

# PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

CLEARING THE PATH FOR A POSITIVE  
AND PEACEFUL TESHUVAH JOURNEY

R A B B I   L E V I   L E B O V I T S

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CLEARING THE PATH FOR A POSITIVE  
AND PEACEFUL TESHUVAH JOURNEY

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*The Vaad Project*



**A Community Initiative of Yeshiva Toras Chaim, Denver**

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## Rabbi Yitzchok Wasserman

## Rosh Yeshiva

## Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan

## Rosh Yeshiva

י"ז אלול תשפ"ג

September 3, 2023

In these short pages, Rabbi Lebovits has managed to identify and address major blocks preventing our generation from experiencing an Elul of simcha and hatzlacha. The practical exercises included inside are a great means by which readers can accomplish these goals. Rabbi Lebovits is to be congratulated on this major accomplishment.

1938/11/20 נסיך יצחק וויסמן

יצחק וויסמן

ישראל מאיר קגן

ישראל מאיר קגן



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## A NEW HOPE FOR ELUL

Another book on teshuvah.

Why read this one?

Judaica stores are packed with teshuvah-themed books. Want inspiration? You'll find it. Practical guidance? It's there too.

Why invest your time in this guidebook?

Because we as a generation have a problem. A problem that makes it hard for the inspiration and guidance to do their job.

For so many of us, teshuvah hurts.

Many people today feel negatively about Torah growth. In their experience, Torah makes them feel inadequate. Worried they'll never be good enough.

We humans don't like to focus on things that make us feel inadequate. So we procrastinate. And when we actually "get down and do it," our hearts aren't fully in it.

Inspiration and practical tips help us get to the teshuvah table. We produce meaningful Yamim Noraim (High Holiday) tefillos. We even take on kabbalos (resolutions) to carry into the year ahead.

But the inspiration – and often, the kabbalos too – fizzle quickly.

We think this happens because we're lazy. Or because we didn't do enough work to inspire ourselves.

But there's a deeper reason the inspiration doesn't last. Because underneath it are people – us – who approach the

self-perfection process with fear and pain. And it isn't easy to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into something frightening and painful.

This is not how Hashem meant us to approach teshuvah.

Torah is not meant to make us feel bad about ourselves.

We need to heal these tragically misinformed mindsets. That's how we'll gain the courage we need to fully do the work of teshuvah. So we can experience Elul – teshuvah – Torah! – life! – as they're meant to be experienced.

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li.

A joyful, inner peace-filled process of building connection with Hashem.

An invigorating life where, instead of feeling hopelessly distant from "good enough," we deeply and peacefully feel we're exactly where we need to be.

In this guidebook, you'll find simple truths and guidelines formulated painstakingly based on decades of experience learning and teaching mussar. Influenced heavily by the teachings of Rav Reuven Leuchter shlit'a, these ideas – and the practical exercises following them – will help you learn to view teshuvah and growth as a positive experience you *want* to engage in.

So this year's Elul can be filled with hope, genuine feeling – and real, lasting growth.

Levi Lebovits

*Elul 5783*



## THE KAYIN COMPLEX

Elul is a little bit scary.

When we were children, we knew why. The Day of Judgement is approaching. Hashem is about to decide our fate for the year ahead. Will we have a great year, or... not?

Simple. Straightforward.

And the solution? Just as straightforward.

Do teshuvah. Become a better person. Combine that with some tefillah and tzedakah, and we're good to go.

Then we got older. And Elul became scary for a different, more subtle reason.

Because "doing teshuvah" itself is scary.

Of course, the actual "doing" can be challenging. Changing our behaviors and habits isn't easy.

But the initial challenge of teshuvah – of any Torah growth – doesn't start with the doing.

It starts with our feelings, our attitude, going in.

Attempting to do better in Yiddishkeit often brings up a lot of, as they say, "stuff."

Firstly, teshuvah necessitates us to take stock of where we are.

Real teshuvah means taking a deeply honest look at ourselves and asking: where are we going wrong? What mistakes do we need to admit to? What middos and drives are pushing us to make these mistakes?

None of which are comfortable questions to ask.

We deeply want to think of ourselves as good people – because we are, right? We try our best. We work hard to fulfill all the many obligations in our lives.

Isn't that enough?

We don't want to explore our dark side. It's too scary. What if what we find there takes our precious "good person" identity and exposes how, well, not good we really are?

Hm, we think. So let's skip the looking-deeper part. Let's focus more externally on our actions and just work on behaving better.

But we run into emotional "stuff" there too. Because let's face it – the Torah holds our behavior to towering standards. It's so demanding, so exacting, that we're bound to fail over and over.

When we realize that, when we see just how far we are from where we want or need to be, the bitter taste comes surging back.

Sometimes, we get depressed. *I'm no good. I can't do this. It's too much. Why am I such a failure?*

Sometimes, there's anger, defiance. *Why is this so hard? Why is it so unfair? What do You want from me already?*

We don't like being in these places. So, very often, we shut down emotionally. We listen to inspiring speeches and studiously troop through our annotated machzorim and choose a nice, impressive kabbalah moving forward –

But we're blocked from really accessing teshuvah. So the growth we theoretically want doesn't actually happen.

Just under six thousand years ago, there was a fellow who went through this experience.

His name was Kayin.

He and his brother Hevel had both brought sacrifices to Hashem. His brother had offered his finest animals. Kayin hadn't been as careful with his own offering.

Hashem accepted Hevel's sacrifice, but rejected Kayin's.

How did Kayin react? Like a human. He sank into that instinctual human response of anger and depression (see Bereishis 4:5).

How did Hashem react to that?

With an incredibly, mind-blowingly simple remark. According to Targum Onkelos, it was this:

"Why get angry and depressed? Isn't it true that if you correct your actions, you'll be forgiven – and if not, your sin will remain?" (Bereishis 4:6-7)

Kayin, right now you're all caught up in your emotions. But clear your head for a minute. Remember what's logical, what's true.

Mistakes are – mistakes. They can be fixed.

After you make one, you have two options: leave things as they are and keep the mistake on your record – or work on correcting your actions.

That angry, depressive, emotional-vortex reaction – it's totally understandable. It's human nature.

But while Hashem gave us our more base human nature, He also gave us the ability to think from a higher, more logical place. A place that responds to criticism, mistakes, failure by simply picking us up and moving us back to the right track.

This isn't just a question of the right way to think vs. the wrong way to think. It's a question of the happier, healthier, more success-driving way to think versus the more painful, depressing, and limiting way.

So how do we make the switch to thinking from that smarter, healthier place?

How can we turn teshuvah and Torah growth into a positive, uplifting journey? An experience we embrace, even enjoy?

There's no quick fix. But. If we're willing to keep an open mind, read through the guidance in this guidebook, and put in a little mental work, we'll be well on our way to making that promise a reality.

**Exercise:** You don't have to do anything. Just start noticing. As you go through your day, notice when you fall into that Kayin mindset. It could be when you find yourself doing something less than ideal. It could be when a family member criticizes or kvetches about you. When you find your mind descending into that messy place of self-flagellation, self-pity, defensiveness, and/or defiance, make a mental note of it. *Oh, I'm doing that Kayin thing. Technically, I don't need to. Instead, I can take a positive step forward.*

Recognizing that this Kayin thought process exists enables you to take control of it – identify it, quiet it, and move on to make positive change.

## GETTING TO KNOW... YOU

So – we have a new mission: to not be Kayin.

In plain English, that means getting rid of the self-loathing, self-doubt, and negativity that blocks us from doing what we need to do.

It means building a new, healthy attitude toward growth. An attitude that says: shortcomings and mistakes are part of being human. When we run into them, we have one job – to figure out how we can get ourselves back on the right track.

Which sounds simple on paper. But isn't in real life. Because when we start figuring things out, those negative emotions start emerging.

The disgust at our mistakes. The despair at how far we are from where we want to be. The anger at how hard it all seems.

We need to learn how to ease these emotions. How to feel comfortable with ourselves just as we are. How to see ourselves in a positive light even as we fully acknowledge our flaws.

Only then will we be able to face the full work of teshuvah without running away.

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman once met a man who described himself as a prime student of the Chazon Ish.

"What do you mean?" Rav Aharon Leib asked, surprised. The Chazon Ish had passed away in 1953. This man was far too young to have studied under him.

"I've learned so much of the Chazon Ish's teachings," answered the fellow, "that I've started thinking naturally like the Chazon Ish!"

"Really?" Rav Aharon Leib said in amazement. "I naturally think like my yetzer hara."

Rav Aharon Leib wasn't bashing himself. He wasn't trying to look humble. He was simply stating a fact – the yetzer hara was a powerful force in his life. And clearly, he was comfortable with that. So comfortable that he had no trouble ac-

knowledging it matter-of-factly to this fellow – and, probably, to himself as well.

So. How to get there? How to reach that level of self-acceptance?

Here's a powerful place to start.

Think about a relationship for a minute – a long-term relationship like marriage or deep friendship. The more you get to know a person, the more you see their flaws, right?

When you first got to know your best friend, they were all polite and cordial. Now, if you call when they're having a rough day, you know you can fully expect to feel the fallout.

Used to be, their house looked immaculate every time you came to visit. Now, they have no problem pushing the massive pile of clutter toward the end of the dining room table and serving you a drink on the one empty corner. You laugh to think you ever assumed they were the organized type.

The funny thing is, though, the more aware we become of our friends' flaws, the more accepting we become.

Why? Because the longer we know them, the more we're able to see the entire person. Their grumpy moments and messiness become part of the greater picture. Of the imperfect but still wonderful friend we love.

We might not be thrilled about their flaws. You, for instance, might not love getting snapped at every time your friend is in a bad mood. You might even call them out on it.

But it doesn't make you dislike them. It's just – part of them. Now that you've gotten to know them so well, you don't judge them based on their positives and flaws. You see them as them, as their essence.

The flaws are just one part of the whole.

We're all in relationships with ourselves – bein adam l'atzmo. And our inner relationships work very similarly to external relationships like marriage or friendship.

The closer we are to our friends, the more we're able to embrace the bigger picture of who they are without getting hung

up on their shortcomings. So too, the better our self-relation-  
ship, the more comfortable and happy we'll be with ourselves  
even as we acknowledge our flaws and failures.

So how do we develop this kind of relationship with ourselves?

The same way we'd do it in marriage or friendship. By getting  
to know ourselves better.

Rav Wolbe used to encourage students to take quiet walks  
with themselves for 30 minutes on Friday afternoons.

One student didn't follow instructions. He said he'd rather  
stay and learn in the Beis Medrash. Rav Wolbe kept prodding  
him, however, until he agreed to go.

Soon after he walked out, he was back.

"What happened?" the Rav asked. "Did you meet a wild dog  
out there?"

"No," said the student.

"Did you meet a stranger who scared you off?"

"No."

"Actually, you did. The stranger who scared you off was your-  
self!"

The more we're strangers to ourselves, the more we'll be  
scared of what's going on inside us.

The better we get to know ourselves, the more comfortable  
we'll feel thinking about the inner parts of us that need  
fine-tuning.

We'll be able to do teshuvah with more courage, more calm.  
We'll be able to keep looking at ourselves in the mirror even  
when we find something ugly. To focus less on "Oy, what a  
failure I am" and more on "how can I fix things?"

**Exercise:** How do friends get to know each other? By talking!  
Getting in touch with ourselves through conversation can  
be very impactful as well. Take 30 seconds from your day to  
ask yourself get-to-know-you questions like: How was your

day? What's on your mind? What are some dreams or goals of yours? What are you feeling? Anything you're proud of? Scared of? What's something special you did today?

And then, take a moment to listen to the answers. Sure, you might know them already. But letting them come out in conversation with yourself helps develop that increased comfort and self-love. Also, you'll hear them in a way that reflects more depth and richness than you might have known existed inside you.

You'll be laying the groundwork for that healthy, loving self-relationship that changes everything.

## NOTHING. ELSE. MATTERS.

How are those mental get-to-know-you chats going?

Are you feeling different toward yourself? A little closer? A tiny bit more positive, more comfortable?

Wonderful! You're building a powerful tool.

But it's not the only tool you'll need.

No matter how close we feel to our friends or spouses, there will be times when their behavior turns us off.

It's the same in our inner relationship. Sometimes, even when we're brave enough to take a good look at that flaw in the mirror, we get stuck on its ugliness. We lose sight of the beautiful bigger picture in front of us.

Which, of course, triggers all the "stuff" keeping us from doing teshuvah.

We need this to change. We need to be able to steadily stare our shortcomings in the face without feeling negatively about ourselves. Or about our chances of growing. Or about how much Hashem expects of us.

We need to learn how to step into a "Hayom" mindset.

Every day, we read this verse in Shema: "Vehayu hadevarim ha'eileh asher Anochi metzavecha **hayom** al levavecha." "And these matters about which I have commanded you **today** should be placed on your heart." (Devarim 6:6)

According to Rashi, we're meant to take the word "hayom" literally. To treat the mitzvos as if we received them **TODAY**. Right now.

Taking that concept further, the Chofetz Chaim states that this particular posuk teaches us three things: at any given moment, "Vehayu hadevraim *ha'eileh*" - we have only **ONE** task ahead of us. "Asher Anochi *metzavecha*" - we're the **ONLY** person who can do it. And, finally, "*hayom*" - the only time to do it is **NOW**.

These words echo a piercing piece of advice from the Vilna Gaon - advice that's about to become the next tool in our arsenal.

When we're faced with a spiritual task, we should envision that there's only one person in the world – us. Only one hour left to our lives. And only one obligation to fulfill – the one in front of us.

It's the mindset Hashem was teaching Kayin. Don't get caught up in what-ifs and what-does-this-say-about-me's and what's-going-to-be's.

Why not? Because right now, *none of it matters*.

The only thing that *does* matter is how we decide to use the moment right in front of us.

Rav Gedalia Eiseman, mashgiach in Yeshivas Kol Torah, was a towering Torah and mussar giant. One notable trait was his utter rejection of kavod, honor. He never wore the typical Torah scholar's frock and shunned other honors commonly served to people of his stature.

As he drew near old age, he shared with Rav Shlomo Hoffman that after all these years of running from kavod, he had started sensing a new affinity toward it. "I'm not sure why this is happening," he added.

Rav Shlomo offered some suggestions. Rav Gedalia thoughtfully dismissed them. After some time, he shared a new insight (*Secrets of the Soul*, Rabbi Meir Simcha Stein, pg. 271-272): "I am beginning to understand what is happening to me. It appears to be because these past years, my physical pleasure from the world has dwindled. I no longer enjoy food as I used to. But the body demands satisfaction... so those forces that have been dormant are beginning to burst forth."

This is the way a Hayom thinker approaches self-improvement.

Rav Gedalia didn't beat himself down for the imperfection he'd discovered. He didn't fall into despair, lamenting that if he could still be struggling after so many years of hard work, he was doomed to failure.

All he did was calmly look at the issue and analyze it so he could work on improving it.

“Hayom” is our official permission to leave our negative emotions behind when we deal with our flaws. The guilt, the feelings of failure, the self-hatred, the excuses and defiance and defensiveness – we can drop them for a moment.

And in that moment, we can neutrally sit with our awareness of the flaw, focusing on nothing but where we’re at and what we can do to climb a step higher.

We’re used to looking at our flaws, sighing, and saying, “It is what it is.”

The Hayom mindset enables us to cut the negativity in that statement and change it to, “*What is, is.*”

There’s a task facing us right now. Something needs to be fixed. We don’t need to focus on anything but fixing it. Nothing. Else. Matters.

**Exercise:** Think you’ll need help getting into the Hayom mindset? Here’s a beautifully simple technique. When you’re thinking about an area you could use some growing in, and the Kayin-esque thoughts start bubbling up – “You were an ogre to your kids this morning. Again. You’re a failure of a parent!” – answer your thoughts with this one little word: “Oh.” As in, “Hm. You’re saying something to me. You’re telling me I got too angry with my kids today.”

When you say “Oh,” something magical happens. You turn yourself into an observer. You step outside the mental quagmire. Now, you’re looking *at* it instead of sitting *in* it. With that little separation, you’ve calmed your thoughts enough to focus on Hayom. To remember: the only thing that really, truly matters right now is how you decide to use the moment in front of you.

## HE JUST WANTS YOU

Used to be, the thought of teshuvah hurt. Now, we've realized it doesn't have to.

First, by getting more comfortable with ourselves, we learned how to turn down the volume on the painful mental noise. Then we discovered a "mute button" with our Hayom mindset.

We definitely feel less compelled to avoid teshuvah.

But that doesn't mean we *want* to do it.

Ultimately, teshuvah still triggers negative feelings. Yes, we're better able to face our flaws and failures, but we still wish they didn't exist. We wish we were perfect, and struggle to fully accept ourselves because we aren't.

What's holding us back from running happily to do teshuvah? What understanding are we missing?

We're missing the correct definition of success in avodas Hashem.

"Success" to us means – results. Accomplishments. Serving Hashem successfully means getting things right. Overcoming our challenges. Making progress. Acing our nisyonos.

But that's not actually what Hashem wants most from our avodah (spiritual work).

Of course He wants us to change for the better. To accomplish spiritually. To get things right. But none of those are His primary interest.

What *is* His primary interest?

You.

More than anything, Hashem wants you – us – to be engaged with Him. To be living our relationship with Him.

In Mishlei (2:4), Shlomo Hamelech tells us: "Im tevakshenah kakosef v'chamatmonim tachpisenah az tavin yiras Hashem v'da'as Elokim timtzah."

The word "im" is generally translated as "if." So people usually read the verse like this: If we would pursue Torah like people

pursue money, we would deeply understand and connect with Hashem and His will.

“Im” has another meaning, though. Sometimes, it means “when.”

Look at the difference that makes in our understanding of the posuk:

**“When you’re in the midst of pursuing and searching** – that’s when you’ll understand yiras Shamayim (fear of Heaven) and find connection with Hashem.”

We’ve fallen into thinking our relationship with Hashem is about bringing Him trophies. We think it’s only accomplishments that make Him happy.

But much as we all love the gifts, favors, and compliments we get from our loved ones – parents, children, spouses, etc. – that’s not what we want from them most.

What do we want most? To know their heart is with us. To know we’re a central part of their lives. That – not the playroom full of toys or the respectful treatment or the \$10,000 bracelet – is how we know we’re truly important to them.

Not that we shouldn’t strive to give our loved ones everything we can. But in a truly healthy relationship, the partners don’t just want what the other person can *do* for them.

They want the other person, unconditionally.

They want to *be* with them. Connected to them.

That’s what Hashem wants from us most. Us.

When do we give Him “us?” Not once we’ve won, or checked the right box. We’re engaged with Hashem when we’re struggling. When we’re trying to figure out what He wants from us. When we’re wrestling with the questions and choices that present themselves every day in our avodah.

“Getting it right” doesn’t necessarily mean we’re with Him. Because if we’re just focused on knocking down tasks and doing a good job, we can easily forget to connect with Hashem along the way.

We’re most fully with Hashem when we’re in a state of bikush,

“seeking.” In the middle of a struggle. In that grey zone of questions.

A 19th century businessman once turned to Rav Simcha Bunim of Peshishcha with a painful question. He’d become so busy with his business that when he wanted to learn Torah, he had to “steal time.” This troubled him so much that he was contemplating closing his business so he could dedicate a respectable chunk of his schedule to Torah learning.

Rav Bunim answered him by quoting a mishna in Pirkei Avos (2:4): “Al tomar lich’she’efneh eshneh, shema lo tipaneh.” “Don’t say, ‘When I have free time, I’ll learn,’ lest you never have free time.”

“Why assume you can only learn in a state of “lich’she’efneh,” a state of calm and availability?” Rav Bunim asked. “Don’t close your business. ‘Shema lo tipaneh’: maybe Hashem specifically wants you to engage in this struggle – working busily, yet trying to fit in as much learning as you can.”

That’s what “connecting with Hashem” means. Not “being picture-perfect.” Just being with Him. Trying. Caring. Wanting to be closer.

So. If Hashem sees getting things right as less important than being involved with Him, teshuvah becomes the most lechatchila (ideal) process in the world.

Our flaws and failings enable us to seek. Without them, we couldn’t be in that state of bikush. We couldn’t grow our relationship.

Teshuvah is an incredibly positive opportunity. Not just because it helps us clean ourselves off so we don’t have to hide our faces in shame. Because it allows us to give Hashem what He wants most – us. Our involvement. Our relationship.

With this attitude in mind, the last vestiges of that crippling self-negativity start fading away. We haven’t simply blurred the sting of our flaws by liking ourselves better. We haven’t just learned to ignore them for the sake of making change.

Our flaws are gifts. They’re the gateway into the most intense, desired part of our relationship with Hashem.

**Exercise:** You're dialing the number of an estranged friend to try and make peace. Will you have the courage to follow through with your apology? Will you end up blaming and getting defensive? You don't know.

Last night you decided today was the day. Today, you'd be on time to Shacharis. You'd set an alarm and put it right under your pillow. In the morning, though, you'd ended up hitting snooze twice and now you're rushing late into shul again.

True, you haven't actually accomplished anything yet. Still, when you find yourself in scenarios like these, where you're trying to do the work, remind yourself: just by entering the struggle, I'm engaging with Hashem. I care. I'm connecting. I'm living our relationship. And that's what Hashem wants most.

## AVODAH EXPLORERS

Now we know.

We know what Hashem really wants from us.

Not to *do* for Him, but to *be with* Him. To enter a state where we're focused on His will and working to move closer to it.

But what if it feels too hard to spend significant time in that state of bikush, of pursuit? Doesn't constantly sustaining all that thinking, all that awareness, sound mentally exhausting?

Yes it does, if that's how we look at it – a heavy task we're completely unused to.

We don't realize that we – our minds, our souls – were designed to thrive in this state. To enjoy it.

When Chazal contrast angels and people, they dub angels "omdim," those who stand still. Adam, man, they term a "mehalech" – one who goes.

People like to take that to mean we're constantly growing. Technically, though, it means we're constantly *going*. Evolving. Developing. Sometimes in positive ways, sometimes in negative – but we're always moving. Always *becoming*.

And deep down, we're only happiest when we're in that state of movement and change.

We do like completing things, of course. Checking them off and knowing we've accomplished. But we forget how much we thrive in the midst of the process.

There's nothing like the intensity, the rush, of being in the thick of things. Preparing for an important event. Training for a major competition. Planning and working on some kind of creative masterpiece.

There's joy in the memories, the medals, the finished product. But it's just an echo of the intense fulfillment we feel during the creative process.

When we follow the false narrative that accomplishments are the only markers of success – when we focus only on the end, on checking the box, on earning the trophy – we cheat

ourselves out of something our true nature craves.

Torah and avodah are endless. There's infinite depth to plumb, limitless greatness to pursue. With Judaism, we can enter into that flow, that sense of process – and never come out.

People who think this way don't find the state of bikush exhausting. They find it exhilarating. To them, teshuvah and growth have become adventures where they're constantly exploring and evolving.

When they make a mistake or feel their flaws acting up, they don't say, "Oy, another thing I need to work on." Instead, they think, "Oh, another pathway to explore in my avodah journey. I'm going to follow it and see how it can help me."

*That guy rubs me the wrong way. Hm, I wonder why. What can this teach me about myself?*

*I'm having trouble staying focused now. How come? What's going on inside me that's holding me back?*

*I really wasn't feeling Yom Tov this year. Why not? What needs to be different?*

This zone of questions, of digging, of work – not only is it the essence of our avodas Hashem. It's also where incredible meaning and enjoyment lies.

Yes, Hashem wants us to live in this state of pursuit as much as we can. But He arranged things so the pursuit would fulfill us. Offer us meaning, even enjoyment.

So it turns out that when we're with Hashem, we aren't just fulfilling *His* will. We get tremendous gratification as well.

**Exercise:** You've just done something you aren't happy about. Instead of letting the self-negativity flood in, take 15 seconds to explore. What made you do it? What's going on inside? What can you do to strengthen yourself next time?

Say a tzedakah collector approached you, and you sent him away a bit too brusquely. 15 seconds, starting now: *What made me react like that? Was it because I had a hard day?*

*Am I nervous about my finances? Was it the man himself that bothered me? His mode of dress? The cause he's collecting for? Or have I just been struggling with patience in general?*

The more you apply this little exercise, the more you'll develop the mindset of an avodah explorer – and start to feel the benefits.

## NOT EVIL. HUMAN.

*How can you be so rosy and positive?*

Did you find yourself thinking that while reading the last few sections?

*Our flaws come from our yetzer hara – the ultimate evil force. Knowing that, how does it make sense to embrace them so freely?*

The yetzer hara. That evil demon living inside us. Coloring our every thought and action. Constantly filling us with embarrassing temptations. Goading us toward the wrong choices.

We think of our yetzer hara as a huge, shameful liability. We see it like a cancer – something endlessly harmful we wish we could just cut out of our lives.

But do we have the full story? Chazal seem to think we don't.

After Hashem put the finishing touches on Creation, the posuk (Bereishis 1:31) tells us: "And Hashem saw all that He had done, and behold, it was *very good*."

Chazal (Midrash Koheles 3:15) explain that the words "very good" refer to the yetzer hara. The yetzer tov, in this same posuk, is simply called "good."

Strange, isn't it, that the Torah refers to our lifelong enemy, source of so much sin and evil, as "very good?" How did the yetzer hara earn that title?

The Midrash's answer: the yetzer hara isn't what makes us evil. It's what makes us *human*.

The yetzer hara, explains the Midrash, is our motivation to engage with the physical world. It's what drives us to build homes, marry and have children, engage in business.

Which makes it an essential piece in our avodas Hashem.

Twice a day, we say the following words from Shema: "V'ahavta es Hashem Elokecha b'chol levavcha." "And you (singular) shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your *hearts*."

Hearts? How many hearts do we have?

Our Sages explain that every individual heart is directed by two different forces – the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara. The Torah tasks us to love Hashem with both sides of our hearts. To channel both inclinations into the service of our Creator.

As children, we absorb a very black-and-white perception of our yitzarim (inclinations). There's the good one, and there's the evil one. What's our goal? To make sure the good one wins over the evil one.

Reality is more nuanced, though. As the Shema teaches us, both the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara play necessary roles in avodas Hashem.

Our yetzer tov isn't our "good side." It's our intellect – "seichel," in Rav Yisrael Salanter's words. It's our ability to recognize truth. It uses clarity, logic, and long-term cost-benefit analysis to help us overcome our base desires and live a more elevated life.

But Hashem didn't just tell us to elevate our lives. He told us to elevate them using the human framework He put us in. And that "humanness," as we just explained, includes our yetzer hara. Our feelings. Our drives. Our interests. Our desires. In Rav Yisrael's words, our "kochos hanefesh."

Many of us think we should be striving to be angels. But if Hashem had wanted more angels, He would have made more angels.

He created us as humans because He wants human avodah. He wants us to take our humanness and bring Him the type of service only we can. The urges and drives the yetzer hara triggers in us aren't just bullets we need to dodge. They're gifts to help us enhance our avodas Hashem.

True, they're delicate, dangerous gifts. Our yetzer hara can plunge off-track incredibly quickly, with drastic consequences.

But its urges and desires don't make us *bad*. They simply need to be *channeled* toward avodas Hashem.

**Exercise:** Next time you feel your yetzer hara speaking up, don't just squash it down. Don't tell yourself, "Oy, I'm so bad/lazy/irresponsible/[insert terrible quality here]."

Instead, say matter-of-factly, "This is just my yetzer hara, doing exactly what it's meant to do. I know one day I can use it to enhance my avodas Hashem."

## PUT THAT YETZER HARA TO WORK!

Need some real life examples to get a better picture of how our yetzer hara can enhance our avodas Hashem?

Let's start with one of the big ones – desire for pleasure.

Many of us think our desire for pleasure is negative. B'dieved. Angels don't desire pleasure, so we shouldn't either.

But Hashem didn't create us b'dieved. He put desire for pleasure into us for a purpose. And we don't have to dig too deeply to theorize about that purpose. Pleasure allows us to develop a powerful dimension of love for Hashem.

If we couldn't desire or enjoy a delicious meal, a beautiful bit of nature, music, warmth, excitement, comfort, connection – we wouldn't be able to truly feel Hashem's love. We'd approach Hashem from a totally intellectual place, not an experiential one. We wouldn't have the same breadth of gratitude, of awe, of perception of His greatness.

Pleasure – and the part of us that desires it – is a gift Hashem gave us so we could better connect to Him. As is every other urge and drive the yetzer hara triggers in us.

Here's another big one – kavod, honor.

Many of us love to hate ourselves when we feel our egos basking in others' respect – or protesting angrily when we don't get it. But what if instead of beating down on ourselves, we could put the sense of kavod to work serving Hashem?

When we feel respected and admired, we feel bigger than certain things. Like repeating juicy gossip. Like wasting an hour scrolling mindlessly on our phones. Like getting offended at petty insults.

We're enjoying the kavod anyway. Instead of feeling guilty about it, let's lean into it and soak up that "I'm-above-silly-behavior" message.

Another major yetzer hara benefit – it helps us relate to others and treat them properly.

If we didn't know what it meant to be "boiling mad," we'd have a hard time reacting sympathetically when our children – or

even adults we're close to – throw tantrums.

If we didn't know what it meant to get deeply insulted by little things – the mother-in-law's innocent comment, the friend's forgotten invite – we wouldn't be nearly as careful in our interactions with other people.

More than all these benefits, the yetzer hara's very existence is one of our greatest assets in avodas Hashem. Why? Because it forces us to recognize how much we need Him.

When things go smoothly, when we feel self-sufficient, we don't always do a good job of remembering Hashem.

He wants us to be flawed – to face unconquerable flaws, in fact – so we remember Him. So we're constantly attuned to our need for His involvement, His help.

Every flaw we have, every ugly area inside us, serves as another opportunity to connect to Hashem through our neediness. And that's how He wants it to be.

**Exercise:** You spot a sizzling piece of pizza and start craving it so single-mindedly you're embarrassed. You're sitting at a sheva brachos and feel that sense of expectation – "Hm, I think I deserve a kibbud, I wonder if they'll give me one." Your child, running out to play, knocks down a pile of your papers, and your blood starts to boil.

You're probably tempted to beat yourself down for these feelings. Or to quiet them quickly so you don't have to think about them.

Instead, try this: just sit with them for a few seconds. Sit with your awareness of them.

And as you do, remind yourself – this is how Hashem wants things to be. The yetzer hara is our ticket to growth in avodas Hashem. To connection with our Creator. Our job isn't to bash ourselves for hearing its voice. It's to make sure we turn its ideas in the right direction.

## HOLDING BOTH ENDS

One little problem with embracing our far-from-perfect selves, yetzer hara and all:

Won't that kind of attitude keep us from growing?

We're trying to accomplish important things. We need drive, motivation, dedication. We need to commit ourselves to giving our all.

If we shift our focus from our ambition, and instead internalize that failure is okay – won't we be hurting our ability to push ourselves? Won't we become more passive, more complacent?

Yes. We will.

Which is why we actually need to keep both attitudes alive in our minds. The attitude that the buck stops here, that we need to be giving our all – and the attitude that when we slip up or don't make our goals, we're still the same worthy people we've always been.

We're all familiar with the concept of aiming for "the middle road." The Rambam (Hilchos De'os) instructs us not to fall to either extreme side of any middah. If we find ourselves pulled toward one extreme, we should push back toward the other. That way, we'll stay somewhere in the middle.

Many of us think people who've achieved the Rambam's ideal have reached a perfect, tranquil state. They've figured out the exact measures of each middah they need in every situation. Life is now simple, clear and harmonious.

But that isn't true. That isn't how middos work.

Middos are forces. We can't just tame them. Instead, we need to live amid the opposing forces. We need to constantly navigate between the two extremes.

It's like those arcade games where our virtual race car keeps veering from one side of the road to the other. We, in the driver's seat, have to keep it moving down the middle, constantly turning it slightly left, slightly right, slightly left again.

It isn't easy to hold two opposing ideas in our minds at once. But according to Rav Yisrael Salanter, it's the essence of avodas Hashem.

Rav Itzele Blazer once wrote to his Rabbi, Rav Yisrael, asking for clear guidance where to focus his efforts in avodas Hashem. Rav Yisrael responded (Michtav 20, Ohr Yisrael) that in avodas Hashem, the point isn't to get *the* right answer and be done. Instead, we're meant to live in the tension between opposing values, constantly striving to make the right choice in the moment.

Igniting our drive to succeed vs. being patient with ourselves.

Helping others vs. taking care of ourselves.

Pushing our bodies vs. preserving them.

Creating novel Torah ideas while staying within the confines of our predecessors' Torah.

Spending life amid tension doesn't sound too pleasant at first. We humans like peace, calm, certainty. We want to be told exactly what to do and know we're doing it right.

But if we think about it, it's that place of high alertness, when we're in the driver's seat making minute-to-minute choices, that we feel most alive in our avodah.

Rav Yisrael teaches us that a life of greatness is one where we're constantly oscillating, constantly making choices.

That's why it's okay to be okay with our flaws and failures – and to not be okay with them. Great people can live in the tension between striving for perfection, and accepting themselves with all their imperfections.

Great people can hold onto both truths – both ends of the rope – at the same time.

**Exercise:** Two-ended dilemmas come up daily in life. Do you give extra time to communal needs, or to your family? Do you give your child space or set a necessary limit?

Next time one of these dilemmas comes up, take a deep breath. Hold onto the tension, the question, for five seconds, feeling both pulls. When you do this, you're strengthening your ability to live in that space of tension. Which will help you better hold the two truths of teshuvah – being happy with yourself exactly as you are, while yearning to be better.

## BUT WHAT ABOUT CHARATA?

Let's talk a little more about the other end of the rope.

We've been working hard to embrace ourselves. To think about ourselves and our mistakes in positive, uplifting terms.

But there's a part of the teshuvah process that doesn't seem to fit with the work we're doing: charata, regret.

According to the Rambam, charata is one of the most essential teshuvah steps. It's not something we can leave out of our process.

But haven't we just spent pages and pages unlearning how to beat ourselves up?

Yes we have. Because charata isn't about beating ourselves up. It isn't about feeling stupid. It isn't even about feeling bad for its own sake.

We humans like to hold back forgiveness until our offender "shows they really feel bad about what they've done" and "gets why what they've done was so terrible." But Hashem isn't vengeful like that. He doesn't just want us to *feel bad*.

Teshuvah is about moving toward a better future. Growing.

Charata is the emotional motivator in the teshuvah process. It's where we experience a sadness that moves us to make change.

The trick is to trigger the right kind of sadness.

There's healthy sadness – unhappiness about what's going on. Then there's despair – loss of hope that we can change what's going on.

Charata needs to be made out of healthy sadness. When we feel sad, we're driven to action – we want to do something to ease the pain. We become productive. When we feel despair, though, inertia kicks in. We just want to give up.

So how do we bring ourselves to the right kind of sadness?

Here's Rabbeinu Yonah's advice: tell yourself, "How could I replace a life of eternity with a transient, fleeting life?"

In other words – what am I doing? Why am I harming myself? I’m making such silly decisions. I need to do things differently.

Nowhere does Rabbeinu Yonah mention thinking about how terrible we are. He’s simply telling us to give ourselves a reality check. *Oy, look where I am today compared to how far I can really go.* When we dwell on that reality, we start to feel deeply, genuinely regretful about how things stand. We know they could be so much better.

That’s healthy charata.

We need to be very careful not to fall into the pain of despair – the emotional spiral that Kayin succumbed to, and that so many of us do as well. Only once we’ve fully embraced ourselves, recognized our goodness, and accepted our flaws as perfectly meant to be, can we leave despair behind and feel that productive sadness.

That’s what makes the work we’ve done until this section so crucial.

And that’s why, when it comes to teshuvah and growth, the two ends of the rope really bring us to the same place.

**Exercise:** Can you think of a time in your life when the pain of falling short motivated you to improve and succeed? Maybe it was when you snapped at your child, saw the hurt look in his eyes, and resolved on the spot to be calmer. Or maybe when you gave a public speech and started planning how you’d do better “next time” even before you left the podium.

Hold onto the feeling from that memory. This is the kind of healthy pain that propels us to improve in life. It isn’t guilt or self loathing – it’s purely constructive. This is the kind of feeling proper charata is meant to trigger.

## READY TO START?

At the beginning of this guidebook, we brought up a problem. Many of us can't bring ourselves to do teshuvah properly because... teshuvah hurts.

Looking inside ourselves, truly facing our mistakes and shortcomings – that's scary. When we do it, we get overwhelmed and depressed. We don't exactly feel inspired to jump into massive growth.

Through this guidebook, we embarked on a journey to fix that problem. To heal how we look at ourselves and spiritual growth. To stop viewing teshuvah as a grueling, negative process and start seeing it as a positive, even joyous one.

Now, we're finally ready to begin the actual work of teshuvah. Excited? Wonderful!

Let's start by looking a little deeper into what it takes to create lasting teshuvah and growth. Because if we're honest with ourselves, most changes we've made during past Elul seasons haven't lasted long.

Why not?

The answer lies with our newly rediscovered friend, the yetzer hara.

We're born into a powerful game of tug-o-war. On one side, the yetzer tov pulls us toward rationality, morality, G-dliness. On the other side, the yetzer hara pulls us toward indulging our human drives.

Over the Elul season, we feed our yetzer tov. We inspire ourselves through books and speeches. We immerse ourselves in the tefillos and emotions of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

*Tug.* We're pulled toward Hashem. We take on kabbalos and commit to making changes for the better.

But then life goes back to normal. The inspiration starts to fade. And then – *tug.* The pull of the yetzer hara, overpowered for the moment but still very much there, starts to drag us the other way.

It's not the Yamim Noraim anymore. We aren't hyperfocused on feeding our yetzer tov. So the yetzer hara's tugs pull at us harder and harder. Until we're right back where we started, changes undone.

It's a vicious game.

But we have the power to step out of it.

How? By bringing the yetzer hara onto the yetzer tov's team.

Strange as it sounds, it's possible. It's possible to make our yetzer hara "buy into" avodas Hashem. It's possible to train him to urge us toward mitzvos instead of aveiros!

According to Rav Yerucham Levovitz, this process – creating harmony between our two yitzarim – touches the essence of avodas Hashem.

*Wow, this must be a massively complicated, lofty process.*

Actually, it's not.

Chazal present us with a stunningly simple formula any of us can use to bring our yetzer hara on board with our avodas Hashem.

The Gemara in Bava Basra (78b) teaches that "those in control of their yetzer hara" advise the rest of us to make a mental calculation called the "cheshbono shel olam" ("accounting of the world"). How to do it? Weigh "the loss of a mitzvah against its gain, and the gain of an aveirah against its loss."

What? Are we really supposed to lay out the "pros" of doing the wrong thing and the "cons" of doing the right thing? Why give such weight to the yetzer hara's opinion?

The last time you had to convince someone to listen to you – disagreeing coworker, unhappy child – what worked for you? Barking your opinion without listening to their perspective?

Probably not.

First, you had to let them tell their side of the story. You had to validate their needs and concerns. Then you had to show them why listening to you would benefit them more than doing their own thing.

That's how the cheshbono shel olam works. We give the yetzer hara a voice. We acknowledge his needs. And then we show him how he can get his needs met by making the right choice.

Here's an example. You're at a kiddush, talking with some popular, influential people you'd love to "get in with." One of them starts "hocking" about a neighborhood scandal involving another friend of theirs.

Your heart beats a little faster. You've got something to add, and it's drippingly juicy. But it's also lashon hara. What to do?

Quick, the cheshbono shel olam!

Yetzer hara: *I want these people to like me. If I say this, I'll look like I'm in the know. We'll have an epic conversation. They'll think I belong with them. If I stay quiet, I'll miss the opportunity.*

You/yetzer tov: *I hear that. We want to be liked, we want to belong. But if this is how they talk about their friends, will we really find belonging with them? And even if we do, most people ultimately feel closest to the friends they can respect and depend on, not the ones who gossip just as much as they do.*

Another example:

Yetzer hara: *It's so cozy here in bed. It's so early in the morning. I don't want to get up for Shacharis. I have such a busy day ahead. If I get out of bed now, I'll start the day soooo tired... maybe I'll just hit snooze and rest another five minutes... or half an hour...*

You/yetzer tov: *I know. It's so hard to get ourselves out of bed when we're tired. But if we sleep another half hour, we'll start our day late. We'll rush around getting ready, run to a late minyan, get to work stressed, out of breath, and already behind. If we get up now, we'll feel tired for a few minutes, but we'll have the time to get ready for our day with peace of mind. We'll have a better davening. All this will energize us and help us feel good and productive the rest of the day.*

You won't always be able to promise your yetzer hara instant gratification. But you will be able to offer him deeper, more lasting gratification. Every time.

Before doing the work in sections 1-6, we wouldn't have been ready to make this cheshbon (accounting) properly. We would have beat ourselves up simply for having this yetzer hara, these unangelic needs and drives. We would have resisted looking deep enough to truly understand our yetzer hara's needs – and answer them.

But now, we're ready to do this digging calmly, methodically – and happily.

We know having human flaws doesn't make us unworthy.

We know Hashem doesn't just want our accomplishments. What He wants most is – us. Our involvement. Our relationship.

As long as we're working on ourselves, we're with Him. And there's no more perfect place we could be.

**Exercise:** Here's a practical resource to help you launch your teshuvah journey:

Choose one area in avodas Hashem you're struggling with – an area you'd like to work on in the year ahead:

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Why are you struggling in this area? Listen to your yetzer hara for a minute. What's hard for him about growing in this area? What benefits does he see in staying the way you are? Jot down some of his thoughts (what does he want? what's he worried about?).

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How can you reassure your yetzer hara? How can you explain in a way that appeals to him how growing in this area will bring him more benefit than keeping the status quo?

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Sample answers:

1. *I want to work on using my time properly. Spending less time on pointless leisure and more time doing purposeful things.*
2. *My yetzer hara wants us to feel good and enjoy ourselves. He's worried life will be less fun and we'll be less happy if we work harder and relax less. He wants me to keep doing what I'm doing because it's easier to enjoy life this way.*
3. *First of all, it doesn't have to be all or nothing. We'll start with a small kabbalah. Second of all, we both know we feel so much better after an hour of learning or helping someone than after an extra hour of browsing the news. We might be losing some fun in the moment but in general we'll feel happier and enjoy life more.*

Depending on the area of avodah you've chosen, composing a convincing answer for your yetzer hara might not be easy. You might need to consult with a rebbi or mentor, or do some learning on the topic.

You'll probably find, however, that your extra effort was worth it. Finding your answer and making your cheshbono shel olam will set you on a path toward lasting and even joyful teshuvah.

## GLOSSARY

**Tefillah/tefillos:** prayer/s

**Ani l'dodi v'dodi li:** "I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me;" verse from Song of Songs

**Middah/middos:** character trait/s

**Yetzer hara:** evil inclination

**Beis Medrash:** study hall

**Avodas Hashem:** self-work in service of G-d

**Nisyonos:** spiritual tests

**Posuk:** verse

**Chazal:** our Sages

**Yetzer Tov:** good inclination

**Kochos hanefesh:** human strengths and drives

**Sheva brachos:** one of the seven festive meals in the week following a wedding

**Kibbud:** honorary role in a religious ceremony

**Middah:** character trait

**Aveirah/aveiros:** sin/s

**Shacharis:** daily morning prayers

**Rebbi:** personal rabbi, usually a teacher

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In the merit of health and  
happiness for my family.

**Jonathan Maram**

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Jews along their teshuvah journey.

**Moshe Daniel**

**GOLD**

In Honor of All Our Children,

**Levi, Avi, Dovid, Daniel, Sorah,  
Chana, and Adina.**

We are so proud of all your  
accomplishments and the  
extraordinary individuals you have  
become. Along with your spouses and  
children, you all have been a source of  
enormous nachas and joy.

May HKB”H grant you kol mishalos  
liebchem AMV”S.

With all our love,

**Abba and Mama**

**SILVER**

Yasher koach to Rabbi Lebovits on his  
latest work on Teshuvah.

**Scott and Sally Alpert**

SILVER

Rabbi Lebovits, mazel tov on your newest Teshuva Guide! We wish you much hatzlacha with it. You are making a tremendous impact in the Jewish world, and we are grateful to have you as our rabbi and friend.

Sincerely,

**Your Vaadkas**  
**(Alan, Darren, Gerardo, Jake,**  
**Michael, and Scott)**

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In honor of those who are deepening  
their Avodas Hashem by learning from  
Rabbi Lebovits.

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Avraham ben Yisroel HaLevi a"h

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Avraham Lewis

In memory of Joyce's parents

**Joseph and Shirley Goldwasser**

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**Shmuel and Chaya Weiss**

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With gratitude to the ultimate “passion promoter” whose true joy is to bring the light of Torah into this world and help people find and develop their relationship with Hashem. May your commitment, heart, and kindness ripple to communities across the world.

With gratitude,

**Melanie, Marc, Eliana and Ben Avner**

In honor of our children and grandchildren

**Andrea, Alex and Joel,  
and Cooper, Lily, Ari and Graham.**

**Larry and Leslie Englander**

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In memory of

**Irving and Edith Gershater, A”H.**

**Rick and Linda Gershater**

In honor of

**Rabbi Lebovits**

**Sara and Chuck Michaels and Family**

---

May all of our tefillah and teshuva lift us up  
and spin us around and may this next year see  
us living a life beyond the dream.

**Adam and Barbara Moskowitz**

To my Friend and Mentor:

**Rabbi Lebovits**

Wishing continued success,

**Harvey & Jenna Pacht**

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With our gratitude to

**Rabbi Levi Lebovits**

Best wishes for a good and sweet  
year. Shana Tova U'Metuka.

**Robert and Claire Sigal**

לעילוי נשמה

ר' הרשל בן מיכל ז"ל

and

עטיה בת מיכל ע"ה

**Rabbi Yakov Vann**

---

**L'ilui nishmas R' Boruch Taub,**

**Boruch Yosef Yechezkel ben Chaim a"h**

**Mordechai Zimberg**

Dedicated to all those people who want to grow, or at least want to want to grow, myself included. May we all see consistent and permanent success.

**Shmuel Adler**

---

Shana Tovah and Mazel Tov on another inspirational guide for the High Holidays! We are so grateful and blessed to have you as our teacher and friend. May you continue to go from strength to strength.

**Jay and Wendy Greenwald**

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The Psalms tell us to “Serve G-d with joy; come before Him in celebration.” In this light, the Vaad has inspired so many souls to embrace the joy of Judaism and the world that the Almighty has given us. May our Yiddishkeit continue to grow along with Rabbi Lebovits.

**Ron and Karen Rubin**

---

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 Rubinson**

May Hashem grant **Rabbi Lebovits** continued success with the important work he does with the Vaad Project.

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