

TESHUVAH WITHIN REACH

YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE TO A JOYFUL,
PRODUCTIVE TESHUVAH JOURNEY



RABBI LEVI LEBOVITS

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PRODUCTIVE TESHUVAH JOURNEY



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The Vaad Project



A Community Initiative of Yeshiva Toras Chaim, Denver

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Leadership & Learning – Our Legacy

Rabbi Yitzchok Wasserman
Rosh Yeshiva

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Rosh Yeshiva

י" אלול תשפ"ב
September 6, 2022

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
י"צחק ווסרמן

ישראל מאיר קגן
ישראל מאיר קגן

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MAKE THIS ELUL DIFFERENT

Elul's here! Isn't that exciting?!

Did you raise your eyebrows when you read that line?

Not surprising. For many of us, the feeling that makes our stomachs churn when we think about Elul isn't excitement.

It's more like dread.

Fear and the Yamim Noraim (High Holidays) go hand in hand. This is the time when Hashem decides what our future will look like. Will we live through the year? Will we be healthy or sick? Will our finances rise or fall? Have we been good enough people to merit a decent judgement?

Of course, a certain level of fear is healthy. It motivates us to work on ourselves. It helps us get past the inertia we humans tend to get stuck in. And some of us do approach Elul with the right level of fear.

But many more of us don't.

We let fear propel us toward despair.

I've done so many things wrong this year. Teshuvah is too hard.

I'll never be good enough. Even though I'm really trying.

I can't handle the pressure – get me out of here!

This type of fear doesn't motivate. It paralyzes. It demoralizes.

We schlep our feet into Elul, wish the time away on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And then we're unhappy with ourselves for our attitude. And for how little we've managed to accomplish.

The simple truth is that many of us aren't in a place where fear can do its job properly. All it does is give our Elul a bitter taste. Which pushes us further from teshuvah, not closer to it.

If we want to have a truly productive month, if we want to approach the Yamim Nora'im with real yiras Shamayim and not just plain old dread, we need to build a positive perspective on Elul.

The type of perspective we're *supposed* to have.

Because it's not for nothing that our Sages call Elul the "chodesh harachamim," month of mercy.

It's not for nothing that they dub the entire period between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur "Yemei Ratzon," days of favor and goodwill.

It's not for nothing that, in our tefillos during the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, we repeat over and over that Hashem is a "Melech chafetz bachayim," a King Who desires life. He gives us life for a purpose, and He wants to see us fulfill it.

He isn't looking to trip us up. He *wants* us to be successful. Ratzon. Rachamim. He *wants* us to merit life.

So our job during Elul isn't to worry ourselves into despair. It's to show Hashem that we have a plan for how to use another year purposefully. That we're laying the groundwork for a successful year of growth.

How do we do that? Enter this guidebook.

Based on the teachings of Rav Reuven Leuchter shlita, these pages open our eyes to just how much we can accomplish during this time. Practical instructions and personalized exercises point us down a path toward real, doable teshuvah. Teshuvah that will last. Teshuvah that will launch us toward further growth.

With the right guidance, it's all within reach. So let's take the opportunity to leave this Elul fulfilled, empowered – and transformed. For real.

Levi Lebovits

Elul 5782



PART I

THE MIND-SHIFTS

You're about to start the most productive teshuvah journey of your life. Step by step, you'll develop the mindsets and skills you need to achieve real, lasting growth – and to do it b'simcha, with joy and inner peace.

First comes Part I, the mindset-shifts. They'll sharpen your vision of your destination and equip you with the strength you need to complete your journey of change. Then comes Part II, which teaches practical tactics to help you make that change successfully.

If you're one of those who's tempted to flip straight to the practical section – don't. If your mind isn't properly prepared, you won't be able to achieve the kind of changes you're dreaming of.

Besides, you'll find plenty of practical advice in the mind-shift section as well.

Get excited. You're going to go far.

STEP 1: WHAT'S MY END GOAL?

Great question. Every journey needs to have a destination.

What's ours?

We know we're out to achieve "successful teshuvah." But that's a bit general. What exactly does "successful teshuvah" look like?

Let's start with what it *doesn't* look like. According to Rav Yisrael Salanter, if we want to merit atonement on Yom Kippur, we don't need to stay in shul until we've perfected our every last flaw. We just need to commit to one kabbalah ketana – one small, sincere resolution – in a single area of Torah.

That's it? Just one?

Was Rav Yisrael trying to water down the teshuvah process? To excuse us from putting in the effort it takes to fully fix ourselves?

Of course not. He wasn't trying to let us off the hook. He was simply acknowledging that real, lasting teshuvah requires a process. A careful, gradual process.

Imagine you're a gardener. You get a call one day from a client with big dreams. He wants you to take a bare, ugly lot he owns and turn it into a mini Eden.

You show up at his property the next morning with your equipment: trowels, spades, and a huge pile of seed packets. You spend the entire day digging and planting.

At sunset, you give your client a call.

"We put in a good day's work," you tell him. "Things are looking great."

Excited, your client rushes over to the property – and stops short. "What do you mean, things look great?!" he bellows. "This lot looks exactly the same as it did this morning! Where are my flowers, my bushes?"

What do you tell him?

You tell him that a garden like the one he dreams of doesn't

grow in one day. It'll take time and work to make his full vision come to life.

What did you accomplish today? You started the process. You planted the seeds.

Elul isn't a time for quick fixes. It's like the first day in a gardening project. We need to approach it with the same process – and the same patience.

First, we need to cast a vision – what do we want our 5782 garden to look like? What Torah purpose do we want to dedicate our year to growing in? Our Torah learning? Our marriage? Our emunah? Our honesty? Our purity of speech?

Then, based on our vision, we design our kabbalah. A small one, but one that works like a seed. One that will trigger a domino-effect of growth throughout the year to come.

Let's say you decide to dedicate your year to ahavas yisrael – strengthening your love and care for your fellow Jews. A smart kabbalah, in your case, might be choosing one acquaintance and greeting him with a smile as he walks into shul each morning. (Yes, just in the morning, and just one person. We're trying to keep this a kabbalah *ketana*.)

What makes this a good "seed" kabbalah? Because when you smile at someone you never paid much attention to, you make them relevant to your reality. And once they become real to you, you start caring about them. The smiles turn into "hi, how are you"s, and then into conversations – conversations where you show genuine interest in them, and genuine concern for their welfare. You start connecting. Eventually, you'll have built a beautiful, caring, respectful relationship based on nothing but the fact that this person is a fellow Jew.

You planted a seed. One small smile. The next day, another. Until you grew an Eden.

That's our end goal for this year's teshuvah journey. To leave Yom Kippur firmly committed to one "seed" kabbalah that will propel us into a year of growth.

Your Step 1: Kabbalah-Drafting

Choose an area of Torah you want to make your “project” for this year:

Now, draft your “seed” kabbalah. What’s one action-step that could trigger a domino effect of growth in this area? Think about it carefully. How will step A – your kabbalah – lead to steps B and C? Once you’ve done your thinking (feel free to take your time!), record your kabbalah here:

STEP 2: BEFORE YOU ACT...

So – you’ve designed your kabbalah for the coming year. Excellent!

But you aren’t ready to use it yet.

Why not?

Every year, we take on beautiful kabbalos. We keep them faithfully through Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. Then Yom Kippur comes, touching us with inspiration and rousing us to carry our new kabbalah into the year ahead.

Except that we don’t.

Sometimes, our momentum takes a month or two to peter out. Other times, we can’t keep it up for more than a few weeks.

Or even a few days.

Why?

What makes it so hard for us to sustain growth and change? Why are we stuck in this frustrating, discouraging cycle, where every Elul seems to find us back at square one?

First, let’s explore what change means to us.

Most of us think that teshuvah is primarily about correcting our actions. We’ve *done* things wrong, so teshuvah means turning around and *doing* them right.

But it isn’t so simple.

Our actions don’t originate in a vacuum. They’re outgrowths of our internal world – the blend of thoughts, feelings, memories, desires and drives filling our minds. These inner factors have a hand in every choice we make. If we really want to change, tweaking our external behavior isn’t enough. We have to address the inner “stuff” that’s really driving our struggle.

We can take on all the kabbalos we want. But if those kabbalos are beyond the reach of who we are inside, we won’t be able to sustain them.

Think this sounds too much like modern psychology? It's actually straight from the Ramchal. In his *Mesillas Yescharim*, he defines teshuvah as "akiras haratzon," or "the uprooting of one's will." When we do teshuvah, we can't just target our actions. We need to start with the will, the inner desire, behind our actions.

Rav Yisrael Salanter himself used to spend the entire Yemei Ratzon preparing himself to launch his kabbalah ketana on Yom Kippur. Why? Why did one little resolution need to be built on forty days of preparation?

Because Rav Yisrael wanted to make sure his kabbalah would last. And a kabbalah can only last if we've done the inner work to keep it up.

Before we jump into action, we need to pause. We need to look inside ourselves and find the source of our struggle. To learn a bit more about the "why" behind the "what."

We can achieve lasting change. We just need to make sure we're starting with the right foundation.

Your Step 2: Look Inside

Think about the area of growth you've chosen to focus on this year. Ask yourself: "Why am I struggling with this? Why is it so hard for me to ___?" What emotions, thoughts, biases, or desires might be holding you back?

Try to think about this question for 20 seconds. Then write down the thoughts that come up.

It isn't easy to do this inner digging. You probably feel like you can't come up with anything else. But you can. Give it another 20 seconds.

STEP 3: THE REAL YOU

How was the Step 2 exercise?

Did you have an easy time with it? Did you gain clarity about the roots of your spiritual struggles?

Or, did something put a stop to your thought process before you could really get into it?

You're not alone. Lots of us meet resistance when we try to explore our inner selves. Why?

Because we're scared of what we'll find.

Our Western-educated minds measure worth based on tangible success. If you do well, if you accomplish something, you increase your value as a person. Flaws and failures, on the other hand, take down your value.

That's how we look at ourselves spiritually as well. We're worth as much as we accomplish in Torah and mitzvos. When we daven with kavanah, when we're careful with our speech, when we're nice to our spouses and kids, our value goes up. When we miss davening, speak lashon hara, yell at our family – that's it! We're worthless! Or, at least, worth less.

That's why Exercise 2 looks unappealing. Nobody likes to feel like a bad, lowly person. With every weakness we admit to, we're forced to knock down our self-worth!

Right?

Wrong.

In the Torah's eyes, our value as people doesn't come from what we do. It comes from *who we are*.

So – who are we?

We are creations formed b'tzelem Elokim – in Hashem's image. That means, explains the Nefesh Hachaim, that Hashem planted a piece of His infinite greatness inside each of us. Like Him, we create. Like Him, our actions influence the direction of the entire world.

This greatness is our essence. It's the core of who we are. And

it's unchangeable – which means that our actions can't make us more or less valuable. All they can do is reflect whether we're actualizing our inner greatness... or wasting it.

Thinking about our flaws isn't exactly fun. Often, it's downright depressing. But look at the Mussar giants of old. They spent their entire lives laser-focused on their every last shortcoming, yet managed to stay miles away from depression and despair. In fact, in Rav Yisrael Salanter's view, uncovering our flaws should actually motivate us to work harder!

How would *that* work?

If we identified with our tzelem elokim – if we truly internalized the extent of the spiritual power within us – we would yearn to actualize that power. So, any insight we could gather about how we could better reach our dreams would be priceless to us.

Let's stop measuring our self-worth the way the Western world thinks we should. Let's recognize our real value. We'll be able to wave goodbye to so much of the despair and denial that haunts our teshuvah journeys.

Your Step 3: Meet the Real You

Think back to a moment in your life when your inner greatness expressed itself. Maybe you were learning, and you managed to lose yourself completely in the bliss of Torah study. Maybe your efforts helped turn around a failing marriage and recreate a happy home. Maybe you davened a particularly sincere tefillah, which left you feeling close to Hashem. Whatever it was, describe it briefly:

Focus on the memory of that moment. How did you feel, during and afterwards? Jot down your memories here.

Teshuvah takes real work. It isn't easy to confront the uglier parts of ourselves. As you get into the work, bring this vivid memory with you. An expression of your true essence, this memory shows you where your real value comes from. Keeping it in mind will help you feel less like running away from teshuvah, and more like putting in the work to bring forth your greatness.

STEP 4: BUT IT'S NOT MY FAULT!

So now we know: our shortcomings don't define us. We're more confident in our true worth – confident enough to look our flaws in the face.

But we don't get far. Because there's this voice in our heads muttering, "This isn't really my fault!"

After a minute's thought, we can't help agreeing. Sure, we did wrong, but – we had bad influences. Challenges. Our parents raised us wrong. Our teachers were too rough with us. Our friends pressured us. It's our family's fault. Our community's fault.

We might even find ourselves putting the onus on Hashem. He's the One who made our lives hard. He's the One who gave us our faulty character traits. What does He expect from us?!

Welcome to the Blame Game.

Why is this *the* most popular game in the world? First of all, because it feels good. It lets us take the easy road. With the right excuses, we get to shrug off all responsibility for our actions – and deny ourselves any possibility of personal growth.

We also make the mistake of thinking that our growth depends completely on outside factors. We rely on inspiring speeches and earth-shattering events to turn the fire on under our neshamos. We think that greatness is reserved for those lucky few with the right qualities, circumstances, and teachers. *Of course he doesn't get angry at his family – he was raised in the happiest, healthiest home around! He's not carrying the childhood baggage that I am. Besides, he always had a "tzaddik" personality. I'm not like that.*

And we're a little bit right. Without the gifts, without the inspiration, without the support, growth can be extremely hard.

Hard, but not impossible. And here's where we're wrong. Ultimately, there's only one party responsible for our growth.

It's not our parents. It's not our teachers. It's not our friends or communities or circumstances.

It's us. Me. You.

Hiding behind excuses, no matter how heartwrenching they are, will only hurt us in the long run. Because no matter how well we justify our sins – they still exist. Our neshamos are still tainted. Our spiritual “bank accounts” still show a deficit.

None of that can change until we ourselves take the initiative to make things right.

Rabi Elazar ben Durdaya (Avodah Zara 17a) spent most of his life a rabid sinner. One day, he was inspired to do teshuvah. But he was worried. He'd done so many terrible things that he felt he needed help.

He called out to the world's powerful natural features – the mountains and hills, the heavens and earth, the sun, moon, stars – and begged them to pray that Hashem have mercy on him.

One by one, they turned him down.

Eventually, he submitted to reality: “Ein hadavar taluy elah bi.” “This matter (of teshuvah) is dependent *on me alone*.” He was the only one responsible for the state of his soul.

Outside inspiration is wonderful. Support, encouragement, personal gifts – they're all blessings. But they aren't the end-all. There are plenty out there who have all the “right” things going for them, yet still fail. And there are plenty others held back by huge challenges who go on to achieve greatness.

Because ultimately, growth only happens when we ourselves step forward and take action.

“Im ein ani li, mi li?” Hillel Hazakein famously asked. “If I'm not for myself, who will be for me?” Or, as Rabbeinu Yonah interprets it, “If I don't galvanize myself to grow, who else will galvanize me?”

Outside inspiration doesn't last. Growth only comes when we motivate ourselves – when we internalize that we and we alone are completely responsible for our growth.

The buck stops with us.

Your Step 4: Where Does Your Buck Stop?

Remember the area of Torah life you chose to work on? List every excuse you can possibly think of that you could use to get yourself off the hook.

Look over your list and, instead of judging yourself, empathize with yourself over each one (even the ones that look silly). Then, remind yourself that, hard as things might be, the buck still stops with you. You are completely responsible for your actions – and your mistakes.

So – let's review your options going forward. If you chose to ignore this truth and keep playing the Blame Game, what would life look like?

If you chose to take responsibility and act on it, what might life look like instead?

Which path do you want to take? It's your choice.

STEP 5: ROADBLOCKS OR ROAD SIGNS?

“Ein hadavar taluy elah bi.” We get it. We, and we alone, are totally responsible for our actions, no matter what’s going on in our lives.

But... it just doesn’t seem fair. Because, at the end of the day, our challenges are still challenges. They’re real, they’re painful, and they make it so much harder for us to do the right thing.

How can Hashem hold us to such high standards when He’s made it so extra-hard for us to reach them?

It’s a great question. To answer it, let’s ask ourselves another one:

What does hashgacha pratis (Divine providence) mean to us?

Many of us define it as the simple fact that everything that happens to us comes from Hashem. When good things happen, we know Who to thank. When bad things happen, we can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that He had a good reason for putting us through them. And one day, we might even learn that reason.

But there’s actually a bit more to it.

Hashgacha pratis isn’t just meant to be our passive reaction. It’s supposed to trigger an active response from us.

The Ramchal tells us (Derech Hashem 2:3) that Hashem gave every one of us a unique purpose in this world – a purpose no one but us can fulfill. How does He make sure we can get it done? He creates for each of us a unique “life-recipe,” packed with every ingredient and tool we need. What goes into that recipe? Our personality, our upbringing, our circumstances, our strengths, our experiences...

And our challenges.

Every obstacle we meet, every source of pain in our lives, was custom-designed by Hashem to help us activate the unique greatness inside us.

Know anyone poor? Hashem might have made them that way, says the Ramchal, so they'd learn to be satisfied with the little He gave them. Know any billionaires? Maybe Hashem gave them their wealth so they'd learn to be givers.

It's almost funny. Those hardships that we use as excuses – Hashem gave them to us specifically so that we would do better in those areas!

He isn't asking us to grow *despite* our challenges. He wants us to grow *because* of them.

We're used to thinking of challenges as roadblocks – boulders in our path that just make life hard. What if, instead, we could look at them as road *signs*? Because that's really what they are – markers that Hashem graciously stuck in our path to help us get to where we need to go.

We all have excuses. "How can I be a respectful wife when my husband is such a schlemazel?" "Of course I'm an angry parent, my kids are holy terrors!" "I'll treat that coworker nicely when he learns to treat *me* nicely!"

That's all "roadblock thinking." We don't want to be roadblock thinkers. We want to be road *sign* thinkers.

"My spouse's/child's/coworker's behavior really tries my patience. That must mean... that Hashem wants me to work on my patience!"

See the concept?

Roadblock thinking: How can I clear more time for Torah study? I'm barely making ends meet with the zillion hours that I work!

Road sign thinking: I'm finding it hard to make time in my day for another learning seder. Maybe Hashem wants me to appreciate that it's not all or nothing – an extra hour-long seder or no seder at all. Maybe He wants me to internalize that even a few short minutes of Torah learning hold immeasurable value.

Roadblock thinking: You say I'm too negative? With all the tough things in my life, you'd also be a sourpuss!

Road sign thinking: I've got some rough things going on, and they make it hard to stay positive. Hashem must have put me in this situation so I could learn how to live b'simcha even when things are hard.

If you're a road sign thinker, you don't have excuses. You have a G-d who wants you to succeed, and fills your life with everything you need to make that happen.

Your Step 5: Start Seeing the Road Signs

We've all had moments when we've seen hashgacha pratis, Hashem's guiding Hand in our lives. Some might have been big – when we found our spouse or survived a major car accident – while some were smaller – helpful little “coincidences” that we know were anything but. Try to list three such moments from your life.

Focus on these memories, and the assurance they give you of Hashem's involvement in your life. Now, remind yourself that He is just as involved in the rest of your life. That your challenges and hardships are also part of His loving plan to draw out your potential.

With that in mind, call up the area of Torah you're struggling with. What would your thought process look like if you used roadblock thinking? What about road sign thinking?

Roadblock thinking: _____

Road sign thinking: _____

Let's take our road sign thinking with us as we move forward on our journey.

STEP 6: YOU ARE “MI’OD”

Road signs, not roadblocks. It’s been a real perspective shift, and it’s left us empowered.

Sort of.

Because, when we actually start approaching the work again, we remember how difficult it is. How unattainable it feels.

It’s nice to get a clearer picture of where Hashem wants us to go – but what if, ultimately, we won’t be able to get there? What if it’s just too much?

Fear of failure. It’s something we all struggle with. Especially when it comes to teshuvah. Real change can be so incredibly hard. The more we think about it, the more successful teshuvah seems like a faraway dream.

So... what’s the point? Why work so hard? Why invest so much into something we can’t imagine succeeding at? Might as well just leave things as they are, right?

Well... what if we just don’t have the right measure of our abilities? What if we’re actually stronger than we think spiritually?

Take a look at Bereishis, perek alef, pasuk lamed alef (1:31): “And Hashem saw everything that He had done, and it was *tov mi’od* – very good.”

Our Sages look at the word “mi’od,” “very,” and point out that it’s made up of the same three Hebrew letters – mem, alef, and daled – as the word “adam,” man.

What do “adam” and “mi’od” have in common?

Think about the word “very.” What does it mean? It’s a word of abundance. Unbound by amounts, it conveys a sense of limitlessness.

That’s us. Limitless. At the core, explain our Sages, every “adam” is “mi’od” – endless. Endless in the depth of his strength. Endless in his capacity to access new levels of potential.

They were talking about every adam. Including us.

You might not feel limitless. *You* can only learn for so much time at once. *You* can only stay patient for so long without losing your temper. *You* can only concentrate for so many parts of tefillah. That's just – you.

But *it doesn't have to be*. These might be your limits right now – but you're perfectly capable of raising them. And raising them again tomorrow. And then again. Bit by bit. Layers upon layers of greatness rest inside you, just waiting for you to activate them.

The work might be hard. But you aren't stuck. You can grow. Bit by bit, you can bring greatness closer.

Your Step 6: Connect with Your “Mi’od-ness”

Sift through your memory for a time when you did something you thought was completely beyond you – when you tapped into hidden strength and reached a higher level than you thought you could. Did you surprise yourself by understanding a difficult piece of Torah? Make peace with someone you thought you could never forgive? Control yourself in the face of overpowering temptation? Describe it here.

Having trouble thinking of the right memory? Wondering if “mi’od-ness” doesn’t apply to you? Well, it does, guaranteed. Keep digging in your mind. You’ll find something! When you do, write it on the lines above.

Dwell on this memory for a minute. You’re building awareness of your mi’odness.

Make a plan to keep that awareness alive. Jot your memory down somewhere – on a post-it on your mirror or computer screen, in a memo on your desktop, on a paper in the card-display in your wallet... anywhere convenient enough that you’ll glance at it several times a day.

STEP 7: FAIL LIKE A LEOPARD

Man is “mi’od.” A comforting thought. It makes us feel more optimistic about our chances for success in teshuvah.

Until an irksome little question pops into our minds.

Our potential might be “mi’od” – but it’s still potential. Which we need to actualize.

What if we fail to actualize it?

An excellent question. And unless we find a good answer, our motivation to keep working on teshuvah might evaporate. Why throw so much effort and energy into a venture so likely to fail?

To answer that, our Sages direct us to an unlikely teacher: the leopard.

“Hevei az kanamer: be bold as a leopard... in doing the will of your Father in Heaven.” (Avos 5:23)

Leopards are well-acquainted with failure. Powerful as he looks, the leopard is actually terribly ineffective as a hunter. In general, he only manages to kill ten to fifteen percent of his targets.

Despite his dismal record, though, he never stops trying. Every time he spots an appealing dinner option, we can imagine a little voice of doubt rising in his mind:

“Why are you bothering? Remember what happened last time you tried this? And the time before that? You failed! Again and again! Why should this time be any different?”

The leopard’s answer: “You’re right. This time might not be any different. *But I’m going to try anyway.*”

That’s the boldness of the leopard. The daring to acknowledge the overwhelming possibility of failure – and to press on despite it. The brazenness – *azus* – to keep pushing forward in defiance of his protesting voice of reason.

Because the yetzer hara does sometimes show up as our voice of reason.

“C’mon, look at the facts. You slept in all week. You’re just not the kind of person that makes it for Shacharis. Forget about it.”

What if we could answer him like a leopard? “You’re right, yetzer hara. I probably won’t make it tomorrow. But I’m going to set my alarm clock for 7:00 am anyway!”

Or, “It’s true. I can’t seem to spend an hour with my kids without yelling at them. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop trying my hardest!”

Or, “Learning is hard for me. I get it. Every time I open a Gemara, I zone out before I’m five lines into the daf. But I won’t let that stop me from sitting down to my seder.”

But... what’s the point? Where’s the value in trying when our efforts probably won’t end in success?

Western thinking alert! As we’ve mentioned, in the Western world, success is all about results. In their thinking, when is effort valuable? When it ends in an accomplishment.

The Torah sees things differently. In our philosophy, success in life isn’t measured by boxes checked or trophies won. Life is about serving our Creator. About building and growing our relationship with Him.

In a relationship, love doesn’t come from stuff. It’s the thought and effort behind the gifts and favors that tell us how much our loved ones care about us.

That’s how our relationship with Hashem works. He doesn’t just award points for results. He cherishes every bit of work we put into serving Him – even if that work doesn’t lead to a perfect outcome.

That’s how Rav Yisrael Salanter’s kabbalah ketana works. According to Chazal, Rav Yisrael explains, we don’t actually need perfect teshuvah to merit forgiveness on Yom Kippur. We just need to be *engaged in the process of teshuvah*.

Success doesn’t have to mean perfection. As long as we’re working, we’re succeeding.

Your Step 7: Flex Your Azus Muscles

Think of a task or activity that you're positive you can't do – and do it anyway. Ideally, this action should be something in the realm of avodas Hashem. If you can't think of something in that category, any mundane activity will do.

What action have you chosen?

Now, go and do it. Afterwards, report how it went. What emotions or thoughts came up for you as you did the task? How did it feel to push against the odds?

Congratulations! You've just stretched your "azus muscle" – your ability to defy that "rational" inner voice (more often than not, the yetzer hara in disguise) trying to convince you that you're attempting something impossible. You've taken an important step toward minimizing fear of failure's negative impact on your avodas Hashem.

STEP 8: ARE YOU LIVING “HAYOM”?

Between “Mio’dness” and “Az Kanamer,” we’ve pretty much taken the sting out of our fear of failure.

So why are we still hesitating? What’s stopping us from taking off into the sunset of teshuvah-land?

Maybe it’s not about the journey ahead. Maybe it’s about the baggage we’re schlepping with us.

What’s in that baggage? Months’, years’, even decades’ worth of aveiros. Of bad habits. Of downward spirals. Of nonstarter teshuvah.

With this burden weighing us down, how can we move on?

Scattered throughout the Torah, there’s a special little word that can lighten our load: “hayom” (today).

Can you think of any pesukim where you’ve seen it?

How about in Shema? “V’hayu hadevarim ha’eileh asher Anochi metzavecha **hayom** al livavecha.” “And these matters that I’m commanding you *today* shall be on your heart.”

When the Jewish people arrived at Har Sinai, the Torah tells us: “**Bayom** hazeh ba’u Midbar Sinai,” “*On this day* they came to the Sinai Desert.”

When Moshe Rabbeinu was instructing his people to follow the Torah, he said, “**Hayom** hazeh Hashem Elokecha mitzvicha la’asos;” “*On this day* Hashem your G-d commanded you to do.”

What are we meant to learn from “hayom?”

Take a look at Rashi on the pesukim we mentioned. In each comment, he explains that “hayom” serves as a reminder to constantly view the Torah’s words as new and fresh – as if Hashem had just spoken them for the first time. Today.

Not an easy task. Putting aside the fact that the Torah was given three millennia ago, we ourselves have been repeating the exact same mitzvah routine for 20-40-60-80 years. We can recite the words of most tefillos and brachos in our sleep

– and often enough, we do.

Torah life, new and fresh? It feels like a stretch.

Unless we remind ourselves of one simple fact.

Every day, every moment we experience, is completely new. It never happened before, and it never will again.

And just like every moment is a new experience, so is every action. The Shacharis we davened this morning wasn't just another Shacharis. It was *this morning's* Shacharis. Brand new. Completely unique. And candle-lighting this coming Friday won't just be another week's candle-lighting. It'll present us with the never-offered-before opportunity to sanctify *this week's* Shabbos.

See? We don't actually need to "make our mitzvos new." Each one we perform is already new in itself. We just need to learn to tap into the newness.

By default, we look at our actions simply as repetitions of what we've done in the past. Here's how to change that: consciously experience each mitzvah as an independent event. Push aside your memories of all the other times you've done it. Don't think about the millions of times in the future you're going to do it. Stick to the present – to the brand-new mitzvah you're about to do – and you'll feel a new sincerity and connection to Hashem.

That's what we call living "hayom."

Now, let's apply "hayom" to teshuvah.

"Ki hamitzvah hazos asher Anochi metzavecha **hayom** lo niflais hi mimcha v'lo richoka hee." "For this mitzvah that I command you *today* – it is not hidden from you and it is not distant." Which mitzvah are we talking about? According to the Ramban, teshuvah.

We're clutching our sin-ridden baggage and wondering how we can possibly move forward under such a load. What if we could start thinking "hayom?" What if we could realize that our past record has zero bearing on how we utilize the current moment?

Our history doesn't have to stop us. Any time we'd like, we can drop our baggage and choose to do better. To do teshuvah.

Snapped at your spouse this morning? Doesn't mean you're stuck in a cold war for the rest of the day. If every moment is new, then each one gives you another opportunity to switch to a gentler tone.

Or, to round up your distracted thoughts and concentrate on the last few brachos of Shemoneh Esrei.

Or, to stop dwelling on your past, and make the choice to do teshuvah.

Your Step 8: Start Living "Hayom"

Choose a mitzvah that's part of your everyday routine: Laying tefillin, davening Shacharis, or even something interpersonal like making your spouse a coffee. Write your choice down here:

Today, when you do that mitzvah, ignore the millions of times you've done it in the past. Pretend that it won't be part of your future routine either. Approach it as if it's a unique experience that you're partaking of for the first time. Be present. Focus on it. Savor it.

How was your experience? Did you find that it changed the way you related to the mitzvah? What new thoughts or feelings did you have about the mitzvah?

After feeling what it's like to truly live every moment as a separate experience, you'll be better equipped to take a step toward teshuvah without the past or future weighing you down.

PART II

THE TACTICS

Eight mind-shifts later, we're ready to take action. When it comes to action, teshuvah boils down to one thing: successfully conquering our yetzer hara.

Know your enemy, they say. What do we know about our yetzer hara? Not too much.

We're used to thinking simply: yetzer tov = good, yetzer hara = bad. Rav Yisrael Salanter helps us go deeper. The yetzer tov, he teaches, is our intellect. Logical. Detached. Seat of higher thinking. What's the yetzer hara? Our more "human" side – our feelings, desires, and physical drives. It isn't inherently evil, but without proper guidance, it can send us barreling off in the wrong direction.

How can we keep it on the right track?

The four tactics we're about to learn won't just teach us how to conquer our yetzer hara. They'll teach us how to do it gently, peacefully, happily. How to win the yetzer hara over to our side, so the two of us can work together to serve Hashem.

STEP 9: KEEP IT SMALL

What's your relationship with your yetzer hara like?

The yetzer hara is the biggest danger we'll ever face. Forget life-threatening – he's eternity-threatening. So we deal with him like any logical person deals with a threat. We beat him down, lecture him, gag him – whatever it takes to silence him.

We don't realize that this approach makes avodas Hashem much more difficult than it has to be. Why? Because the harder we fight the yetzer hara, the harder he'll fight back.

But do we have another option?

Once upon a time, there was a shepherd named Akiva. Out with his sheep, he noticed a smooth, beautifully sculpted stone sitting under a gentle drip of water. It struck him that if something as soft as water could alter solid rock so gracefully, then Torah could certainly do the same to his *heart*.

Yes, his heart. Not his mind or his intellect.

He'd always known that Torah could mold his mind. So what did the rock teach him? That Torah had the power to change his "human side," to mold his basest elements into something beautiful.

And, that it could do it gently. Naturally. Softly as water.

Usually, if you want to change the shape of a stone, you need the force of a sledgehammer. Rabi Akiva's rock, however, wasn't altered through force. Instead, a gentle, patient trickle of water smoothed away at the rock until its roughness was gone.

What if we could stop being sledgehammers, and start using the "gentle drip" approach in our avodas Hashem?

The Dubno Maggid tells of a merchant who came home from an overseas buying trip. He walked off the ship, told a porter where to find his bags, and hired himself a carriage home.

A few hours later, an extremely sweaty, winded porter knocked on his door. "Here are your things," he panted.

The merchant shook his head. "Can't be. I'm a jewelry merchant. My bags are light and easy to carry. They wouldn't have made you so exhausted."

Judaism takes work – lots of work. But it isn't meant to be grueling. We're actually – surprise, surprise – supposed to enjoy it. If we're stressed and worn out by our avodas Hashem, chances are we aren't serving Him the way He wants us to.

Where does all that stress come from?

We think that serving Hashem properly means keeping the entire Torah perfectly at all times. Because that's nearly impossible, we spend lots of time feeling like we'll never be good enough.

Rav Yisrael Salanter tells us we're making a mistake. Avodas Hashem, he teaches, is about taking on *one small kabbalah*. And then another. And then just one more.

It's easy to miss the depth in Rav Yisrael's advice. To read it as another version of the truism about moving a mountain by picking up one pebble at a time.

But Rav Yisrael is actually teaching us that avodas Hashem *isn't* about moving mountains, or about taking small steps toward a lofty goal. Avodah, at its essence, simply means *moving one small step beyond where we stand right now*.

That's all we need. That's good enough. That's the "gentle drip" approach.

Want to give it a try?

Start by explaining to your yetzer hara that growth doesn't have to be extreme. Tell him that all you're asking him to do is to take one tiny step forward. Usually, that step is something so unthreatening that even he would agree that it makes sense.

Imagine the difference between the outcomes of this little dialogue....

You: It's Elul, time to work on making peace. I guess I'll start with that coworker I haven't spoken to since he badmouthed

me to our boss and almost got me fired.

Yetzer hara: No way, that's outrageous! What are you, a doormat?

... and this one:

You: It's Elul, time to work on making peace. I haven't been paying much attention to my neighbor lately... I think I'll say hello next time I see him.

Yetzer hara: Oh, well... I guess that doesn't sound too hard.

That's our first tactic – stick with **Small**. Stop overwhelming your yetzer hara. If you push him too hard, he'll push back harder. If you make sure your kabbalos are small enough to feel reasonable, he'll be much more likely to come along for the ride.

Your Step 9: How Small Can You Go?

Look back at the kabbalah you recorded in Step 1. Is it **Small** enough?

Here's how to evaluate it. When you think of carrying out the kabbalah, or, more specifically, keeping it up long-term, how does your yetzer hara react?

If he doesn't seem too resistant, then you know your kabbalah is small enough. If, however, he fights back strongly enough that you're not confident you'll be able to push on despite his protests, you know you need to "shrink" your kabbalah a bit.

Once you've adjusted your kabbalah, use the same test as above to evaluate it. If you're still encountering strong resistance, keep modifying. If, however, your yetzer hara has quieted down, you know you've adjusted your kabbalah properly.

Record your adjusted kabbalah here:

STEP 10: THE POWER OF SIMPLE

Ever spend time with toddlers? If yes, you'll identify with this scenario.

Child hits his sibling. Mother says, "Sweetie, you can't hit your sister! Hitting isn't nice! We want to be a nice boy, right?"

Child grins and hits his sister again.

Most of us learn pretty quickly that moral reasoning doesn't work with toddlers. They don't buy lofty, ethical arguments. If we want them to cooperate with us, we need to speak *their* language.

The yetzer hara has a toddler-like side to him as well.

Chazal call him a "k'sil" – a fool. He's plenty smart – as we've experienced one too many times – but he likes to use his fool's voice as a weapon.

It's a brilliant tactic. Why? Because our yetzer tov is our intellect. His natural ammunition is intellectual argument. When the yetzer hara attacks, he often fires back with divrei Torah, with lofty ideas. He pulls seforim off our mental shelves and starts expounding.

And the yetzer hara – what does he do?

He sticks his thumb in his mouth and gives a blank stare. Or he shrugs and says, "Huh? This is waaaaay too deep for me."

Want to play dumb, yetzer hara? We can handle that. We'll learn to speak your language – the language of **Simple**.

Simple is powerful. When something is simple, we understand it. We relate to it. The simpler a concept or task, the easier it is to internalize or accomplish.

Torah sages value the power of simple. In his introduction to Mesilas Yesharim, the Ramchal writes that his sefer isn't trying to teach us new ideas. It's simply here to remind us of the basics we already know. Rav Yisrael Salanter echoes that line in his own writings, adding that he also plans to keep his concepts simple.

Why? We're talking about two of the greatest Torah sages in

modern times. They could have dazzled the world with complex masterworks. Why did they stick with simple instead?

Because they weren't out to make us *smarter*. They were out to make us *better*. To help us change and grow.

For real, lasting change, you need the yetzer hara on board. That's why these giants wrote their sefarim in the yetzer hara's language.

Simple. Down-to-earth. Straightforward ideas that make sense emotionally. That's what we're looking for.

Next time your intellect defense doesn't hold up...

Yetzer hara: Ooh, have I got some juicy lashon hara for us to share! Get ready for a good time!

You: But... Speaking lashon hara makes the mouth impure. Hashem won't want to listen to our tefillos. Besides, don't you remember that when we speak badly about someone else, all our merits get transferred to them?

Yetzer hara: Huh? Do you understand what any of that stuff means? Course not. But you do understand that if you shoot off this sharp line, you'll feel amazing – right now. What are you waiting for?

...try to get back on relatable turf:

Yetzer hara: Oooh, have I got some juicy lashon hara for us to share! Get ready for a good time!

You: But... if we say it, we'll embarrass our friend and really cause him pain. Ouch!

Yetzer hara: Hm... yeah, I guess we won't feel so good after all. That's tactic #2: Keep it simple. Sometimes, it's the simplest things that stump the yetzer hara. Start speaking his language.

Your Step 10: Simplify!

When you try to push yourself in your chosen area, what arguments does the yetzer hara use to stop you?

Currently, what is your response to him?

How could you simplify your argument?

STEP 11: IS HE SATISFIED?

Small and Simple. They're doing a great job of lowering the yetzer hara's resistance.

But our goal here isn't just to disable the yetzer hara's weapons. We want him to switch sides. We want to get him personally invested in avodas Hashem.

How do we do *that*?

Remember – our yetzer hara is our human side. He needs things like comfort, pleasure, satisfaction. If we want his cooperation, we need to show him how avodas Hashem can fill his needs.

The first step is to listen – really listen. Next time he nags you about something, stop for a minute and ask him: “Why?” What does he need? What does he think this aveirah will give him?

Be patient. He might have to drag up his answer from deep inside.

Once he gives you that answer, he's given you tremendous power. Because now, you can make him a counteroffer that he'll have a hard time refusing.

We get you, yetzer hara. You've got needs that don't let you rest. But guess what? You don't need to turn to aveiros. You can fill the same need through Torah and mitzvos.

No, the payoff might not be instant. You'll have to put in some work to get it.

But once it comes, it'll fill you and lift you like no aveirah can. And it'll last. It'll be yours forever.

Picture this: You're arguing with your spouse. Your yetzer hara, of course, is egging you on.

Why? What does he want?

He wants to feel good. He wants the satisfaction of being right.

What if you reminded him that life feels so much better when shalom bayis is good? When you and your spouse feel close to each other?

Ask him to compare the fleeting “fix” he’ll get by “being right” with the deep, nourishing satisfaction of a peaceful, loving relationship. It’s not hard to see which option makes more sense.

We’re not here to judge our yetzer hara. We’re not here to criticize him for wanting what he does. We’re just here to present the facts.

That’s exactly how Chazal tell us to do it: “Weigh the loss of a mitzvah against its gain, and the gain of an aveirah against its loss.” Show him the math. Show him why the right choice is the smart choice.

That’s our third tactic: Remind him how **Satisfying** avodas Hashem can be. Help the yetzer hara understand what’s in it for him.

Rav Aharon of Karlin once said, “I have more *physical* pleasure from reciting Nishmas Kol Chai on Shabbos than the Czar gets from all the delights his money can buy him.”

Real ovdei Hashem don’t negate their yetzer hara’s wants. They acknowledge them, accept them – and find a way to fulfill them through Torah and mitzvos.

Because that’s where the real pleasure is.

Your Step 11: Satisfy Your Yetzer Hara

How does the yetzer hara seek to benefit (physically and/or emotionally) from keeping things status quo in your chosen growth area?

Make your counter-offer: how can he gain (far more meaningful and fulfilling) pleasure and satisfaction from doing things the right way – even if the gratification won’t be instant?

STEP 12: SLOW AND STEADY...

Ever wondered why Judaism is so – repetitive?

The same tefillin every morning. The same Shemoneh Esrei three times a day. The same Torah portions repeated year after year.

Why such monotony?

In his introduction to Mesillas Yesharim, the Ramchal gives an interesting instruction: *If you want to benefit from this sefer, don't just read it once. Only through chazara (review) and hasmada (diligence) will you be able to mine the treasures buried in it.*

Review. Repetition. According to the Ramchal, they're crucial to our growth. Why?

Remember when we called the yetzer hara a "fool?" Chazal have another name for him: "zakein," or elder.

Which is slightly confusing, because we're used to seeing "zakein" used as a compliment, an honorary title. Why give it to the yetzer hara?

Older people have spent a lot of time living. They've developed certain ways of doing things and settled comfortably into them. Changing, or even giving serious thought to change, can be very hard for them.

That's the yetzer hara – stuck in his ways. When we ask him to change, he gives a krechitz and a moan and grumbles, "What do you want from me? You think I have the strength for this?"

So, yes, even after we make avodas Hashem look reasonable, and keep our language simple, and talk to his desires, he still might not move an inch.

Now what?!

Remember Rabi Akiva's rock?

Rocks are hard. Rigid. You can punch a rock, kick it around, even set fire to it, and nothing about it will change. Yet a soft drip of water totally changed the shape of Rabi Akiva's rock.

How?

Through repetition. Patient, consistent repetition.

Did the first drop to fall on Rabi Akiva's rock leave a mark? Of course not. It just slid off. But over time – *drip... drip... drip...* – all those micro bits of pressure added up. Each drop deepened the impression until the rock was fully transformed.

When we repeat mitzvos, we aren't just doing the same thing over again. We're enabling the mitzvah to make an impression on us – each time, a little deeper. We're bringing the yetzer hara more and more fully onto our side.

Penetrating through the yetzer hara's thick head takes time and persistence – but every repetition makes a difference.

That's our fourth tactic: just keep repeating yourself. **Small**, **Simple**, and **Satisfying** might not work on the first try. Or even on the first several.

That's why we need "**Steady.**"

Don't give up. Keep opening the conversation. You might not feel it, but every "drip," every repeated try, brings you closer to change.

Your Step 12: Watching "Steady" at Work

You've committed to carrying out your kabbalah – but when? Write down the next three times you plan to do it.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Remember – each repetition of this kabbalah makes a deeper impression on you. The next three times you do it, keep a log of how your impressions are changing. What new thoughts or feelings did you notice after the first time?

After the second time?

After the third time?

STEP 13: THE REAL FIRST STEP

Nope, you're not done yet!

Why not?

Because even if you've read this entire guide, *and* filled in the exercises, *and* shifted your perspective on teshuvah, *and* started a new conversation with your yetzer hara, *and* designed the perfect kabbalah...

You still might put the booklet down and say, "This was great, but – I can't."

Because teshuvah is *hard*.

Sometimes, teshuvah means altering your personality. Other times, it means uprooting part of your lifestyle. Even in less dramatic cases, you might feel like you can't change without a miracle.

And you might be right. But who said that's a problem?

You have the Creator of the world on your side.

True, He's sitting in judgement over every last detail of your life – but He's also right beside you, waiting for a chance to support you.

Remember? He's the Melech chafetz bachayim. He *wants* you to live. He *wants* you to succeed.

And He wants to help you do it.

The Nefesh Hachayim (1:20) tells us that tefillah is an indispensable part of the teshuvah process.

Why?

Because – let's not forget – teshuvah isn't just about refining ourselves as people. It's about *returning to Hashem*. When we sin, our relationship cools off. Teshuvah means coming back and rebuilding the connection.

That's why Hashem made the teshuvah process something we can't do on our own. Because when we turn to Him for help, we strengthen our relationship with Him. We recognize and express that we need Him – and remind ourselves that

He wants *us*. Harotzeh b'teshuvah.

Chazal teach that Hashem “digs a hole” under His Throne of Glory to receive those looking to return to Him. When we show Him that we want to come back, He reaches down to us and clears the path home.

Yes, teshuvah is hard. Yes, you need a miracle. But you have the Maker of all miracles on your team!

He wants you. He's waiting for you.

Go talk to Him.

Yes, right now.

Hatzlacha.

L'ilui nishmas

Gittel bas R' Yitzchok a"h

Marty and Hadassah Weiss

Los Angeles

In appreciation of the Torah that
Rabbi Lebovits
brings us through works like this.

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חי-ה בת ר' חיים לייב הלוי

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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.

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Thank you

R' Lebovits and Family

for all you do for me, for the Denver
community and for Klal Yisroel.

And thank you for all your efforts, those that are
successful and especially those that aren't.

Shmuel Adler

Shana tova and yasher koach on this year's Teshuvah Guide! We are excited to use it in our High Holiday preparation for 5783. We look forward not only to using it this year, but for years to come to help us grow and become more connected & inspired Jews. We are grateful to have you as our teacher, guide and friend in our journey. We wish you much hatzlacha with your guide and hope you have a meaningful and inspiring High Holiday season.

Sincerely,

The Vaadkas

(Alan, Darren, Gerardo, Jake, Michael and Scott)

Dedicated to all the beinonim, like me,
that are striving to learn and improve.

Adam Moskowitz

With gratitude to

Rabbi Lebovits

for his North Star guidance and his endless commitment to
the growth and well-being of the Denver Jewish Community.

Marc, Melanie, Elliana and Ben Avner

In honor of my grandsons

Ethan Shmuel and Ownen Zev

May they grow into fine Jewish men
and follow the ways of Torah.

Hank Brandon

To amazing couple's learning with Rabbi Leibowitz!

Jay and Wendy Greenwald

In memory of Joyce's mother,

שרה בת יהודה ע"ה

Avraham and Joyce Litzman

We gratefully acknowledge Hashem for all the kindness and blessings He bestows upon us. May we continue to merit the spreading of wisdom and joy which teachings like this bring....

Joyfully,

The Margulies family

May the world heal physically and spiritually with the coming of Mashiach in our lifetime.

Anonymous

To my parents

Gita Faygel bat Israel Yitzchak and Ephriam ben Shmuel

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

Trudy Robinson

T H E V A A D P R O J E C T

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