that will touch and satisfy even the likes of the yetzer hara.

Exercise: Next time you find yourself struggling with a mitzvah, don't rush to squelch and condemn your resistant feelings. Instead, give your yetzer hara a voice. Allow him to express what makes this area of Torah so difficult to keep.

Contemplate his words and the meaning behind them. What might be causing his resistance? What is he really looking for? Gaining this thorough understanding of the yetzer hara's concerns will equip you to present him with a sufficiently appealing second option.

Step 10

The Winning Pitch

Now that we've allowed the yetzer hara space to express his perspective, the time has arrived for us to share our side of the story – to emphasize the “gain of a mitzvah” and the “loss of an aveirah.” How exactly can we accomplish that?

Firstly, we must make sure to approach the yetzer hara in his own language: the language of pleasure, comfort, and satisfaction. These drives form the root of the yetzer hara's resistance to avodas Hashem. It therefore becomes our task to explain to him that the mitzvos he seeks to avoid actually offer him those very same gains. As Chazal teach us (Shabbos 105a), the first word in the Aseres Hadibros, “*Anochi*,” serves as an acronym for the phrase “Amira Neima Kesiva Yehiva,” which states that Hashem gave us a pleasant Torah, through which we can all access true meaning and joy.

Imagine once again that our yetzer hara is pushing us to-

ward speaking lashon hara. His reasoning? That this aveirah will provide us with the pleasure and satisfaction of acceptance – both by our peers and by our own inner critic. So we attempt to explain that by living a “life of lashon tov,” by focusing on and commending the good in others, we access tremendous self-satisfaction, happiness and fulfillment. That by lifting others up and bringing light to their lives, we lift ourselves and illuminate our own lives as well.

“But why should I choose your brand of pleasure and satisfaction over my own?” the yetzer hara contends. “A life of lashon tov might bring me gratification, but only if I invest tremendous effort, brain-power and self-control. Why should I wait and work for satisfaction and pleasure when speaking lashon hara will enable me to enjoy them right now?”

The yetzer hara demands instant gratification. He focuses on the easy, immediate benefits that come with flouting Hashem’s will. How are we to counteract this preference? By reminding him that the pleasure he finds in aveiros is shallow and fleeting. Mitzvos, though they do require effort and sacrifice, provide deep, long-lasting, and genuinely fulfilling gratification. The momentary satisfaction of sharing lashon hara proves transient and superficial compared to the profound, pervading, edifying pleasure of a “life of lashon tov.”

As we apply this sort of persuasive reasoning to spiritual struggles large and small, we may find that crafting compelling arguments requires preparation. We may need to study the subject of each challenge in depth. We may need to speak to teachers or mentors. But that is the beauty of the chesbono shel olam – and, in fact, of the yetzer hara himself. Both compel us to rise above “status quo Judaism” by causing us to actively seek out the sweetness, pleasure and fulfillment to be found in a life of Torah and mitzvos.

Exercise: After encountering a challenge in your avodas Hashem and listening to the yetzer hara’s opinion on the matter, contemplate the deep, long-term benefits you might

experience by choosing right. This might require you to do some learning about the topic in question or to speak it over with a Rav or mentor.

Once you've gathered sufficient information, you'll be presented with two clear options: the yetzer hara's argument for easy, instantaneous, fleeting gratification, and the Torah's offer of more meaningful, fulfilling, lasting satisfaction. You are now fully equipped to decide whether or not you will commit to taking a concrete step toward teshuvah.

Step 11

One Small Step in the Direction of Change

We've made the cheshbono shel olam. We've weighed benefits and losses of each option and come to the conclusion that the deep, lasting rewards of avodas Hashem far outweigh the shallow, fleeting gains afforded by aveiros. Armed with this clarity, we are finally ready to take action – to follow Rav Yisrael Salanter's example and accept upon ourselves a kabbalah ketana (small resolution) for the new year.

According to Rav Yisrael, this one small kabbalah, this single practical step toward teshuvah, enables us to merit the incredible gift of atonement on Yom Kippur. Why? How can one minor resolution fulfill our obligation to do teshuvah when there remains so much within us to repair? Was Rav Yisrael trying to minimize the requirements for effective teshuvah?

Imagine a fellow who dreams of opening a successful business. A friend of his, CEO of a respected company, gives him the following advice: "Right now, your business is nothing more than a dream. You have no capital, no venue, no customers. What can you do to start moving in the right direc-

tion? Hire a graphic designer and create your business's logo. Doing so will motivate you to work toward eventually achieving your dream.”

Many people mistakenly assume that teshuvah is simply about changing our behavior, about acting more correctly. When viewed through this mindset, Rav Yisrael's assertion that we can merit complete atonement by making one small change indeed seems illogical.

In Rav Yisrael's view, however, teshuvah is not simply about altering our external behavior. It is about creating internal change, about transforming ourselves into better people. Like building up a business, this sort of transformation involves a long, arduous process. Like designing a logo, our kabbalah ketana serves to trigger that process – to provide a launching point for a greater journey of growth.

The kabbalah ketana is not an end-goal in itself. If we do nothing but keep our original kabbalah, we defeat the purpose of Rav Yisrael's teshuvah strategy. Instead, we must utilize our kabbalah as the first step in a year-long project of strengthening ourselves in a given mitzvah. Doing so will enable us to accomplish the ultimate goal of teshuvah – lasting internal change.

Say we determine that our Bircas Hamazon requires improvement. We therefore resolve to bentch only from a bentcher for the duration of the upcoming year. In keeping with Rav Yisrael's guidance, we view this kabbalah not as an end unto itself but as a springboard for further growth. Bentching with a bentcher will help us concentrate better on the words. By concentrating more, we'll become better aware of the words' meaning – which will help us develop more of the hakaras hatov that Bircas Hamazon expresses to Hashem.

The time has come for us to select our own kabbalah ketana. Whether we seek to improve our tefillah, Torah study, interpersonal relationships or another area of avodas Hashem, our strategy remains the same: to choose a kabbalah that

will propel us toward continuous change and improvement in our chosen area of growth. Accomplishing this will enable us to enter next year's Elul season as a truly different person.

Exercise: Start by setting yourself the broader goal of achieving a deeper connection to the area of Torah in which you wish to improve. Perhaps you'd like to develop a deeper appreciation for tefillah, or a warmer relationship with a family member. Using your previous inner work as a guide, identify a small practical step you can take that will serve as a launching point for further growth toward your goal. This step will become the kabbalah ketana that will lead to a year of true transformation.

Summary

We've gone through countless Eluls, invested our hearts and souls into numerous Rosh Hashanahs and Yom Kippurs. Yet far too many times, we've found that the passion and effort we've invested in teshuvah have evaporated into nothing by the time the next Elul arrives.

How can we break out of this discouraging pattern and achieve lasting change?

The insights in these pages help us construct a multi-layered teshuvah philosophy to empower, support and guide us along our journey toward true, lasting change. Layer by layer, we acquire the motivation, the tools, and finally the strategy to effect and sustain real teshuvah.

The first step in our journey helps us ascertain the exact location of our teshuvah battlefield. As the Ramban teaches, teshuvah is "close" to us. The real work of teshuvah must begin by delving into our own inner worlds: the blend of thoughts, feelings, perspectives and desires that drive our behavior.

Clearing a Path for Teshuvah

We find ourselves avoiding this process, however, for fear of confronting the extent of our lowliness and worthlessness. Step 2 comforts us by informing us that our value stems not from our actions or accomplishments but rather from our unchangeable essence, in which Hashem instilled limitless potential for greatness.

After gaining a thorough understanding of our struggles, we encounter another obstacle: our unwillingness to take responsibility for our actions. Step 3 helps us realize that despite the hardships and challenges we endure, no excuse can remove the fact that we and we alone are responsible for our actions and spiritual status.

Even after accepting the truth of “Ein hadavar taluy elah bi,” we still find it difficult to understand how Hashem could hold us accountable for our actions despite grueling challenges. Step 4 reminds us that those very challenges have in fact been custom-designed by Hashem to guide us toward actualizing our unique purpose in this world. This realization enables us to stop viewing our challenges as hindrances and instead see them as pointers on our specific path of growth.

After accepting responsibility for our actions, we turn our attention to the fear of failure holding us back from taking action. To combat this limiting fear, we employ a two-pronged approach.

First, Step 5 teaches us to connect with our “mi’od-ness,” reminding us that our personal perception of our abilities falls short of the true extent of the potential latent within us. Recognizing the tremendous power buried within us increases our confidence to take action.

Simultaneously, Step 6 helps us build our “azus muscle,” which enables us to face impossible tasks with the boldness to put in our every effort despite fully acknowledging the probability of failure. Realizing that Hashem values every bit of effort we invest in His service empowers us to plunge into avodas Hashem despite feeling incapable of succeeding.

While these ideas effectively quell our fear of future failure, we still feel inhibited by the failures of our past. We've stumbled so often and fallen so low that we've come to seriously doubt our ability to truly change. Step 7 remedies this pessimistic outlook by helping us develop a "hayom" mindset, through which we internalize that every day, in fact every moment, is completely new and completely independent of the ones that precede and follow it. Each opportunity for teshuvah is unique. At any moment, we can drop the baggage weighing us down and make the decision to change.

Armed with these seven crucial insights, we move on toward actual teshuvah strategy. We begin by rethinking our approach to the ultimate source of our struggles: the yetzer hara. Instead of exhausting ourselves through constant fighting, Step 8 advises us to ensure lasting teshuvah by convincing the yetzer hara to desire Torah and mitzvos as much as we do.

How do we go about convincing him? By utilizing Chazal's cheshbono shel olam, which involves weighing the "loss of a mitzvah against its gain and the gain of an aveirah against its loss." In Step 9, we employ the first side of the cheshbon to take in the yetzer hara's frustrations and concerns. Step 10 teaches us to counteract those concerns by illustrating how the sweetness and pleasure our yetzer hara seeks can be attained through Torah and mitzvos. We now present our yetzer hara with a choice: to continue pursuing the shallow, fleeting instant gratification of aveiros, or to invest effort and patience into earning the deep, lasting satisfaction of a life of Torah.

Persuading our yetzer hara and choosing avodas Hashem equips us to accept upon ourselves one small kabbalah for the new year. Step 11 reminds us that instead of viewing this kabbalah as an isolated accomplishment, we must look at it as the first step in a process of growth that will slowly transform us over the year to come.

על שלשה דברים העולם עומד: על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים
עבודת אבות

This booklet is dedicated by

Bob and Allison Weiss

In honor of Bob's parents and grandmother,

Donald Weiss

Miriam Groll

Trudy Strauss

As a merit for our children,

Zach Wappelhorst

Jacob Weiss

Ira Weiss

In memory of Allison's parents and son,

Bernard Sanders

Helen Sanders

Alex Wappelhorst

*In honor of our wonderful
grandchildren,*

Cooper, Lily and Ari

Larry and Leslie Englander

Dedicated by

***Weiss Family
Los Angeles***

In honor of the amazing work being done by the

Vaad Project

*and the continued hatzlacha in the mission to
bring the meaning and depth of mussar to the
Jewish people*

Anonymous

In honor of

Rabbi and Mrs. Lebovits

*for the Torah and guidance, they have imparted
on our family. We are forever grateful for the
involvement you have had and continue to have in
our spiritual journey. Your friendship and support
knows no boundaries.*

Nosson and Chaya Major and Family

*Wishing all of Klal Yisroel a happy,
healthy prosperous 5781 and
shidduchim to all who need!*

Adam Moskowitz

***In honor of the front line workers including
nurses, paramedics, doctors, pharmacists, health
care staff, police, and the fire department, who
during the Pandemic of 2020, and at all times, selflessly
put their own lives on the line to protect us. In honor
of the grocery store workers who provided food and
essentials to us every day and are so easily forgotten. In
honor of the many other public and private workers that
helped maintain a degree of normalcy in uncertain times.***

***Finally, in honor of the many Rabbis, including
Rabbi Lebowitz, who continued to inspire us and give us
hope for the future.***

*May they continue to be remembered by us and protected
by the hand of Hashem.*

Anonymous

In memory of our beloved parents,

Dr. Jerome and Marjorie Sievers

Daniel and Mae Wagner

Marc and Dale Sievers

In honor of

Rabbi and Mrs. Lebovits

Effie and Simmy Sonstein

Yasher koach on your latest kuntres! We are grateful for all you do to inspire, educate and motivate us to become better Jews. Even moreso, though, we are grateful to call you our friend.

Shana tova!

Sincerely - The Vaadkas (Alan, Darren, Gerardo, Jake, Michael and Scott)

Dedicated to

Rabbi Levi Lebovits

Anonymous

In Honor of

Rabbi Lebovits

Shmuel and Margaret Angel

*In honor of my friend and teacher, **Rabbi Lebovitz**,
and to my children **Eliana and Ben**. May your
life be surrounded by wonderful teachers who
continually inspire you to grow each day.*

Marc Avner

In honor of my beautiful grandson,

Eitan Shmuel

Hank Brandon

*May HaShem grant us, in the merit of the work of the
Vaad Project and the study of this Kuntres, the ultimate
Peace for all of Israel and the rebuilding of the Bais
HaMikdash speedily in our days*

Avraham and Joyce Litzman

To my parents,

Frank and Faye Rubinson

*of blessed memory, and in recognition of Rabbi
Lebovits' dedication to sharing Torah knowledge
filled with wisdom and insight*

Trudy Rubinson

Clearing a Path for Teshuvah