

Navigating Shovevim Week 2

”Stuff about **Habits**”

Rabbi Avi Tenenbaum CAC, MA CASAC grad.

054 845 1458

avitenenbaum9@gmail.com

“....Even something that a person thought he’d never do, once he does it **two or three times**, it suddenly becomes easier for him to consider doing it again....

....This is what Chazal are telling us by the words “avar vishana bah, na’aseh lo kiheter-once he does a sin once, and then **repeats** it, he begins to experience the sin as if it is permitted to do”

-Magid Of Dubno, Sefer Hamidos, Shaar Da’as 3; Matbeah Shetav’u Chachamim,
“Hergel”, Oz Vehadar2002

“A person needs to get up in the morning like a lion....

....If he **accustoms** himself to getting up like this four or five times, it won't be so hard for him afterwards”

-Advice of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, 1, 4

“After the Yetzer Harah pushes a person to a certain point of sin, he no longer needs to encourage them to sin-because that person will go and do it **on his own** without the Yetzer Hara’s help....

....and once a person makes a **habit** of pursuing lust on his own, he begins to lust for things that are not even natural to lust for.”

-Vilna Goan, Even Shleimah, 4, 4

Why does the brain form habits?

The process of habit-forming is the brain's way of conserving energy and health. If you had to concentrate your brain on doing every thing as if it were the first time you ate food or read a book, it would consume a lot of energy and be overwhelming.

The habit-forming mechanism is part of the administrative function of the brain to “run the show” as best as possible. Your brain is very “smart” and “has a mind of its own”, making these decisions for you without your conscious consent or knowledge.

What EXACTLY happens when a decision becomes a habit

Conscious decisions are made in a part of the brain called the **“Prefrontal Cortex”**. When we do something enough times, our brain tells itself that this repeated behavior should now be carried out by a different part of the brain called the **“Basal Ganglia”**. The

Basal Ganglia is able to take a behavior and turn it into an **automatic routine**. By doing this, our **Prefrontal Cortex** is now free to engage in new and other things.

Example- A Yeshiva accepts 18 year old boys for their 1st year learning program. After these boys complete their 1st year, the Yeshiva staff encourages them to move up to their 2nd year program. This is not only in the best interest of the students, but it is also good for the Yeshiva. By moving the 1st year boys to 2nd year, it allows the Yeshiva to have space for a new batch of 1st year boys.

Habits can be broken down into three parts

(1) The Cue/Trigger- The thing that causes the habit to come about; it arouses the desire to perform the habit; it pulls him into going to do the habit. It might be a certain time, sight, thought, etc.

(2) The Behavior- This is the actual thing which is done as the habit-it is the biting of the fingernails, the acting out, or searching the internet for arousing material

(3) The Reward- This is your brain's response that says "hey-I enjoyed that" and the decision in your mind to continue doing this behavior because it feels good. This step is the link that encourages the behavior to continue.

Cue + Behavior + Reward = A Habit

Why do we need a cue to form a habit?

We start doing the behavior on a **conscious level**. It is our **decision to do or not do** whatever is the behavior in question. However, as we make this decision repeatedly, our brain starts do the behavior on autopilot.

Since we are on **autopilot** and no longer making a conscious decision, we need a trigger or cue to arouse our subconscious to carry out the habit.

Upon seeing the cue through the 5 senses, our Basal Ganglia tells our body to perform the habit.

If we're not making a decision then we need to somehow “know” when to do the behavior, & that happens by having a cue.

The cue/trigger tells your brain to go into automatic mode.

It started with a goal or more conscious decision but now...

People start doing the behavior for a reason. It might be to see what happens, or because it provides relief.

Over time, this turns into a habit and **the original goal or reason becomes less necessary** since the habit becomes now more innate.

Context of the Habit

The Basal Ganglia is our part of the brain that forms habits, and it seems to “remember” the context that the brain learned the habit within. So if a habit to act out is learned in the context of an empty room, then in the future any “empty room” may trigger an urge to act out.

In the “empty room” case, let’s brainstorm how to make this room “no longer empty”. We might want to stay out of that empty room and be elsewhere at that time, invite people into the room, call a friend on Skype or make a phone call, and so on.

The phenomena of “Habituation” helps form a habit too

“Habituation” is another interesting thing that our brain automatically does. It means that when we do something one time, we react to what we did by feeling good or bad about what we just did, and that’s called a “stimulus”. When we repeat the behavior several times, our brain becomes used to and unimpressed by the “good” or “bad” feeling, and we no longer react to the behavior strongly. An example is that when you take the first piece of cake, it’s really good, but by the 2nd and 3rd piece you already get used to it.

Example-We act out and feel terrible about it. We repeat the acting out and the “terrible feeling” starts to evaporate.

Possible Solution-Hear other people describe why they need to stop this habit, and maybe by hearing it in a new way, you can “feel” again the importance of why you should work on breaking this habit.

Example-We feel it’s important to take manage our recovery, but after a few weeks that feeling goes away.

Possible Solution-Find new ways to renew your recovery to keep it fresh. Go to a new meeting, do fellowshiping with a new person, read a new book on the subject, try a new ritual of recovery like meditation or exercise.

Automaticity-When habits become like Folgers in your cup!

Automaticity is the brain's ability to learn how to perform tasks on a subconscious level so that you can do other things at the time and multi-task. Example- I can walk, be on the phone, and find what I need in the store, all at the same time.

When acting out is repeated thousands of times, the brain might make it possible to act out without barely any conscious level thinking. This can explain how a person in some cases can act out even without almost any thought or planning!

True story-A yeshiva guy sat in a library and felt tired. He got up to act out in order to wake himself up, and then caught himself and reflected on what he was just about to do. In his mind, acting out became such an automatic response to stress, discomfort, and strong emotions that needing a coffee prompted him to act out!

Imagine yourself yawning in shiur and without thinking, your body suddenly gets up to snort cocaine....

The medicine on the shelf has to go in your mouth to work

Knowledge never solved any problem. However, **knowledge can be a useful road map** to help you drive to doing the solution.

Your knowledge can help you know **where to go** for the solution.

Ultimately, by **changing something** in your life or doing something, **THAT is the solution**, not the mere fact that you *know* there's a bottle of medicine on the shelf.

In regards to breaking bad habits, **understanding the structure of how your habit works** can be a map to help you know **where to go to change something** in your habit loop.

Common ways used to break habits

- Avoid/Remove triggers in your environment. Knock out the cue/trigger.
Take the trigger away from you.
- Take yourself out of the environment to a new place. **Take yourself away from the trigger.** Since the brain forms habits within the context of a certain setting, place, or environment, so going on a vacation from that environment is found to make it easier to break a habit. **Example-**Sleeping in a different room for a few nights while you try to break this habit and get out of the habit loop might be helpful, especially if you're doing other interventions as well to break the habit. The point is to form a new pattern while in the new setting before returning back to the old setting. You come home from vacation with a new competing pattern.
- Learn other habits and rituals to do instead of the bad habit. Doing this helps us develop new habits and keep ourselves busy with them, meanwhile letting the old habit fade away. Sometimes this is called **making a “parallel pattern”**.

More common ways used to break habits

- Reward yourself in a healthy way for each time that you overcome the urge to do the bad habit. This makes a new reinforcer that competes with the urge to do the habit. Think about how you love yourself and are doing the right thing, and try to hold that feeling in your body for a few minutes.

Be proud of how you're practicing self-care.

- Find people to share and support your goal of habit-breaking. Talking to them about it will not only help bring your subconscious decisions closer to your conscious, but their support will give you strength to overcome the bad habit. You can also be accountable to them to keep consistent.

- Notice each time you have an urge and just be mindful of it. Practice mindfulness in your life until you can put some space between what you think and your reactions to it.

- When you feel triggered **rehearse** in your mind or orally what you'd rather want to be doing instead. **Practice this** enough times until you've added this healthy behavior into your "habit loop" as well, at least in your mind if not also physically as well.

Change the Setting, Doing, or Viewing

Above are three categories you can use to change habits with.

Changing the Setting:

- **Change locations-** At 10pm-11 he usually acts out in his room. Tonight he will be in his friend's room reading a book.
- **Change the timing-** He usually acts out when he's on the computer at 8pm. He will try now to use the computer at 2pm to change the timing.
- **Rearrange the furniture-** By moving his bed and dresser differently, and moving a picture on the wall to the other wall, he is changing the environment in which the habit was learned.
- **Change something in the way you look.** Dress nice and neat for a few days. Look put together while trying to change the habit.

Change the Doing

- **Taking** care of the problem with **baby steps** instead of big steps. Most people will tell you they've tried something 100 times, but upon further investigation you discover they tried the same types of things in the same way, so all 100 times was really just one time.

- Do less. Sometimes people try "too hard" or "too much" and create extra problems that just exacerbate the main problem. Do one or two helpful ideas at a time, not more than you can handle. Don't do things that take away your resources like sleep, piece of mind, and downtime to relax.

- If you're doing something that you hate or it's really heavy on you, stop doing it-its probably counterproductive. Example-you like learning bi'iyun but when you do it for more than two hours you feel like there's a jackhammer mutilating your brain. Instead, figure out how to reduce your stress and figure out with your Rebbe about learning in a different way that doesn't kill you.

- Living efficiency conserves energy while living with chaos and rumination drains energy. Take care of things right away, get up on time, and do whatever you need so that you're life will be less complicated and chaotic than it may already be. Thinking too much also drains energy and makes you tired so you want to fix that too.

- Get out of the other side of the bed/ change something in your routine

Changing the Viewing

- Change the perspective and see how it makes change. You can reframe the nature of a problem. **Example**, instead of wanting to stop acting out because it's bad, think about stopping because you deserve to live better.
- Change the questions and ask more helpful questions. **Example**- Instead of "G-d, why are you doing this to me?" you can ask "G-d, what can I do to go through this easier?"
 - Finding the blessing in the pain or problem
- Make believable hope. Don't try to believe something unrealistic and be disappointed; instead, set realistic reasonable standards and goals.
 - Noticing the exceptions to the problem. Notice how the problem doesn't happen all the time-sometimes you overcome the problem.
- Trying to forget something can help. What would be helpful to you to forget?
 - What advice would you give someone if they came to you for advice about your problem?
 - To reflect on what unrealized truths might there be about oneself, others, the world, life, or the true nature of Avodas Hashem