

YK 5781
Breaking Bad Habits

There was once a wealthy man who wanted nothing but the best for his son. But to his misfortune his son did not have any good habits, and no work ethics. So, the wealthy man went to an old scholar and requested him to wean his son away from his bad habits. The scholar agreed but first he wanted to see what kind of habits the son had. For one whole week the scholar followed the young boy and observed everything the boy did without saying a word.

Then after a week of observing, the scholar took the young boy for a stroll through the garden and the old scholar asked the young boy what does he want to be when he grows up? The boy described every detail of what he is going to do when he grows up with so much passion that half an hour just passed by like it was a minute. Then the old scholar asked the young boy if he had the right habits to achieve what he wanted. The young boy's eyes suddenly turned sad and he admitted that he did not, and that he does not know how to change his bad habits. The old scholar suddenly stopped and asked the boy to pull out a tiny plant growing there.

The young boy held the plant between his thumb and forefinger and pulled it out. The old man then asked him to pull out a slightly bigger plant. The young boy pulled hard and the plant came out, roots and all. "Now pull out that one," said the old man pointing to a bush. The boy had to use all his strength to pull it out. "Now take this one out," said the old man, indicating a guava tree. The young boy grasped the trunk and tried to pull it out. But it would not budge. "It's impossible," said the boy, panting with the effort.

"So it is with bad habits," said the old scholar. "When they are young and small it is easy to pull them out but when they take hold they cannot be uprooted easily or at all."

During this High Holy Day season, we have the opportunity to scrutinize our habits. Which are the ones that we would like to uproot, and what new habits would we like to plant, like a new seed? Or do we feel that we are already too rooted in our ways that we cannot change?

Tonight's Yom Kippur service is referred to as Kol Nidre. The service takes its entire name from the beginning prayer chanted by the *Hazon*, the cantor, which is a plea for God to forgive us in advance for all the mistakes we may make in the upcoming year. It literally asks that "All vows—resolves and commitments, sworn promises and oaths that we promise and swear to God and take upon ourself from this Day of Atonement unto the next Day of Atonement—may they all be discarded and forgiven—abolished and undone, they are not valid and binding.

There are believed to be political reasons for the establishment of the KOL NIDRE prayer—perhaps it was said by Jews who were publicly forced to denounce their Judaism during the Crusades but were perhaps telling God—I don’t really mean it. Or perhaps it is an act of humility—in which the 13th century scholar Bachya ibn Pakuda said “is the root and beginning of repentance.” Maybe we humble ourselves—and admit our wrongs—face our mistakes at the beginning of Yom Kippur so that we have nowhere to go but up?

But by standing there and asking for advance forgiveness for the mistakes we will make—is this admitting defeat?

Like the tree, are we stuck in our ways, so deeply rooted that we can’t grow (or turn a new leaf)?

Why do we set ourselves up for failure? Aren’t statements like “I am who I am” and “I’m too old to change” selling ourselves short? How can we mature if we refuse to take an honest look at ourselves on these High Holy Days?”

Resh Lakish said, “Great is repentance, for it transforms one’s deliberate sins into merits.” (Talmud Yoma 86b). We often think of repentance as a way of apologizing for the wrongs we have done. But Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains that “Resh Lakish’s teaching points us in a new and surprising direction... **The focus is s not on changing the past, but on defining a new direction for the future.** For *t’shuvah* is ultimately about **changing ourselves**, not only clearing our record of past deeds that we are now ashamed of.”

Rabbi Larry Kushner describes the Hassidic understanding of teshuvah as “sweetening the evil in yourself.” We go down into ourselves with a flashlight looking for the evil we have intended or done—not to excise it as some alien growth, but rather to discover the holy spark within. We begin not by rejecting the evil but by acknowledging it as something we meant to do. This is the only way we can truly raise and redeem it.”¹

This Yom Kippur we set out not merely to cast blame upon ourselves for our past bad behavior but rather to **develop better habits**, and to act in a way in which we can be proud of.

This Yom Kippur is a time for reflection and to ask ourselves not only who we have been or what we have done—but who it is that we want to be. Rabbi Morris Adler, of blessed memory once said, “Prayer is a step on which we rise from the self we are, to the self we wish to be.” [Rabbi Morris Adler (1906-66), *Mishkan HaNefesh, Rosh HaShanah*, p. 166]

¹ Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, *Yom Kippur Readings*, p.43

James Clear, author of the New York Times Best Seller *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones*, **suggests a connection between our habits and our sense of identity.** He says, “When you have repeated a story to yourself for years, it is easy to slide into these mental grooves and accept them as fact... The more deeply a thought or action is tied to your identity, the more difficult it is to change it... **The biggest barrier to positive change at any level—individual, team, society—is identity conflict.** Good habits can make rational sense, but if they conflict with your identity, you will fail to put them into action. Your habits are how you embody your identity.

In fact, the word identity was originally derived from the Latin word *essentitas* which means *being* and *identidem* which means *repeatedly*. Your identity is literally your “repeated beingness.”

- When you make your bed each day, you embody the identity of an organized person.
- When you write each day, you embody the identity of a creative person.
- When you train each day, you embody the identity of an athletic person.
- The more you repeat a behavior, the more you reinforce the identity associated with that behavior.²

Mr. Clear explains that, “Over the long run, however, the real reason you fail to stick with habits is that your self-image gets in the way. This is why you can’t get too attached to one version of your identity. Progress requires unlearning. Becoming the best version of yourself requires you to continuously **edit** your beliefs, and to upgrade and expand your identity.

Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. Small habits can make a meaningful difference by providing evidence of a new identity”³

Mr. Clear points out that “we don’t choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. We follow the script handed down by our friends and family, our religious institution or school, our local community and society at large.” Often we follow the habits of our culture without thinking and without question.⁴

Throughout the Torah we hear the Israelites (our Jewish ancestors) referred to as a stiff-necked people, in another words, stubborn. Learned behavior and societal patterns are hard to break from. Even after the Jewish people enter the Promised Land, God continually sends the Prophets to point out their bad behavior and convince them to make better choices. We see people we care about follow the same bad patterns of behavior—and it seems so obvious that they should make a different choice—but so much of what we do is done without thinking—we are conditioned. Yom Kippur provides with an opportunity to

² Clear, James, *Atomic Habits*. Avery-Penguin Random House, p.35-37

³ Clear, James, *Atomic Habits*. Avery-Penguin Random House, p.38

⁴ Clear, James. *Atomic Habits* p.115

break out of our routines, to stop, and take an honest look at our behavior. Are there habits we would like to change? Are there new habits that we would like to take on in this new year?

Blank points out that “a craving is just a specific manifestation of deeper underlying motive.”

For example

- We want to connect and bond with others, so we browse Facebook
- We want to win social acceptance and approval=so we post on Instagram and hope people like what we have to share.
- We have a desire to feel competent or valuable, so we spend our time engaged in our work trying to prove our worth.
- We want a drink—to escape from being quarantined with our children

How can we address the underlying desires that are driving our cravings?

How do we reframe our emotions from our fears into faith?

Rabbi Kusher explains that “our sins come from the pure and holy spark of divine motivation—the desire to nurture and be nurtured, to support those we loved, to find intimacy, and to reach [wholeness]. If we can recognize the holy sparks within our sins... and we can have a clear vision of the world and those around us, we can raise those sparks and redeem them. In this way not only do we atone for our sins, but we also gain access to new forces of holiness in our lives.”⁵ In another words, if we can look at the underlying reason for our bad habits, we can work to establish better habits in the coming year.

How can we bring the most meaning to the days that we have?

For what do we want to be remembered?

What legacy do we want to leave for the generations that follow?

Our tradition has a lot to teach about creating new habits. There are so many rules in Judaism—613 to be exact! Our ancestors knew that discipline and routine forms habits. Engaging in daily rituals and saying simple blessings (like Shehecheyanu) is part of creating new habits. Is it learning to cultivate gratitude rather than finding fault? Is it making more time for the things that are important such as reading that book, taking that class, finding more valuable ways to use your time?

Which new habits can you create this year that will help you become the person you want to be? How can you break those bad habits before they become harder to uproot?

⁵ Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, Yom Kippur Readings, p.43

We don't have to change all our bad habits—let's just work on one we know we can improve. It won't be easy... but the longer we wait, the harder it will be for us to change. Let's allow ourselves to feel empowered and inspired this Yom Kippur to change those characteristics of ourselves that hinder our true potential. Let's make promises that we fully intend to keep—or at least try our best in upholding. While there is much in the world beyond our control, there are still many things we can do to improve the quality of our lives—from our attitudes, to our foibles, to our bad traits that we have excused as being just “who we are.” This Yom Kippur let's ask ourselves who we want to be. Kol Nidre—all the vows we make—may we try in earnest to achieve -may we take our commitments seriously and continue to work towards being our best selves.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah—May you be sealed for a year of blessing and of discipline.