

AVODAH ALIVE

*Step into a vibrant, growth-filled year where
closeness to Hashem takes center stage*

RABBI LEVI LEBOVITS

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**Avodah
Alive**

A Community Initiative of Yeshiva Toras Chaim, Denver

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Leadership & Learning – Our Legacy

Rabbi Yitzchok Wasserman
Rosh Yeshiva

Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan
Rosh Yeshiva

י"ז אלול תשפ"ה
September 10, 2025

In this groundbreaking booklet, Rabbi Lebovits has successfully made the lofty goals of sustaining our Yamim Nora'im inspiration year-round truly accessible. The paradigm shifts presented within offer readers a transformative approach to experiencing avodas Hashem as a pleasant, enlightening, and energizing venture despite the many challenges our lives today present.

יצחק ווסרמן

ישראל מאיר קגן

This booklet is dedicated in memory of

Mr. Art Harris ob"m
Avraham ben Yisroel Halevi a"h

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A YEAR OF CLOSENESS

This isn't a guidebook on how to have a productive, elevated, or meaningful Elul.

It's a guidebook on how to have a productive, elevated and meaningful 5786. Starting with Elul.

Most of us look at this time of year as an end-point. We focus on "doing" Elul and the Yamim Noraim (High Holidays) right – doing teshuvah, improving ourselves, davening with fervor – so we can merit a favorable judgement.

We don't realize Hashem doesn't just judge us on how we've spent our previous year, or how well we do during Elul.

He's looking at how we plan to use the year ahead.

Life is a gift. Each year, Hashem evaluates His creations to decide where to invest this precious resource. Who will make good use of it? What do they plan to do with it in the coming year?

We've all heard of Rav Yisrael Salanter's "kabbalah ketana." The one small resolution he advises we take with us from Yom Kippur into the coming year.

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 was simply acknowledging that real, lasting teshuvah requires a process. And that Elul isn't about getting some

growth done, earning a good judgement, and moving on. It isn't an end-point. It's a starting-point.

It's meant to serve as our springboard into an entire year of enhanced avodas Hashem (the work of spiritual ascent). So committing to one small kabbalah well-positioned to trigger further growth in the year ahead makes perfect sense.

The davening, the teshuvah, the elevated closeness to Hashem during Elul? The clarity we reach? The inspiration we experience? They're not just ends in themselves. Hashem created the Elul season as a gift to set us up for an entire year of spiritual success. A year where we're constantly growing as Jews, constantly drawing closer to Him.

Here's the thing, though.

Most of us struggle to take advantage of this time and its gifts. That Elul magic, that sense of spiritual focus, fades soon after Yom Kippur – if not the very night afterwards.

Why? Why can't we hold onto it? Why do we always seem doomed to fall back into a spiritual status quo we wish would be different?

Because, well, life isn't just precious. It's also – hectic. Demanding. Challenging. Distracting.

It's hard enough simply keeping our heads above water as we try to make a parnassah. Take care of our family's never-ending needs. Maintain our shalom bayis. Deal with health challenges, both physical and mental. Balance society's pressures and obligations.

And what about those of us grappling with bigger, more painful challenges on top of regular life "stuff," chas v'shalom?

Deep down, we all want our relationship with Hashem to take center stage in our lives. But with everything going on, losing focus seems inevitable.

It doesn't have to be this way.

We can learn to maintain our focus on avodah. By making certain perspective shifts and developing certain mindsets, we can change the way we approach growth without feeling strained or overburdened.

We can rise above our circumstances and live the life we really want to – one defined by a living, ever-growing connection with Hashem.

This year, let's take full advantage of the gift of Elul. The following pages walk us through 10 powerful mindset and attitude-shifts. Shifts that will empower us to maintain our focus on avodas Hashem at vibrant Elul levels throughout the year.

So we can stop losing sight of our most precious goals amid the challenges life throws at us. And start becoming the deeply connected ovdei Hashem we truly want to be.

Levi Lebovits

Elul 5785



TIRED OF WHACKAMOLE?

So. We're busy. Life is hectic. Responsibilities, distractions and challenges totally eat up our focus.

But this year, we want things to be different. We want to keep that special Yamim Noraim connection to Hashem alive throughout the year. We want to maintain a consistent, vibrant focus on our avodah.

With everything consuming our attention, how can we make that happen?

We'll start by quoting a posuk in Mishlei (2:4):

"Im tivakshenah kakahsef v'chamatmonim tachpisena, az tavin yiras Hashem v'da'as Elokim timtza." – "If you seek it like money and search for it like treasures, then you will grasp yiras Hashem (fear of Hashem) and find the knowledge of Hashem."

Doesn't it seem a little strange for Shlomo Hamelech to draw parallels between the most important thing in life – closeness with Hashem – and something as lowly as money?

It might – until we realize Shlomo Hamelech isn't actually comparing the two.

He's just giving some very psychologically sound advice.

There aren't many things that consume people the way the pursuit of money does. Building a business can fill a person's every waking moment. They become passionate and excited about it. Devoted to it at the expense of food, sleep and downtime.

When they have time to spare, their thoughts automatically zoom to the business. Tearing their focus away, even when they really need to, becomes a struggle.

Says Shlomo Hamelech: you want to learn how to turn avodas Hashem into the overpowering focus of your life?

Look at it like a business.

What is it that makes business so all-consuming?

Obviously, there's the money-making factor. But most entrepreneurs will tell you there's more to it. There's something deeply thrilling about the process of creation. Of sinking your skills and interests into a project that helps you build a concrete contribution to the world.

It's satisfying. It's fulfilling. It's an immersive project where you make a business plan, map out implementation steps, and conquer them one by one. All while building toward a bigger-picture mission.

How many of us associate avodas Hashem with a proactive process like that?

For most of us, avodas Hashem looks a lot less like business-building than like a game of whack-a-mole. Challenges leap up – in relationships, in emunah (faith), in our connection to davening or our commitment to Torah study – and we hit back with our best efforts at overcoming the hurdle.

We push ourselves to be nice. To do some extra chizuk reading. To focus on the words in the siddur. To go learn even when we don't want to.

Which is truly beautiful. This holy "whack-a-mole" reflects breathtaking dedication to fulfilling Hashem's will.

But this reactive approach, unframed by a process or journey, can be exhausting. And with so many other demands on our willpower and energy, burnout can become a constant shadow.

What if things were different? What if we could put down our

reactive mallet and start getting proactive, creative?

What if we could start approaching avodas Hashem like an exciting project – like a business?

Say we want to work on davening with kavana. Before, we simply reminded ourselves over and over to concentrate, nu? Now, though, we'll turn kavana into a project. We'll ask ourselves: what needs to happen for us to create a better tefillah experience for ourselves?

Our list might include strengthening the awareness that we're standing in front of Hashem. Focusing on His love for us. Contemplating His absolute control over the world. Taking some time to read through a translated siddur to make sure we understand the words we need to say.

Then, we'll have our work cut out for us. We'll be ready to move through the list one step at a time. And as we do, the awareness that we're building something, creating something, will create a sense of interest in the work we might not have ever felt before.

Another example: Say we want to improve the way we give tzedakah. Before, we might have committed to one isolated action step – speaking politely even when meshulachim (solicitors) come at inconvenient times, or perhaps adding a dollar or two to our typical donation.

Now, we know we can accomplish so much more by making a project out of “giving tzedakah with dignity.” We'll list out several different changes we can implement – actually smiling at each meshulach, creating a little corner in our entrance hall where they can sit and take a drink, learning how to listen respectfully as they tell their stories, actually looking at our budget to see how much more money we can free up for tzedakah, and so much more.

As time goes on, we'll work through each item on our list, watching with tremendous satisfaction as our tzedakah-with-dignity “business” grows.

Until now, we've been looking at Torah and mitzvos as boxes to check off, or challenges to defeat.

Let's change that.

Let's start looking at them like entrepreneurs do. Like they're opportunities to build upon, to create with, to grow through.

We'll feel more engaged. More mission-driven. More purposeful. And avodas Hashem will naturally become a prominent, more vibrant focus in our lives.

Exercise: What area of avodah do you want to turn into your "project" or "business" for the year? Take some time to think about it, then jot it down here:

What are different steps or facets you might need to include in your "business plan?" Jot at least three down below. Don't worry about missing steps or picking the right answers. If they come from you, they're excellent.

THE MARTYRDOM MIXUP

Picked your first business venture in avodah? Great!

Now, as you think about your growth plan, here's a question for you.

When we work on ourselves, what areas are we supposed to attack first? The easier ones, or the harder ones?

If you'd answer, "the harder ones," you're probably among the majority. We tend to think the harder battles rank higher on Hashem's priority list. Maybe because we think it shows we care more about Hashem's will. Maybe it's because of "I'fum tzaara agra" – Chazal's dictum that reward increases according to exertion.

This approach poses a challenge to us, though. If we see avodas Hashem as the need to constantly push ourselves to our utmost limits, we'll end up with a very negative association with avodah. Even if we don't crash and burn right away, we'll get resentful and overwhelmed.

Our goal here is to start living a life of constant avodah. If we want to do that, we need to work on ourselves more sustainably. We need to realize that heavier really isn't better – lighter is. And that when we take a lighter path, we trigger a natural process of growth.

Does that sound a little heretical to you? Take a look at just a few of the sources assuring you it isn't.

Like this parable from the Dubno Maggid.

There once was 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."

Avodas Hashem isn't meant to be heavy, overwhelming. It's meant to be light and pleasant. Really. If our avodah choices always send us huffing and puffing as we force the largest leaps possible out of ourselves, we're approaching avodah wrong.

Turning ourselves into people who are constantly engaged in avodah means we need to turn ourselves into people who enjoy avodah.

Part of that process includes learning to approach it like the Dubno Maggid.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz takes this idea a step further. He asks: where do Chazal refer to the concept of "she'ifos," spiritual aspirations?

The automatic answer many of us would give? The famous statement of Tana D'vei Eliyahu (25): "Masai yagi'u ma'asai l'ma'asei avosai?" – "When will my deeds come close to those of my great forefathers?" We've been taught that setting our eyes on the highest levels of greatness we can fathom motivates us to reach for our own greatness.

Rav Yeruchem, however, has a different view on how she'ifos work.

He points to Chazal's source for she'ifos as the Midrash in Koheles (1:13) that states: "One who has a hundred wants to make from the hundred two hundred and one who has two hundred wants to make from the two hundred four hundred."

We're used to understanding the negative connotation here: look how greedy we humans are, never satisfied with what we have.

But if that were the full meaning of this statement, why wouldn't Chazal have said, "Someone with 100 wants 1,000,000"? Isn't that how today's entitled generation thinks?

Rav Yerucham understood this Chazal to be a more all-encompassing remark on human nature. Which includes the observation that she'ifos don't become ours through taking

on big, glamorous goals from the outside. She'ifos come from within our own personalities.

We have all seeds of greatness inside us. The more we notice them, focus on them, savor them, the more we become motivated to build on them.

He who has 100 wants 200. If we own our existing greatness, we'll naturally move to increase it.

Sustainable avodah doesn't mean starting as big as we can, everywhere we can. It means slowly building ourselves up in one area, then another, then another. Beginning with the steps that align most closely with our nature, and gradually layering from there.

That's how avodah becomes "light and pleasant." And how concrete, lasting growth is achieved.

For example: if we've chosen kavana in davening as our new business venture, we need to find a section of davening – one bracha, one short set of pesukim or lines – that we already connect with. One that already inspires easy kavana when we're in the right mood – or that already feels especially interesting to us.

We'd start with that passage. Learning about its meaning more. Committing to maintain focus on just those lines during davening.

We'd find it engaging, fulfilling. We'd feel great about it. We'd even enjoy it. And that would naturally cultivate a desire to work on another piece of davening.

Say we've chosen to work on seeing the good in our loved ones more. We don't need to start with the complicated sibling who irritates us every time we speak to them. We can start with a relative or friend we like a lot, and put a little extra effort into noticing and complimenting their good points.

We'll get into the swing of this new behavior. It'll start coming more naturally to us. We'll start tasting the deliciousness of making someone else happy and strengthening our relationships.

Which will motivate us to pick another subject, and another – until tackling that exasperating sibling doesn't seem so hard anymore.

As the Midrash Koheles is teaching us, growth from within creates its own momentum. It does require effort, of course, but in a lighter, more pleasant way – because as we grow in our avodah, so do our interest and desire.

Worried you'll have a hard time finding your 100's? Don't be.

Self-doubt is normal and understandable. But it's also the yetzer hara. We may need to dig a little to discover the avodah starting points within us. But we can all rest assured we have them within us – at least one for every area of Torah and mitzvos.

So let's allow ourselves to give this 100→200 approach a try. To stop forcing ourselves automatically into difficult stretches, and start with the small steps we connect with best. So we can truly internalize that avodas Hashem isn't meant to be grueling. That it's meant to be pleasant, engaging.

And that a life of constant avodah, where small successes regularly fuel bigger ones, is within our reach.

Exercise: After Section 1, you identified an area of avodas Hashem you'd like to make into your project for the year. Now it's time to identify your "100" in your chosen area. What's an action within your area you feel naturally connected to, naturally interested in doing?

Say you chose to strengthen your davening. Maybe you're already enthusiastic about reflecting on the gratitude you feel for the blessings Hashem showers on you. Perhaps your "100" action would be to spend a minute before davening mentally listing out several reasons you're grateful to Hashem.

Take a minute to think about and jot down the “100” action-step you would like to begin with.

HE JUST WANTS YOU

Our new 100→200 approach to growth struck us as refreshing and hope-inspiring.

But then we got down to actually planning our first “100” action. And thought about how much work it would take simply to get to the next step. And lost some of our excitement.

The path to perfection in my chosen area is literally endless. Are these small actions, doable as they are, really going to get me anywhere?

It’s true. It feels almost impossible to be “good enough” when it comes to avodas Hashem.

Sometimes, we can work on one area for months or years and see depressingly little progress. Other times, we take giant leaps in growth – but the finish line stands so far ahead of us, we feel like our progress hardly matters.

Torah and its demands truly never end. Chazal describe Torah as “longer than the earth and broader than the sea” (Iyov 11:9). And the Vilna Gaon reminds us (Mishlei 15:24) that the minute we stop trying to move upwards, we move downwards.

How can we ward off the overwhelm and despair of never, ever, ever being good enough?

First, let’s recognize where our definition of “good enough” comes from: Western culture and thought.

Western culture is all about completion. Perfection. “Go big or go home” is a favorite motivational expression. If it isn’t finished, if you didn’t win the game, you just don’t make the cut.

Raised in this culture, we’ve learned to think the same about avodah. If we don’t maintain focus throughout the whole Shemoneh Esrei, our work on kavana doesn’t mean enough. If we learned through a masechta (tractate) but can’t understand it all, our learning isn’t good enough.

The Torah approach strongly disagrees.

A few sections ago, we quoted this posuk: “Im tivakshenah kakahsef v’chamatmonim tachpisena, az tavin yiras Hashem v’da’as Elokim timtzah.” (Mishlei 2:4)

The word “im” is generally translated as “if.” So we usually read the verse like this – as we did above: If we would pursue Torah like people pursue money, we would succeed in connecting deeply with Hashem.

“Im” has a second meaning, though. It also means “when.”

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

“When you’re in the midst of pursuing and searching – that’s when you’ll understand yiras Hashem and find connection with Him.”

Shlomo Hamelech is teaching us: you don’t experience yiras Hashem after you’ve done the work. You experience it *when you’re engaged* in the work. When you’re still searching and struggling.

What’s the essence of Judaism? Our relationship with Hashem. And a relationship isn’t a list of mutual gifts.

It’s a state of engagement. It’s when two people are present with each other.

If we think about it, that’s truly what we want most from the people we love. We want to know their hearts are with us. That they’re focused on us. That we’re a central part of their lives.

And that’s also 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.

Perfect execution 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 *bi-kush*, "seeking." In the middle of a struggle. In that gray 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."

The goal of our avodas Hashem isn't "being picture-perfect." It's about being with Hashem. Trying. Caring. Wanting to be closer.

This perspective shift changes everything. It means that as long as we're working, we're succeeding. We're ascending.

As long as we define perfect execution as the goal of avodas Hashem, we'll be overwhelmed. We'll feel despairing.

Once we start defining our goal as that of deepening our relationship with Hashem, the pressure eases. The endless things we're doing wrong suddenly become endless opportunities to show Hashem how much He means to us, despite our ups and downs.

“Ki karov eilecha hadavar mi’od.” Finally, armed with this new perspective, we truly feel Torah success is “very close.”

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 IS ADVENTURE

Last section left us feeling relieved. Empowered. Loved.

It was incredibly encouraging to realize that, more than anything else, Hashem simply wants our relationship, our presence with Him.

But... what if we don't exactly feel the same way towards Him? What if we find intense focus on avodas Hashem a bit... tedious?

We naturally invest our time and headspace in pursuits we enjoy. Our work, perhaps. Our relationships. Our hobbies. Activities or tasks we take pleasure in.

To most of us, spiritual development isn't a natural interest. Avodas Hashem is on life's to-do list, not exactly in its fun-and-games bucket.

How can we get our pleasure-oriented selves to happily focus on it anyway?

By realizing that, when we learn how to think the right way, avodas Hashem becomes a great adventure.

In Hilchos Talmud Torah (1:13), the Rambam introduces us to the middah or trait of "hislamdus." The reflexive form of the Hebrew word for learning, hislamdus essentially means "self-teaching."

This middah serves as a core feature of a life of avodah. It keeps our minds busy exploring the insights we constantly notice in both our external lives and our inner worlds.

"Who is a wise man? One who learns from everyone." (Avos 4:1) Famous as this mishna is, has it ever led you to wonder about the parallel it draws? Can't a person be wise simply because he knows a lot, even if he doesn't learn from absolutely everyone?

Well, say Chazal, wisdom isn't just something you have. Wisdom is a mindset. A chacham, a wise person, is someone who constantly learns from the people and things around him.

Someone who's in a constant state of hislamdus.

The word "explorer" usually brings up images of intrepid men cutting through tropical jungles, discovering new wonders of the world. But a person who's truly living a life of avodas Hashem is also an explorer.

That's because he views everything in life – his surroundings, things that happen to him, his own actions and reactions – through the eyes of hislamdus. To him, they're all new vistas brimming with intriguing pockets of insight, ripe for exploration.

How do we activate our hislamdus? What insights should we be looking out for?

Anything that can inspire, enhance, or open up a new path in avodas Hashem.

Chazal (Eiruvין 100b) remark that even if we hadn't received the Torah, we could have picked up many of its lessons from the world around us.

We could have learned modesty from the cat. The evil of stealing from the ant. The immorality of adultery from the dove.

The people around us also constantly drop gems of insight into human nature, and how we should – or shouldn't – be channeling it. Watching a child tantrum for half an hour over one ungranted wish reminds us how much perseverance we too possess to pursue even "impossible" goals. Watching an adult pick fights over petty things, alienating others, teaches us how worthwhile it is to live with an ayin tova (benevolent perspective).

And there's truly no hislamdus playground as intricate and enlightening as our own inner world. Our actions. Our choices. Our triggers. Our strengths and weaknesses.

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?

To a man with a hammer, the old adage says, everything is a nail. What we focus on in life determines what we'll notice in the world around us. A photographer notices lighting and framing details wherever they look. A real estate developer sees potential projects in any empty or poorly used land.

And someone living a life of proactive avodas Hashem?

They notice pathways to a stronger relationship with Hashem.

Because these pathways are truly everywhere. Behind its smokescreen of distractions and temptations, the world is one intricate map designed to lead us toward closeness with our Creator.

"Ein tzur k'Elokeinu" – "There is no Rock like our G-d," the Navi tells us (Shmuel 1: 2:2). Chazal expand the word "tzur" into "tzayar," unveiling a new meaning: "There is no Artist like our G-d." Hashem fashioned a world filled with an endless variety of creations – all to teach us something else about Him, about connecting with Him.

Those living focused on avodas Hashem, living in a state of hislamdus, live endlessly interesting lives. Because there's always more to explore. More to learn. New paths to follow – which lead to yet newer ones.

Hashem doesn't just encourage us to focus on avodah for the sake of our spiritual wellbeing. He wants us to live the most satisfying lives we can in this world too.

Hislamdus is one of the gifts He's given us to make that possible.

Exercise: With hislamdus, you need to taste it to believe it. So let's set ourselves the goal of exploring one new insight

every day picked up from our lives or our surroundings.

It could be something picked up during a spiritual struggle. I sped through davening again with zero kavana today. Why? What is it exactly that's hard for me about davening? Why do I feel like it's a burden?

Or during an interaction with someone else. I thought that wealthy new neighbor of mine was standoffish. But this morning, after actually smiling at him as we crossed paths, I got a really nice smile and greeting back. Maybe he's just shy? Maybe people appreciate a smile more than I thought? (And maybe I'm stereotyping too much?)

Or even a "mashal" that strikes us from nature, traffic, an ad headline...

Now that you're on the lookout for them, insights will strike you. Take one of them per day and spend 60 seconds thinking about it. Exploring it. Following the paths that open up in your mind and seeing where they take you.

Afterwards, notice how you feel. Differently from the way you felt 2 minutes ago, before your little avodah adventure?

YOURS TRULY

It's encouraging to discover that avodah can be so engaging.

The problem is, those other parts of our lives, the ones pulling us away from avodah, are even more engaging.

Why? In part because... they're about "me."

Our family, for instance, is about *our* loved ones, *our* relationships, *our* nachas, *our* legacy.

Our hobbies are about us. They're our interests, our outlets, our kind of fun.

Even our work is about us. It's about our money, our professional growth, our success.

Avodas Hashem is Someone Else's focus. It's not something centered on us – it's something we need to fit ourselves into.

We know intellectually it's in our best interests to serve Hashem as well as we can. But there's a difference between a goal or focus that feels obligatory, and one that feels personal.

Unless... avodas Hashem is more us-centered than we think? "Bereishis" – the very first word in the Torah. Commenting on it, Rashi cites Chazal's explanation that this word hints at the two purposes of creation.

What are they? Torah, which is referred to as "reishis darko" ("the beginning of His way"), and the Jewish people, referred to as "reishis t'vuaso" ("the first of His crop").

Torah as the purpose of creation – that's easy to understand. Torah is Hashem's Will. Hashem wanted His will to be expressed, so He created a world of people to recognize and reveal it.

So how do the Jewish people fit in? We're just the nation who does the work of revealing Hashem's Will, right?

Yes and no. Because, as per this Rashi, there are really two sides to the "coin" of actualizing Hashem's purpose for cre-

ating the world.

Side one, that His will be accepted by the world's inhabitants. And side two: that the world's inhabitants use the tool of the Torah to develop themselves into G-dly people.

Chazal (Midrash Vayikra 35:7) say that when a person keeps the Torah, it's like he's "creating himself." When we engage in Judaism, we mold ourselves into ever-greater versions of ourselves – until we reach the version Hashem has intended us to become since creation.

From this perspective, avodas Hashem is actually all about us.

So, with that point settled: how do we take advantage of avodas Hashem to reach self-actualization?

Last section, we spoke about hislamdus – constantly gathering the insights life has to offer us. How do we develop into our perfect selves? By following hislamdus with bitachon.

Bitachon? Isn't that about trusting that Hashem only acts in our best interest? What does hislamdus have to do with bitachon?

Most of us define bitachon as the trust that everything that happens to us comes from Hashem, who calculates it all to serve our very best interests.

A reactive awareness.

At the beginning of Sha'ar Habitachon, the Chovos Halevos frames bitachon as a character trait – actually, the most essential trait we need to serve Hashem properly.

Really? Why is bitachon more crucial to avodah than all other middos?

Because beyond generally reminding us everything that happens is for our good, it informs us that our every experience is a custom-tailored opportunity to engage in self-perfection and avodah.

"B'tach ba'Hashem va'asei tov." Trust in Hashem and do

good, Dovid Hamelech writes in Tehillim (37:3). Wouldn't it seem more natural to switch the order there? "Do good, and trust in Hashem that everything will work out"?

Not quite, explains the Ramban. Before actually doing good, we need to have bitachon that doing good is possible.

When we encounter a challenge – whether it's short-term crazy-making, like a child keeping us up at night or the AC breaking on a 100-degree Shabbos, or whether it's deeply painful, G-d forbid – we tend to see it as something to get through. We hunch our shoulders, do our best to cope, and wait for the light at the end of the tunnel to come closer.

In these situations, bitachon doesn't simply offer us the comfort that somehow, our suffering is good for us.

It gently reminds us of the active role we can play here. That there's something we can do, right now, to serve Hashem. To develop ourselves. To become greater. To turn the pain into growth.

These challenges aren't unfortunate rocks in our path of life. They *are* the path – the one Hashem has designed to bring us toward our best selves.

That irritating trait of our parent, spouse, child or friend isn't just there to give us yissurim (earthly suffering). Hashem lovingly and deliberately placed it in our life to help us become more patient, more tolerant, more accepting.

Hashem didn't just give us that stressful salary cut to make life difficult and get us in trouble when we question Him. He's pulling us back to Him through personal introspection and sincere, meaningful tefillah.

All this to say, avodas Hashem is very much about us.

It's about creating ourselves. Becoming the most elevated versions of ourselves. Benefitting ourselves in the most powerful and eternal way possible.

Exercise: What's an instance in your life where you feel like doing the right thing means giving up on what's good for you? Do you get pressured to make donations you're not enthusiastic about? Do you need to give up on your time or your preferences in the name of working on your marriage? Jot an example from your own life on the line below:

How can you reframe this "sacrifice" in a way that shows you're truly benefiting yourself? Is that "forced" tzedakah helping you become a more generous person, plus one who believes more fully in G-d's control over the numbers in your bank account? Does doing things your spouse's way instead of your own help refine you into a more giving person (and that's, of course, aside from the relationship-building benefits you accrue)?

Take a minute to write out your own reframe below. Because really, all our challenges and all our self-work ultimately benefit no one more than ourselves.

KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

We're feeling intrigued by this new approach to avodah. Maybe we've even started applying some of the new ideas we've learned.

But then something doesn't go right.

We start to make a certain change – and we don't follow through. Or, we make the change, but fall back into our old pattern the next day.

If a life focused on avodah means a life of constantly falling, constantly facing your flaws, constantly seeing yourself fail – are we really sure we want to stay so focused?

This question calls for another paradigm shift. This time, one that takes some of the pain out of our mistakes. That allows us to see them in a positive light.

We'll start with the story of Kayin.

Kayin 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. So 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: "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?" (Targum Onkelos on 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 don't make you a failure. They're simply a signal that you need to work on something.

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

That depressive, resentful, 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.

It's also the way of some of our day's greatest Torah giants.

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, many years before.

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

He didn't see his human fallibility as a bad, shameful thing. He saw it as a simple fact of life as a Jew.

Rav Gedalia Eiseman, mashgiach in Yeshivas Kol Torah, was a towering mussar giant. One notable trait was his utter rejection of kavod, honor.

As he drew near old age, however, he shared with Rav Shlomo Hoffman that after a life spent running from kavod, he had started sensing within himself a new affinity for 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:

"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." (*Secrets of the Soul*, Rabbi Meir Simcha Stein, pg. 271-272.)

Rav Gedalia wasn't distressed about this new character flaw he'd discovered. He didn't beat himself up about it. He simply reflected on it, calmly and pragmatically, so he could craft a plan for working on it.

If Gedolim like the ones in our stories here could approach their shortcomings as simple facts, simple indicators that some inner work is needed, then we can too.

So let's start internalizing that our flaws and failures don't mean WE are failures.

We're all created flawed, and we all make mistakes.

When we're faced with our shortcomings, beating ourselves up and getting depressed is the wrong reaction.

The right reaction? *Hm. Ok, I got off track. I see there's work to be done here. I'm going to get started on it.*

Exercise: When you've made a mistake 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 practice looking at your flaw the way we've learned to above.

NO OTHER OPTION

The paradigm shift in the last section made a massive change in our attitude toward our failures in avodas Hashem. We're feeling less pressured, more empowered. Less burdened, more motivated

But we still have a problem.

Even if mistakes aren't something to be afraid of, even if it's the effort that counts, we humans just don't like doing things we fail at again and again.

How can we convince ourselves to stay enthusiastically focused on avodah when we're naturally loath to pour effort into something doomed to fail?

To answer that, let's take a deeper look at one of the most famous lines in Pirkei Avos (5:23):

"Hevei az kanamer: be bold as a leopard... in doing the will of your Father in Heaven."

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.

“You aren’t new to Elul and these plans and strategies – you’ve been here before, you’ve been excited before, you’ve tried to enhance your davening, increase your Torah learning, repair difficult relationships before, and look where you are today.

“Why give it another chance when you know exactly how it’s going to end?”

And he doesn’t just talk to us that way in Elul. The more we work to maintain our everyday focus on avodas Hashem, the more we’ll hear from him about it.

“Your time is valuable. Why spend it on things you know you probably won’t succeed at? Besides, you need to feel fulfilled by what you do with your time. It’s part of self-care. Invest yourself in something more doable, so you can stay emotionally healthy.”

He sure knows how to sound convincing. And he makes very good points. How can we refute them?

Well, what would the leopard say? Why does he keep trying despite his dismal success rate?

Simple. I need to eat. I might not enjoy all the failed chases, but I don’t have the option to stop. Unless I want to starve.

When something is crucial, you do whatever it takes to get it. No matter how many times it slips through your fingers.

Earlier in this guidebook, we talked about viewing avodas Hashem like a business. We talked about the excitement entrepreneurs feel in the creative process of business-building, and how we can carry that sense of engagement over to our spiritual lives.

But people don’t just focus on business when it’s interesting. Earning a living is a basic need. It consumes huge amounts of our time, effort and focus – even when we’re not enjoying the process. Because making money, sustaining ourselves and our family, is important. It’s crucial.

We might not sense it consciously, but our relationship with Hashem is even more crucial. Whether we like it or not, it's the most important aspect of our lives.

So just as we'd do a tremendous amount, push out of our comfort zone, brave failure and difficulty, to put food on the table – it's worth our while to do the same for our relationship with Hashem.

Living with avodas Hashem at the center means reminding ourselves that, like money, we just can't do without it. No matter how many times we fail in our work, we realize we can never afford to stop trying.

That's our answer to the yetzer hara. We simply have no other option. Just as the leopard needs to eat, we need to grow in our closeness to Hashem.

You're right, yetzer hara. I might fail. I might feel like I'm wasting my time. But it doesn't really matter. I need to "eat." So I'm going to do this work anyway.

Exercise: Let's try to experience the middah of azus. 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 you're attempting something impossible. You're minimizing fear of failure's impact on your avodas Hashem.

NOTHING MATTERS BUT HAYOM

It's hard to argue with a leopard – especially one who makes such a logical case.

But what if our dedication level isn't quite as strong as his yet? And we don't really have the willpower to fight that aversion to failure again and again?

What's another answer we can give that discouraging inner voice questioning why we should bother trying when our past success records are so low?

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.

But we haven't received them right now. We received them a very, very long time ago. Besides, what does it mean to treat them as if we've received them right now?

Commenting on this posuk, the Chofetz Chaim teaches the following: 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 the Vilna Gaon's advice that when an avodah opportunity arises, we should envision 3 things: we're the only person in the world. We only have one hour left to live. And only one obligation to fulfill – the one in front of us.

Sounds unrealistic to you? That's because of a nasty little time-illusion the yetzer hara likes to perform for us. He likes to collapse our past, present and future into one entangled experience.

If until now, we've stumbled in a certain area of Torah and mitzvos, and we're likely to stumble again many times in the future, he convinces us that the present moment needs to follow the same unhappy pattern.

Exhibit A: it's erev Pesach, around noon. We've been snapping at our family throughout the morning. We know that as candlelighting approaches, we'll probably get more stressed out and snap more. So we just keep communicating in snaps, even though we've had a few minutes to think by now and really would rather speak more pleasantly.

Exhibit B: we've had an exhausting day. We speed-mumble the first several brachos of Mincha's Shemoneh Esrei with zero intent. Halfway through, our mind settles down enough to hear our yetzer tov's urgings to slow down and concentrate a bit. We consider for a second, then tell ourselves that since we've already been on autopilot for so much of Shemoneh Esrei, there's no point starting with kavana now.

Here's the thing, though. The yetzer hara made this idea up. In reality, our past choices have absolutely nothing to do with our ability to choose good in the present. Neither does the fact that we'll probably struggle going forward.

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

And right now, the only thing that matters is how we choose to use this moment.

Remember Kayin? He reacted so unproductively to Hashem's rejection because of this same time illusion of the yetzer hara's.

Hashem's response was a reminder about "Hayom." Kayin, stop dwelling on your past mistakes and experiences. Stop fretting about how you'll "never be good enough."

The only thing that matters to Me in this moment is the step you choose to take right now.

"Hayom" is our official permission to drop our emotional bag-

gaze around change, even for just a moment. The guilt, the feelings of failure, the self-hatred, the excuses and defiance and defensiveness – at any moment, we can choose to let go of them and take a step in the right direction.

And the more often we do this, the more often we block out past and future to fixate fully on the moment, the easier it'll become to maintain a steady focus on avodas Hashem.

Snapped at our family this morning? Doesn't mean we're stuck in a pattern for the rest of the day. If every moment is new, then each one provides its own opportunity to speak respectfully.

Or, to ignore our exhaustion and concentrate on the last few brachos of Shemoneh Esrei.

Or, to stop fretting about our history or our future, and make the choice to connect with Hashem.

Exercise: Try the following mental reset next time you're in a situation where you've realized you've done something wrong. Maybe you've gotten into a fight with a loved one, and regret it, but feel too trapped by the momentum of the argument to backtrack or apologize. Maybe you're in the middle of a gossipful conversation and suddenly realize you don't feel good about it, but think you need to keep going because, well, you stumbled already, you're doomed for now.

When you find yourself in a moment like this, take two or three seconds to remind yourself: *Hayom. Every single moment in life is brand new. The yetzer hara wants me to feel like my actions two minutes ago cast a pall over my present. But he's wrong. So what if I said something I shouldn't have two minutes ago? Now is a totally new beginning. Right now, I can start doing the right thing. I can pause, take a deep breath, and speak differently (or about a different subject). Because right now, nothing matters but the present moment.*

YOU HAVE IT INSIDE YOU

Reading through this guidebook has cleared away so many obstacles from our path toward a life with avodah as our primary focus.

But we still might not feel like we're the right fit for this elevated kind of life.

I'm just a regular Jew, trying to get by. This kind of life is for those great Jews who actually feel that deep desire to make Hashem the center of their lives.

Who says I can really get there? Who says I should even try?

Good question.

Bereishis (1:31) tells us that on the 6th day of creation, "Hashem saw everything He had made, and it was *tov mi'od* – very good."

Our Sages look at the word "mi'od," "very," and point out it's made up of the same three Hebrew letters – mem, alef, and daled – as the word "adam," man. When the Torah uses the word "mi'od" here, they explain, it is referring to man.

Why? What about man is "mi'od?"

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. Touched with a tinge of Hashem's own limitlessness.

You might not feel limitless. *You* can only focus on davening for so much time at once. *You* can only stay patient for so long without losing your temper. *You* can't really keep yourself from lashon hora. That's just – you, right?

No, it's not. *You* are so much bigger, filled with so much more potential, than you perceive. 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.

As humans, we are inherently fallible. But we needn’t allow that fact to rule our self-perception. The same humanness that guarantees our imperfection also assures us that we are “mi’od” – that we possess limitless capacity to change, strive, and access ever-higher levels of greatness.

Before the 9th Plague, Darkness, Pharaoh told Moshe he could take his people out on their planned trip to serve G-d in the wilderness – but they’d need to leave their assets behind.

Oh no, Moshe responded. Not only will we take our assets, we’ll end up taking your livestock as well. Why? Because “we don’t know how we will serve Hashem when we get there.” (Shemos 10:26)

Rashi’s comment on Moshe’s words raises our eyebrows. “We don’t know how intense the avodah (work) will be because maybe Hashem will ask from us more than we have in our hands.”

But how can that be? How can Hashem, who knows our capabilities perfectly and only challenges us in ways we can handle, “ask from us more than what’s in our hands”?

Because we’re mi’od. We’re so much bigger, stronger, and more capable of greatness than we perceive ourselves to be. We might not have that greatness “in our hands” now, but we have the capability to reach higher and access it.

Abstract and lofty as this idea might sound, we’ve all seen it in action. We’ve all met or heard of people who, when thrust into impossible situations, accessed unreal depths of strength and accomplished tremendous things.

Not that we should jump levels here, or expect ourselves to maintain all-day-long avodah focus starting tomorrow.

We simply need to realize that our mi’odness exists.

That though it may take time, we’re fully capable of becoming great people.

That it's worthwhile for us to set a life of avodah as a goal, even a distant one, and start taking a few small steps in that direction.

So when the yetzer hara needles us with thoughts like "This is too big to even think about," or "You're just not that person," or "You're way too far from this kind of life" – we know what to respond.

You're right. I'm not that person now. But I'm also mi'od. If I put in the work, I'm perfectly capable of becoming a little more like that person every day.

Exercise: 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 give of yourself more than you thought you could? 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. Whenever you feel down about your capacity to change, spend a few seconds focused on this same memory.

It might take a journey, but you've seen your destination before, and you can make it there again.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Our last tool here won't be new to anyone.

But if you've learned about it and shrugged, now's the time to give it another try – and watch its power at work.

Our Sages call this tool “ayin tova,” or a good eye.

Many of us imagine that highly pious people steeped in avodas Hashem are constantly focused on what's wrong – within themselves, within others around them, within life in general.

We may be surprised to hear, then, that Rav Yisrael Salanter held ayin tova to be a crucial element in avodas Hashem (Michtav 20 in Ohr Yisrael).

So what exactly does it mean to have an ayin tova, a good eye?

We're used to thinking of ayin tova as an inborn tendency. He's naturally a positive person, an optimist, I'm naturally a pessimist.

But Pirkei Avos (2:13-14) disagrees.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai instructed five students: “Go out and discern the proper path [in life] one should cling to, and the evil path [in life] one should distance himself from.”

One student, Rabi Eliezer, returned with these findings: “An ayin tova – a good eye – is the proper path one should attach himself to. An ayin ra'ah – an evil eye – is the evil path one should distance himself from.”

Ayin tova isn't just a predisposition. It's a “pathway to attach ourselves to.” An acquired ability we can cultivate, no matter our natural traits.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz defines living with a good eye as routinely choosing to see the diamond in the rough. To spy out the good in situations where it isn't easily discernable. To see the possibility beyond external limitations.

In general, we humans are wired to focus on the negative. Ayin tova enables us to move against that powerful natural pull, and proactively search out the positive.

The positive in whom, or what?

First of all, in ourselves. As Rav Yerucham famously remarked, “Woe is to one who isn’t aware of their shortcomings, but doubly woe (“oy va voy”) to one who isn’t aware of their strengths!”

As we discussed several sections ago, we can’t build ourselves in avodah if all we see is brokenness. We need to recognize the greatness already within us, the strides we’ve already made, the areas we’re already connected to, and build from there.

So: as you move into a year focused on avodah, make sure to look at yourself and your progress, insignificant as each amount might seem, with an ayin tova.

Once we develop an ayin tova toward ourselves, we need to extend it to other people.

Rav Yerucham, who served as mashgiach in the Mir Yeshiva, took a hiatus of five years. He returned to a yeshivah filled with 300 new students.

After 3 short months, he remarked that he’d discerned *all* the natural strengths of *every* single student. As for weaknesses, he’d only uncovered those of a few.

How does focusing on others’ strong points enhance our avodah?

Because when we’re surrounded by good people who do great things, we’re inspired to follow them. And we’ll only be able to access as much inspiration as our ayin tova allows us to see.

So. When we view ourselves with an ayin tova, we position ourselves better for growth. When we train our ayin tova on others, we open ourselves up to powerful inspiration.

There's one more place where we need to apply our ayin tova – our power to affect the world around us.

The world works overtime to convince us spiritual effort isn't worth it. If our learning tells us we're constantly capable of bettering ourselves, creating more kedusha, bringing humanity closer to recognition of Hashem – the world smirks and assures us we won't be able to overcome the apathy, the inertia, the temptations with which it surrounds us.

Our counter-weapon? Ayin tova.

Moshe Rabbeinu, the Torah teaches, was buried opposite Ba'al Pe'ohr (an idol people worshipped by defecating in front of it). Why there of all places?

As Rav Wolbe explains, Ba'al Pe'ohr worshippers believed everything in life was headed to waste. Since nothing really mattered, they felt they might as well live life exactly as they wanted to.

Torah, which Moshe brought to the Jewish people, teaches exactly the opposite.

From Torah we learn we can create kedusha and closeness to Hashem out of anything, anytime. That *everything* matters – every moment, every human choice – and everything can fulfill a noble purpose.

As we move into the new year – a year in which we've set this goal to center our lives around avodas Hashem – ayin tova will serve as our safeguard and our support. It helps us remember that growth opportunities can be unearthed everywhere, in every moment.

And keeps us believing we're capable of achieving our avodah dreams.

Exercise: We'll begin our ayin tova work at the most natural starting point – ourselves. Think of a positive character trait

you possess. Are you patient? Compassionate? Perseverant? Generous?

Now, think about two practical ways you can (and perhaps already do) use that positive trait to serve Hashem.

Now, repeat the same process with another positive trait you see in yourself.

The trait: _____

Two of its uses in avodas Hashem: _____

SET FOR THE JOURNEY

We started this journey with a challenge. There's so much about life that drags our focus away from what's important. The responsibilities. The challenges. The distractions and temptations.

How can we rise above it all and absorb ourselves in avodas Hashem despite life's powerful downward pull? How can we turn that special Elul closeness into a year-round experience?

The paradigm shifts we made through this guidebook taught us that developing a more life-pervading relationship with Hashem isn't an impossible goal. It's doable. Pleasant. Engaging. Fulfilling. And no matter what mistakes we've made, or what failures await us in our futures, this rich spiritual life is within reach.

First, we learned the difference between *reactive* avodah and *proactive* avodah. Until now, we've been brandishing a whackamole mallet and exhausting ourselves as we try to knock down those ever-appearing obligations and challenges.

Now, we know how to pursue avodah "like money." How to approach it proactively like a business or project, envisioning the big-picture change we want to create and working towards it step by step.

We also clarified that harder doesn't equal higher priority in avodas Hashem. On the contrary, starting from easier work that naturally appeals to us creates a positive momentum that carries us toward further growth.

We worried a bit about the sheer amount of work our desired changes would require, wondering if our "100" actions were really enough to move us forward. And then reminded ourselves that Hashem's deepest wish isn't that we execute Judaism perfectly. More than anything, He wants our relationship. Our presence. The evidence that we care, that we're trying.

We also uncovered some of the personal benefits we can reap from a life focused on avodah. Learning about hislamdus, and its role in spirituality-centered living, showed us how engaging and exciting a life of avodah can feel. And brushing up on our bitachon that every experience in our lives has been custom-tailored to prompt self-perfection helped us reframe our avodah “sacrifices” as very real self-advancement.

Then we ran into questions like, “What if I fail? As I’ve done so many times before?” Like, “Who says I’ll be able to pull this avodah-focus off?” And like, “I’m not sure I’m cut out for this consistent-closeness thing.”

First, we took the edge off our dread of mistakes with Hashem’s simple response to Kayin’s angst. We learned to react to our stumbles with a calm “Oh,” and quickly get back on track. Then we learned to mentally separate our past and future from the present moment, because truly, nothing matters but “Hayom.”

We also reflected on the practical logic of the ever-perseverant leopard, reminding ourselves that failure isn’t a worry when there’s no other option. And tuned into the reality of our true essence, our true “mi’od” potential, reminding ourselves of our infinite ability to raise our limits and access greatness.

Will this journey toward constant closeness with Hashem be an easy one? Of course not. That’s why we made sure to stock up on ayin tova before concluding. Because nothing can motivate and uplift us like a well-practiced habit of seeking out the “diamonds in the rough” within ourselves, others, and life in general.

With our new knowledge in hand, Yom Kippur doesn’t need to mark the end of this Elul season’s special bonding time with Hashem. We’ve now developed mindsets and tools key to helping us naturally maintain a stronger focus on our relationship with our Creator.

Yes, life will still be hectic. Yes, challenges and temptations

will still attempt to pull us down. But this year, we're greeting post-Yom Kippur life more prepared. And the difference will be tangible.

We'll slowly shift from simply checking off our spiritual obligations to getting swept up in the experience of them. We'll get to watch our avodah come alive.

GLOSSARY

Avodah: in our context, service of Hashem; spiritual growth

Avodas Hashem: service of Hashem; spiritual growth

Ayin tova: “a good eye;” a benevolent perspective

Azus: brazeness;chutzpa

Bitachon: trust in G-d

Bracha: blessing

Chas v’shalom: Heaven forbid

Chazal: our Sages, usually from the Talmudic era

Chizuk: encouragement, strength

Davening: prayer

Hayom: today; in the present

Hislamdus: the middah of “self-teaching;” a quality of one who gathers insights from ordinary life

Kabbalah ketana: small new year’s resolution

Kavana: intent

“Ki karov eilecha hadavar mi’od”: “For this matter is very close to you.” Quoted from a verse in the Torah (Devarim 30:14), which teaches that Torah and mitzvos aren’t “far away” or “across the sea” – i.e. far above our capability level – but rather “very close,” doable and natural to us.

Masechta: tractate or volume of the Talmud

Mashal: parable

Michtav: letter

Middah: character trait

Mincha: afternoon prayers

Mi’od: very, or a lot

Mishna: written teaching of our Mishna-era Sages

Ovdei Hashem: plural for an individual dedicated to serving Hashem

Parnassah: livelihood

Pesukim: verses

Posuk: verse

Shacharis: morning prayers

Shalom bayis: marital harmony

She'ifos: spiritual aspirations

Shemoneh Esrei: the Silent Devotion prayer, typically recited 3 times a day

Tefillah: prayer

Tzedakah: charity

Yamim Noraim: High Holidays

Yetzer hara: evil inclination

Yiras Hashem: fear of Hashem

DEDICATIONS

In memory of our dear parents,

Eleanore Foonberg ob"m

Meyer (Mike) Licht ob"m

Donna Letman Licht ob"m

Dana and Brad Licht

GOLD

Mazel tov on the publication! Thank you for bringing light and kindness into the world. May your work inspire others to do the same.

Joey Licht

In honor of this Elul guide and, be"H,
the impact it will have worldwide.

Moshe Daniel

SILVER

In honor of

**Rabbi Goldbaum and Mr. Hoffman,
the staff, teachers and Board of
Directors of Hillel Academy.**

Zvi and Shoshana Gelt

SILVER

In loving memory of

Abe Herzberg
Avraham ben Tzvi, a"h

Mrs. Anne Herzberg

לזכות לרפואה שלימה והצלחה של

פייגי בת אירית

ראובן בנימין בן אסתר

צילה בת רחל

והצלחה ברוחניות וגשמיות של

יוסף בן צילה

אהרן בן פייגי

רוחמה ברכה בת שולמית

אסתר מלכה בת פייגי

יוסף מילר

In honor of

Chava bas Sarah,

my constant source of inspiration.

Adam Moskowitz

L'zecher nishmas

R' Yisroel Moshe ben Yosef Chaim zt"l

and

R' Meir ben Yisroel zt"l

Mishpachas Rosenbaum

With gratitude to Hashem for
Levi Lebovits,
my teacher and my friend.

Marc Sievers

Mazel tov on your latest guide! You do so much for Klal Yisrael to help us all grow and become the best versions of ourselves. With your guidance and encouragement, 5786 promises to be our best year yet! We're grateful for everything you do, and most of all for your friendship.

Sincerely,

The Vaadkas

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



216.333.4927

With gratitude for your friendship, your guidance, and our nearly 15-year chavrusa. You are a true passion promoter. I am inspired by your love of Torah and your passion for sharing Hashem's light with the Denver Jewish Community and Jews around the world.

Marc, Melanie, Ellie and Ben

As a z'chus for Klal Yisroel

Eddie and Rivka Goykhman

In honor of Rabbi Lebovits – thank you for providing our family with such a calm perspective throughout the year, especially during Elul. We are grateful to have you as a resource and even more so as our friend.

Love, Casey, Brett, Chase, Cooper and Kash

In honor of

**Joshua, Rachell, Ilan, Akiva,
Nechama, and Naava**

making aliya. May your journey be a blessing for your family and for K'lal Yisrael.

Ron and Karen Rubin

לע"נ דוד בן זוהרה ע"ה

Wishing you much continued success in
illuminating the lives of Jews everywhere!



Alex Polotsky, MD

Medical Director

Reproductive Endocrinologist

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L'illui nishmas

R' Hershel ben Michel z"l

by his children and grandchildren

In memory of

Irving and Edith Gershater, A"H

and in honor of our children and grandchildren.

Rick and Linda Gershater

To my beloved wife,

Daurice.

Looking forward to many more years together.

Jonathan Maram

To my Friend and Mentor:

Rabbi Lebovits

Wishing continued success,

Harvey & Jenna Pacht

L'illui nishmas

Boruch Yosef Yechezkel ben Chaim,

from the

Taub family of Cleveland

To my parents,

Gita Faygel bat Israel Yitzchak and Ephraim ben Shmuel,

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

Trudy Robinson

To my precious grandsons, **Ethan and Owen Mandi,**
may they follow the path of Torah. To their family
that they may guide them on their way. To my wife,
Sherrie, who has sustained me and loved me all these
years. Last, but certainly not least, to **Rabbi Lebovits,**
my teacher, my mentor, and my friend.

All the best,

Hank Brandon



Avodah Alive

Formerly known as The Vaad Project, **Avodah Alive** is an organization dedicated to helping Jews of all backgrounds access classic Mussar insights for rejuvenating their connection to Hashem. Its founder, Rabbi Levi Lebovits, draws from the teachings of his rebbi, Rav Reuven Leuchter shlita, in empowering Jews to experience a vibrant, joyful Torah life with concrete spiritual growth as its primary focus. Based in Denver, Colorado, Avodah Alive is a community initiative of Yeshiva Toras Chaim of Denver.

If you've enjoyed this guidebook, email **llebovits@avodahalive.org** with the subject line "Guides" to receive future guides and/or weekly avodah emails.

To learn more about Avodah Alive, or to inquire about speaking engagements, email **llebovits@avodahalive.org** or call **303.949.5606**.

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