

Change Your Habits, Change Your Life
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My first high holidays with Community Synagogue was in the ballroom of the Rye Town Hilton. Next door were our friends from Chabad. Many of our teens atoned by visiting the hotel restaurant. Outside, a lone woman stood, protesting Israel's presence in the West Bank. It was the first time I experienced the high holidays anywhere other than a synagogue building. And, if I could wave a magic wand, we would be at 200 Forest Ave., in a bright, modern and spacious facility, suited just to our needs. Maybe that day will come. But for now we are here, in this space that is our sanctuary. It was also during those first Holy Days, that I experienced something new. As the Torah was carried through the congregation, the volume increased tremendously. It wasn't the cantor or the choir, it was you, the congregation, using the hakafah as a mid-service shmooze break. While I first found it shocking, I came to realize that we enjoy each other's company. With that in mind, I'm going to ask you, in a moment to talk with the person next to you, but to connect with them around a particular question. Here it is: think of someone who really changed themselves for the better. It could be you, someone you know, or a character from a story. Share with someone next to you how that person changed? What did they do to get there? What were their rewards? (Share in chevrotah)

In his book *The Power of Habit* (<http://charlesduhigg.com/the-power-of-habit/>), Charles Duhigg points out that the creation and maintenance of habits follow the same pattern. It's basically a three step loop. First, there is a cue, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which behavior to use. Then there is the routine, which can be physical or mental or emotional. This is then followed by a reward for following that cue. Whether it was Tony Dungee

who reinvented the Tampa Bay Buccaneers or the advertisers for Pepsodent toothpaste who revolutionized how Americans care for their teeth, this three step pattern can be applied to every aspect of life.

These are days for creating new spiritual habits, for turning ourselves around. It is also a time for admitting our shortcomings. *Al Chet Shechetanu* - for the sin we have committed. We all know that we want change. Our goals are immense: Peace in the Middle East; eradicating hunger; reforming immigration laws; sensible gun legislation; controlling the spread of Ebola; stemming global warming, just to name a few. Yet I wonder if we are starting in the wrong place. I wonder, if we want to repair the world, might it make sense to start by repairing our own souls?

The Chafetz Chayim, the leader of Polish Jewry prior to the Holocaust once faced a similar problem. Asked how he had such an impact on the Jewish world, he replied, "I set out to try to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there too. So I targeted the community in my hometown of Radin, but achieved no greater success. Then I gave all my effort to changing my own family, and failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world."

It often feels that we, the Jewish world, never really learned from his example. In the last half-century our communal focus was largely devoted to issues of assimilation, intermarriage, ritual performance, support for Israel and recovery from the Holocaust. We spent so much time building and strengthening the external community, that we forgot about the interior world of the individual. Despite the fact that the soul in all its dimensions is where we experience life, where we thrive and where we suffer, the inner life of the individual was almost entirely eliminated from the communal Jewish agenda. And for the millions and perhaps billions that we spent developing

Jewish identity and ensuring Jewish continuity, are we better off? Aside from a few bright stars like Birthright the news is not good. Affiliation rates are declining, synagogues around the country are closing their doors or merging, intermarriage among non-Orthodox Jews stands around 73%, and despite an essential doubling of the Dow Jones Industrial Average since 2008, Federation campaigns across the country have remained flat. For all our efforts to build the Jewish community, we failed to develop the key ingredient that makes community - the individual Jewish soul. *Al chet shechatanu* - for the sin of focusing too much on macro issues instead of the micro spiritual needs of the individual.

The price of that neglect has been enormous. Jews continued to seek spirituality but because a Jewish pathway for inner living in liberal Jewish settings was almost impossible to find, many wandered. The top three choices? Buddhism, Quasi-Kabbalah or Chabad which is really Orthodox light - low expectation Judaism with the veneer of traditional practice. The results of the Pew study called "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" (<http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>) released last fall confirm this. As Pew demonstrated, millennials who seek meaning and purpose can't imagine that the Judaism they grew up on, a religious tradition seemingly more concerned with survival and surveys, could possibly speak to them. Instead of searching deeper within Judaism, too many abandon organized Judaism outright. Somewhere we lost our way. We became so focused on the rules, on the performance of mitzvot, whether something is kosher or not, that we forgot what Judaism was intended to be - a pathway to a richer and more meaningful life. *Al Chet Shechatanu*- for the sin of focusing too much on the "what" of Jewish life and not spending enough time on the "why".

Have you ever built a sukkah? Did anyone in your family? Did someone ever tell you why we build one? Was the answer either: because our ancestors lived in temporary housing as they wandered in the wilderness OR, because when our ancestors were farmers they built these little booths closer to their crops? Or did someone just say, "Tradition." What if someone had said, "We build sukkot so that once a year we can experience a profound connection with the earth and recall our responsibility towards it." Would that have inspired you? If someone said, "we build sukkot to spend seven days dwelling outside our homes to teach us how vulnerable our lives really are. By living outside, we come to realize how challenging it would be to be homeless; therefore, we come to empathize with those who ARE homeless and feel moved to work to eradicate homelessness and poverty." Would that engage you? Al Chet Shechatanu Lefanecha - for the sin we have committed by not making Judaism compelling and relevant.

When the Pew study was released, Rabbi Frankel summed it up best. "We are selling something that no one wants to buy." We've spent too long guiltting people into being Jewish or teaching people how to DO Jewish, instead of doing what Judaism was intended to do all along, create a spiritual discipline so that we can live a life that matters. Besides, why spend time teaching something that you can learn from Rabbi Google? Al Chet Shechatati - for the sin I have committed by teaching a surface understanding of Judaism.

But all is not lost. There is, I believe, a pathway that will allow us to do what Judaism was intended to do all along: make us into better human beings. Let me repeat that. Judaism was never intended to make us better Jews. There is no such thing as a good Jew or a bad Jew. There are; however, good people and bad people. Some of them are Jewish. Some are not. The purpose of Judaism was intended to make us better human beings, to make us Menschen. And let's face it, isn't that really what your mother wanted for you, to be a mensch?

In the mid-1800's the Jewish community of Europe was beset with a variety of social tensions: the oppression of the Czar, the magnetic attraction of the new social ideologies of communism and socialism, the passionate call of the Zionist movement, the secularizing thrust of the so-called Enlightenment and the fact that the Chasidic movement had lost some of its spiritual authenticity. Each of these put a strain on the Jewish Community.

In the midst of these tensions, one rabbi called for communities to learn and practice a spiritual discipline called Mussar, often translated as "ethics." Highlighting the work of tenth century Babylonian sage Sa'adia Ga'on, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter pointed to a chapter in Sa'adiah's Book of Beliefs and Opinions called, "How a Person Ought to Behave in the World." Salanter felt that through the practice of virtues or middot, one might learn, not so much what to do but rather, how to live.

The Hebrew word Mussar has many meanings. It can be translated as discipline or self-conduct. Another way to translate it is "correction." Mussar is the study and practice of moral character traits. Beginning with a verse found close to the center of the Torah, a verse we will read this afternoon, Mussar reminds us of our job description: "You shall be holy - *Kedoshim T'hi'yu*." These words advise us to act on that inner drive to make something better of our lives. You shall be holy. As Alan Morinis, (<http://www.mussarinstitute.org/>) the great mussar teacher of our age who will be with us this spring puts it, "Since we live in a time and place that emphasizes the material, we commonly give rein to that impulse in material ways. We change the color of our hair, straighten our teeth, replace the car, get a new roof, do the laundry, upgrade the computer and spend innumerable hours and dollars in answering the call to improve... [However] the Torah's advice is to recognize that the inner impulse you feel to improve is a spiritual urge, an innate drive

toward spiritual refinement that is squandered when it is spent on your clothes or your car."
(Everyday Holiness, p. 12)

How does Mussar work? By following the same three step loop of cue, routine and reward that Duhigg uncovered when researching his book.

To practice Mussar, one identifies particular character traits or middot to work on. These might include traits such as humility, patience, gratitude, simplicity, or generosity. And it's not just the things we need to do more of. We can sometimes improve ourselves by doing less. Maybe you see yourself as being too quiet, too trustworthy, too neat, too enthusiastic. The middot each of us choose to focus on will be unique as each of us is unique. I, for example, (and my family will concur) know that I need to work more on patience while I feel like I'm doing fairly well when it comes to gratitude. Practicing Mussar is about finding the middot that call to you in what could be called your ISP or Individual Spiritual Plan.

Once you've identified the middot you want to work on, you create a regular practice. Concentrating on one middah at time, you would find a focus phrase, an affirmation to meditate on. If, for example, your middah was "truth," your affirmation might be words of Torah which say, "*midvar sheker tir-chak* - keep far from falsehood." This word or phrase reminds you where your head and heart should be. You could make it the screen saver on your computer or just have it as a post-it note stuck to your bathroom mirror. As you go through the day, you might come to pay closer attention to a tendency to play fast and loose with the truth. The little white lie would suddenly sting, no longer crossing your lips without notice. Or you might find something different: some folks are never tempted to lie, but tell the truth too often and too harshly. Either way, you would end your day by writing for a few minutes about your experiences. This heightened

awareness of your wrongdoing will ultimately lead to a change in character. And the side benefit? Judaism might come to actually play an ongoing and compelling role in your life.

Of course, it's not enough to meditate, contemplate and reflect. One must put the learning into practice. If, for example, you are working on the middah of humility, you might intentionally sit in the back of the room. If you are working on gratitude, you might follow the Talmudic advice to say 100 blessings every day. Imagine how constantly saying "thank you," instead of "gimme" would change you. If you are practicing generosity, you might choose to give \$1 to one hundred people over the course of 100 days. You could write a \$100 check to one person or one organization but that's not the point. The act of extending your hand 100 times is the external motion that generates the internal change you seek.

Does this sound like classic cognitive behavioral therapy? In many ways it is. What makes it Jewish are the texts we draw from, the fact that it impacts your soul and that it leads to what Judaism wants for us - a life of *Shleimut* and *Kedusha* a life of wholeness and holiness. That's the reward.

As we know, today is a day for confessing our failures and admitting our shortcomings. "*Al Chet Shechatati*, I missed the mark by..." When it comes to my own mussar practice, I have a lot to confess. I have the best of intentions but life often gets in the way. Some weeks, the best I can do is to merely remember the Middah I am working on. Yet that, in itself, has helped tremendously. While practicing generosity I found myself acting with greater patience, offering to pay for others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, slowing down to let the other car go first. While practicing teshuva as I did this summer, I found myself reflecting more on my actions of the day and not avoiding those I may have hurt. The key to mussar is not to necessarily follow

what I described earlier with utter precision. The key is to do something, to find the exercises that work for you and then to follow them. Perhaps this story will help:

A group of students in the Yeshiva of Novarodok had obtained a dead fish, tied a string around its tail and suspended it from the ceiling of their room. They then sat around and observed it as it decayed. This contemplation was meant to impress upon them the reality of death and the way of all flesh. A group of Mussar students from the Slabdoka Yeshiva found out what the Novarodokers were doing and ran to tell their teacher. Since their style of practice was dignified and decorous, they expected him to say something that would affirm their practice over that of the radical Novarodokers. When they had finished pouring out their tale, their teacher simply asked them, "Does it work?" That is the question when it comes to developing a Mussar practice. Does it ultimately work to bring about inner change?

Understanding the roadblocks we all throw up that get in the way of doing this kind of positive spiritual work, we have decided to bring it to you, to focus this year on the theme of wellness and mindfulness. For some, it will mean coming to our monthly "Making Mussar" class. Some may choose to drop by on a Sunday morning for Jewish Yoga that incorporates Mussar teachings. Others may choose to only engage with our scholars in residence, Rabbi Rex Perlmeter and Alan Morinis. Our CJL families will be exposed to a Middah of the month and this spring I will teach a class called, "Food for Thought," (<http://hazon.org/jewish-food-movement/food-for-thought/>) reminding us that how we eat and how we think about what we eat is an extension of our core values. Each week, as part of our weekly digest, we will highlight a different middah with suggested practices. As you leave this morning handouts of different middot and suggested focus phrases will be available and as part of our afternoon service we will engage with texts around the middah of Shalom Bayit or Peace in the Home. The goal of Mussar is to view Judaism as

something to be practiced and lived, to inform our lives from when we rise in the morning to when we retire at night. Like the rabbi who said to the soap maker upon seeing a filthy child playing in the gutter, "just as soap cannot do any good unless it is used, the same is true with Torah. Learned and left on a shelf, Torah is useless. Used daily, it can change our lives."

Now, I know there are those who hit the delete button whenever an email comes from comsynrye. I even know that some bristle at the thought of Jewish study, even in its most benign form. But my goal is not for you to register for a new class - although we are currently registering a new class of adult b'nei mitzvah students and need a few more to make it happen - the goal is to give you the tools and resources to grow in wholeness and holiness, to allow you to develop new habits, to change for the better - and it can be done.

I'm curious. By a show of hands, how many of you have a device that you have to enter a password into multiple times a day. How many of you, in your work places, use a computer system where you are asked to create a new password, as frequently as every 30 days? It can be a frustrating process.

In a blog post I came across recently (<https://medium.com/@manicho/how-a-password-changed-my-life-7af5d5f28038>), a man named Mauricio Estrella felt this sense of frustration before remembering a tip he heard from his former boss. "Use a password to change your life."

Having recently gone through a nasty divorce and feeling like an angry victim, Mauricio typed, "Forgive@h3r" as his password. Which he read as, "Forgive her."

He had to type this statement several times a day. Each time his computer would lock; each time his screensaver with *her* photo appeared; each time he would come back from eating lunch.

In his mind, he went with the mantra that he didn't type a password. In his mind, he wrote "Forgive her" every day, multiple times a day, for a whole month.

That simple action changed the way he looked at his ex-wife. That constant reminder that he should forgive her, led him to accept the way things happened at the end of his marriage, and allowed him to embrace a new way of dealing with his moods and the his new reality.

One month later, like clockwork, the Exchange Server asked him again to choose a new password. Hearing his boss' advice to "use a password to change your life," he typed, "Quit@smoking4ever."

And guess what happened? He quit.

Month after month this man created passwords to develop habits he wanted to work on and in so doing, changed his life. Here is an extract of those passwords and their outcomes:

Save4trip@thailand ← it worked.

Sleep@before12 ← it worked.

Ask@her4date ← it worked, he fell in love again.

No@drinking2months ← it worked. he felt better.

Get@c4t! ← it worked. He bought a beautiful cat.

Facetime2mom@sunday ← it worked. He now talks with his mom every week.

And the last one: Save4@ring ← She said yes¹.

¹ Mauricio Estrella, "How a password changed my life," medium.com

Use a password to change your life. Develop a cue that leads to a positive pattern. The reward will be a greater sense of wholeness and holiness. Your family will thank you. Your co-workers will thank you. Your body will thank you. Your soul will thank you.

According to one midrash² only 20% of the Jews followed Moses out of Egypt. The other 80% were too habituated to their lives, too fearful to unload their burdens and make the break for freedom. In fairness, they were faced with the difficult choice of either maintaining an unsatisfactory life that was at least known or facing a challenging life in the realm of the unknown. But the fact that they were unwilling to try meant a lifetime of servitude instead of attempting an opportunity to start anew, to live a life of freedom.

Today we are given a choice, to choose how to respond to the various stimuli that come our way. We know that we all must die. How we live, however, is entirely of our choosing. We can choose to remain in the Egypt's of our lives, or with boldness, to begin journeying along that path to the promised land, to a life that is both whole and holy. All it takes is that first step. And don't worry that the road is long. As Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter Rebbe of Kelm reminds us, "it is the work of a lifetime and that is just why you have been given a lifetime in which to do it."

I began this sermon by asking you to think about somebody who really changed their life for the better and to think about what they did to get there. Now, as we are about to leave this darkened sanctuary and emerge into the noonday sun, I ask you to sit for a few moments as the cantor sings and to ask yourself four simple questions:

- What is one change I want to make in my life?

² Tanchuma, Parshat Beshalach 1)

- Who or what can help me make it?
- What will I do in the next 24 hours to begin the process of change?
- What will my new password be?

May your fast be one of meaning and purpose. May you aspire to a life of wholeness and holiness and may you strive to make your life a work of art.