

The Battle of the Generation:

Winning the Battle Against
Desire in the 21st Century

Hillel S.



BECAUSE THE WAY YOU THINK, BECOMES THE WAY YOU FEEL ...

... BECOMES WHO YOU ARE. **FOREVER.**

The author of this *sefer* is a young man who I know well. He is a *Ben Torah* and a *Yirah Shmayim*. He asked me to read through this work. I have done so, and I am extremely impressed!

The book deals with strategies and motivation, tips and techniques to effectively work on *Shmiras Einayim*. I feel this is a very significant resource.

One of the great challenges of taking on this issue is that it is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we have to focus on the extent of the damage, but on the other hand, we can't feed into the great trick of the Soton of making ourselves feel like a failure. This book does a great job of walking that line.

It is on target, clear, uplifting, and real. It wasn't written from an ivory tower — it was written by one who has been there fighting the fight of our generation.

It has been a long time since I was so impressed by a book. It is bold, frank, and clear, and is an excellent work. I highly recommend it to anyone working on this issue.

Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier
TheShmuz.com

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ב'ת ג'תוה השע"ו

To Rabbi פוטאש,

I have read parts of your extraordinary ספר -
"The Battle of the Generation", & my impressions are the
following:

That the sefer was written by a true Ben-Torah who
sincerely worries about the spiritual health of his
fellow Jews, who are faced with daily awesome ^{משימות} in
their offices & on their travels, which threaten to
cause them eternal damage.

That the author has analysed expertly from all
angles, what causes these ^{משימות}, & what can be
done to avoid them.

That the author understands very deeply the workings
of the Nefesh, & how to cure it from the sicknesses
caused by forbidden desires.

We are therefore very grateful to the author for
having produced such a monumental work, which with
Hashem's help, will cause many of our brothers to win the
battle of our generation.

So, your sefer will be a great success,
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Dear Hillel, *tichyeh*,

I am very delighted to be able to add my few words to the chorus of approbations that have appeared about your great work: *The Battle of the Generation*. I have read it through in its entirety and am amazed at how a work can be so simple and so deep at one and the same time.

The profound humility evident throughout the book is matched only by the incredible *Ahavas Yisroel* manifest in every chapter. You share, commiserate, encourage and hope -- always with love, compassion and understanding. I find that while you bring many sources, authoritative and basic as they all are, a reader does not feel that he is being presented with a catalog of Torah, with a collection of halachic statements or aggadic pronouncements. It all flows so seamlessly; citations and personal reflections flow together. There is a naturalness to your presentation which make the reader less apprehensive.

This book is not a didactic tome, it is "user-friendly" to the extreme. You are more friend than teacher. That makes for the very best teacher, indeed. Which idea brings us to the central feature of the book and, with *Hashem's* help, to the reason why it will be eminently successful. You present "challenge" as the first and foremost ingredient for "growth". Challenges need to be overcome, but in doing so we become great. You give the reader, often a despairing and misery-laden prisoner of failed efforts and broken promises, reason to hope. But more important even, you give him reason to have confidence. This is an incredible gift and you give it without ever being condescending.

I would like to add a comment or two about your reading of the story (Kiddushin 80a) of R. Amram Chasida in chapter 28 entitled: "Why We Need Willpower". The total separation of the girls was achieved in the best way possible. After all, the ladder, which was the only means to access the attic, was so heavy that it was impossible for one person to move it to the attic's opening in the ceiling. Yet R. Amram Chasida did just that. Some almost superhuman strength was summoned up from within this great *tzaddik* (rarely is someone endowed in the Talmud with the appellation: Chasida) and he moved the ladder. This teaches us the incredible force, the sheer power of the *yetzer hora* to coopt a person's will. That is, not only was his *yetzer tov* suspended completely, his physical strength was devoted wholly to the task of the *yetzer hora*. It is almost as if R. Amram Chasida was engaged in some necessary and most worthy task and his entire being is consumed to accomplish it.

This perspective is reinforced by the Gemara's mention (in the telling of the story) of a radiant light from the attic opening that R. Amram Chasida noticed. This is indeed a strange way of saying that he saw a beautiful girl. I believe this is the Gemara's way of showing that the *yetzer hora* needed to confound R. Amram so that he suspend his judgement about the inappropriateness of the whole thing. He was so blinded that he could not summon up the simple thought that what he was doing was totally absurd for such a *tzaddik*. The terrible consequences of his deed also became irrelevant. This is the deeper meaning of *kol hagodol mechaveiro yitzro godol heimenu*. His *yetzer hora* was commensurate to the *tzaddik's* natural resistance and somehow (in a way that we cannot fully comprehend) made his desires meaningful and necessary.

Another point: R. Amram Chasida stops mid-ladder. He seems to have caught himself in the nick of time. Still, he does not go down and run out of the house. At this point he is aware suddenly, and for the first time, of the absurdity of what he intends to do. But awareness is not enough. He knows that the *yetzer's* efforts will now be redoubled and all forces will be marshalled to keep him moving up the ladder. There is only one *eitzah*. He needs to break the force of the *yetzer* in a way that is so successful, that the hold over him (in this instance) is gone. He needs to break the spell. The only way to do this is to make the moment public.

Finally, I would like to point out that it is this decision (to make the moment public) that entitles him to the title Chasida for all time. We are so careful about our reputation and it is the last thing we are willing to forego. These are the last words of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai to his *talmidim*: *Halvai* that you fear of Heaven is as great as your fear of mere mortals. And he proves it to them by noting that when anyone is about to do an *aveirah*, he mutters: I hope that no one sees me. For R. Amram Chasida to commit to doing this as a last resort is truly incredible and manifests extraordinary greatness of spirit. Even more, it shows tremendous *Yir'as Shomayim*. He is giving up his aura, his mantle of leadership, his reputation as a *Chosid*. As the Rabbis comment when they discover that he is standing mid-ladder and realize that there is no fire: "You have embarrassed us!". This may be, in fact, the greatest lesson for all of us and the most difficult to accomplish in real life. Are we so conscious of the sin that we are willing to give up our own worth in the eyes of others to reclaim the high ground. This level of commitment to HaShem is truly deserving of the title Chasida. Certainly, this would guarantee a breakthrough into the greatness that you write about throughout the book.


May you be blessed for what you have achieved herein. May *HaShem* reward you for all that you have written and all that you will have accomplished over time as the book becomes better known and more widely read. All their merit will be in your merit and all their triumphs will be, in great part, to your everlasting credit. This could very well be the catalyst to bring *Moshiach* in our time.

ברוך ה' אלהינו
ה' שנת ה'תשנ"ג
בבית ש"ס
בבית ש"ס

A pious man once met some soldiers returning victorious from a fierce battle against their enemies. He said to them, "You have returned victorious from the small battle. Now prepare for the great war!"

"What is this great war that you are referring to?" they asked him. The pious man responded, "The battle against the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) and his armies."

(*Chovos Halevavos* 5:5)



This book can be purchased on Amazon.

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Introduction

Most books start with an introduction or even a few chapters stating why their topic is so important. This book doesn't need any of that. You already know that it's important, so let's get right to it.

Guilt-Trip Free Guarantee

You won't find any guilt trips here. I'm not above you and I'm not against you. And there's no need for it anyway. You want to succeed, and I will help you strengthen that drive. You won't feel manipulated. You will *want* to smash the *yetzer hara*. Think of me as your ally in your quest to reach the greatness that is your destiny.

It's Normal to Desire

Hashem created desire. Not you. He gave it to us as a test, a charge to win our battles and reach greatness. Pretty much any desire you experience is normal. Everyone gets it and must fight through it.

Never blame yourself for your impulses. All that matters is what you do with them.

Repetition

I try to avoid repetition. It makes things boring. Nevertheless, certain main points will be repeatedly emphasized throughout the book. One two-page daily lesson won't change the way you have been thinking for twenty years. It takes repeated reinforcement. We all know that.

This book is not meant to be an inspiring quick read with no lasting impact. *I want you to live with excitement.* Our goal is to crush the *yetzer hara*. The only way to do that is to change our perspective and grow incredibly strong. That requires elaboration and review of the important ideas.

Attribution

I do my best to cite all sources. If I missed something, I apologize. Also, much of my perspective has been influenced by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier and my rebbeim from yeshiva. No doubt the lessons they taught me have influenced everything I have written.

(I occasionally quote something I've heard or seen from a secular source. Please keep in mind that it doesn't mean I recommend those books. Some secular books have great wisdom but there often are parts that are not in line with *Da'as Torah*.)

No Offensive Language

You won't find blatant language or detailed description of sins in this book. Such discussion actually increases people's desires slightly and is best avoided. (I discuss this further in Chapters 37 and 42.)

In addition, this book caters to a diverse audience. Many people find such language offensive or inappropriate, so it would be unfair to use it. Instead, I discuss this topic with the sensitivity it deserves. I use roundabout language and don't refer to specific

situations, but my message and its application are clear.

Also, I try not to limit the ideas and techniques I present to specific situations. This book caters to people on all levels, and each reader should apply the material to wherever he is holding and whatever he is working on.

For Special Situations:

After a victory — read Chapter 25.

After a slip-up — read Chapter 11 and then Chapter 10.

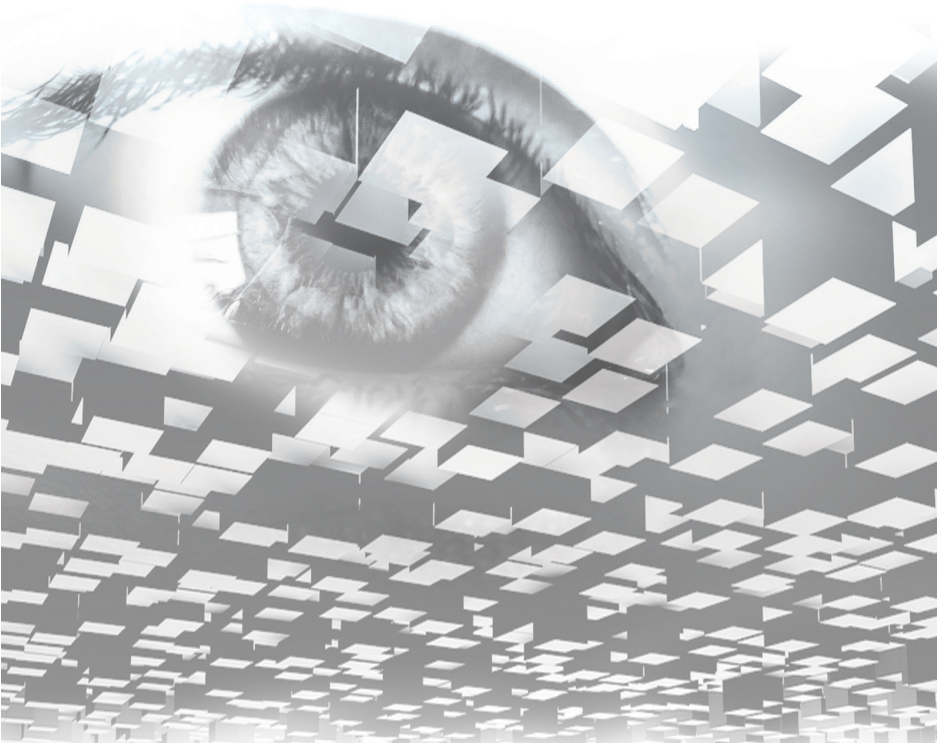
Contact Me

Feel free to discuss anything in this book with me by contacting me at **thebattleofthegeneration@gmail.com**. And if you benefited from this book, please let me know! Don't shy away from contacting me for any reason.

Let me know your favorite parts of the book. Tell me what you found helpful. Tell me what you liked about the book and what you didn't. You might also want to highlight whatever you find important or inspirational and bend the pages of whatever you might want to review or find later.

Spread the Word

Help spread the message by recommending this book to everyone who might gain from it. Tell your friends and your school. (The book is available on Amazon.) Email me at thebattleofthegeneration@gmail.com for an excerpt that you can send to your friends. All the accomplishments and ripple effects will be in your merit.



Part 1 –
The Greatest
Opportunity
of All Time

CHAPTER ONE

A Life-Changing Perspective

There is a little secret the *yetzer hara* doesn't want you to know. It's the secret that spells his doom. And it's the secret that will change your destiny.

Our generation faces challenges never encountered before by mankind. Society teaches that there is nothing wrong with immorality, and it portrays the most despicable acts as glamorous. Promiscuity is made to seem exhilarating. We are taught that chasing desire is cool, and that those who don't are losers who are missing out on life. Sin is readily available, and there is little to hold us back.

Society also trains us to think we are incapable of controlling ourselves. We see everyone around us giving in to crazy temptations, and we think it is impossible to win. We might even hear people openly express how impossible a fight it is, which discourages us from even trying. With all that's going on, our generation seems to be at a huge disadvantage. It seems that we were born in perhaps the worst situation in the history of our nation, at least from a spiritual perspective.

But that's only if you ignore the *yetzer hara's* secret.

Before he became king, Dovid Hamelech married Shaul Hamelech's daughter Michal, a very beautiful woman. Shortly after their marriage, Shaul turned against Dovid, forcing him

to flee. The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 19b) relates that Shaul ruled that the method by which Dovid had married Michal was *halachically* invalid, and therefore, they were not married. Shaul then had her married to a man named Palti. Realizing that Shaul was wrong and that Michal was married to Dovid, Palti held himself back from sinning — even though he and Michal lived in the same house for five years. The *Gemara* states that Palti's demonstration of self-control was far superior to Yosef's when he faced the challenge of the wife of Potifar. Clearly, this was an extremely challenging situation for Palti. Nevertheless, Palti employed superhuman self-control and held himself back.

After five years, Dovid became king and sent for Michal to be brought back to him. Palti traveled with her as she returned and was crying. The *Gemara* explains that Palti was crying over the *mitzvah* that was leaving him.

This *Gemara* is perplexing. Why was Palti sad that Michal was going back to Dovid? As a person who valued his service of Hashem, he should have been relieved that his challenge was finally over! Why was he upset about losing his ability to sin?

In Shmuz 145: "Stages of Change: Taking Action" (www.TheShmuz.com), Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier answers that we learn a powerful lesson from Palti's attitude in his battle against desire. Rather than growing frustrated about the desires threatening to disturb his spiritual aspirations, Palti was excited to face this challenge. Palti did not view his situation as an annoying obstacle impeding his spiritual growth. He realized that it was an opportunity for him to serve Hashem in an unprecedented manner. He understood that with this test, Hashem was giving him a phenomenal opportunity to accomplish and reach greatness. This perspective led him to win perhaps the most difficult battle against desire in history.

In *Pirkei Avos* (5:26), Ben Hei Hei teaches us that Heavenly

reward is meted out in accordance with how much a person exerts himself. Our Sages teach us that this is a major principle in the calculation of reward and greatness. How hard a person works to accomplish something is one of the primary determining factors in how great the accomplishment is. When a person faces overwhelming challenges and overcomes them, he performs acts that are truly great.

Overcoming difficulty is so basic to true accomplishment in life that it is the reason Hashem places man into a life so full of challenges (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 1). Hashem wants to provide man with the opportunity to win his battles and truly accomplish. Challenges are only there to make us great! **Succeeding despite the difficulty is the point of life!** The harder it is, the greater it makes us.

If Hashem hadn't created us with the urge to do wrong, and all we wanted to do was to learn Torah and do *mitzvos*, acting properly or even reaching lofty levels would be no big deal. Our successes are impressive only because the *yetzer hara* challenges us from every direction, trying to confuse and derail us. When we hang in there and try to succeed despite how much we want to give in, we are performing monumental acts of greatness.

This is how Palti viewed his own formidable challenge. He realized that his was one of the most difficult challenges in history, and he realized how great his act of self-control would be. This motivation led him to achieve his profound success.

When we feel overwhelmed, we must realize that this gives us an opportunity to attain unprecedented merit. The more challenges we face — whether they were given to us entirely by Hashem or whether we brought them upon ourselves — the greater our opportunity for achievement. The lower a person's spiritual level, the greater he can become. The deeper he has sunk, the higher he can reach. Granted, it is not so easy to change our

lives and to overcome strong desires, but if we do, we become men of phenomenal accomplishments. We will reach astounding heights and score victories that others, even many great *tzaddikim*, did not attain because they never faced such challenges. Our challenges, while difficult and humbling, are also opportunities for us to reach unprecedented greatness!

We hear over and over how terrible our generation is and how much decadence lurks around us. Everyone seems to either look down on us or feel bad for us for having been born now. But if we are here at this time, that means that Hashem put us here, and it wasn't by accident! Why did He give us these challenges? Why were we born in this generation?

By now, the answer should be obvious: Hashem put us here to give us the opportunity to accomplish something that was never done before. By succeeding despite the challenges that bombard us daily, we reach monumental greatness. Of course, we will have to work harder to succeed than any prior generation, but it is worthwhile because we will be great forever. It is not supposed to be easy. **Life is meant to be challenging!** That enables us to attain accomplishments that are truly impressive. Accomplishments that aren't achieved in the face of difficulty, even if they look good on paper and are lauded by society, pale in comparison with these real accomplishments.

Our challenges are our opportunity to reach phenomenal heights! Reaching greatness through fighting valiantly in this difficult battle is the destiny Hashem has chosen for us! This is why Hashem gave us such difficult challenges.

We must realize that these challenges mean **we can do what has never been done before in history**. These are challenges and opportunities that Hashem has trusted only our generation with. If we can succeed despite what lures us to do wrong, we will achieve unmatched success.

We learn from Palti that our chances increase dramatically if we have the proper attitude toward our challenges. Palti's excitement was the secret weapon that helped him win his raging battle. It gave him the strength to control his desires because he longed to succeed even more than he wanted to give in. Because his excitement was stronger than his desire, he was able to attain mastery over himself.

We must not forget this, no matter how much the *yetzer hara* starts up with us. The *yetzer hara* tries to make us feel guilty to debilitate us. He tries to give us a negative attitude to make us depressed. He tells us we are doomed to be failures. At the very least, he tries to convince us that we are insignificant and incapable of reaching greatness. Instead of listening to him, we must stand up against his lies. We must remind ourselves that this is our opportunity, the greatest opportunity there ever was. It is not a trap to get us to mess up. It is what we were put on the planet for!

When the *yetzer hara* disturbs our Torah study and *tefillah* with desires, we must not view them as an annoyance. Our Torah and *tefillah* are far more powerful when we succeed despite desires. The point of life is not that nothing ever goes wrong. Such a view will only leave us frustrated. Instead, we must remember that every time we put in even a bit of effort against our desires, we are scoring a major victory!

We are so lucky to have the opportunity to fight this battle because we can succeed and become great. The challenge might be the greatest ever, but that makes it the greatest opportunity ever. We have to realize this and be motivated rather than depressed.

It is incredible that we can reach unprecedented heights for eternity by prevailing in this challenge. If we remember this, we will buzz with excitement, and we will achieve brilliant accomplishments that will shine forever when we defeat the

yetzer hara in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Hashem granted us an unprecedented opportunity to reach greatness by creating this intense battle against desire.
- **“Is it (whatever *it* is) hard for me? Then success in that area will be incredible!”**
- The secret weapon in the battle against desire and in all areas of spiritual growth is the desire to succeed and reach greatness.

CHAPTER

TWO

“*I Had To Do It Anyway, So Big Deal*”

In life, we face many limiting beliefs that can become self-fulfilling prophecies. By convincing us that we can't succeed, these feelings sap our drive to accomplish. We feel listless and lack the strength to persevere.

One particularly dangerous limiting belief is that anything we can accomplish lacks significance because it is “only” what we are obligated to do. Because we *have to* do it anyway, it feels like nothing special. We tend to feel this way especially about holding ourselves back from sin, because sin is clearly negative. Although we avoid harm by not sinning, it does not seem to be anything exceptional that we can feel good about, even if it is officially a *mitzvah*. This puts our focus on the times we fall short, while we discredit all our accomplishments . . . if we even notice them.

Because of this attitude, we don't get excited about our upcoming challenges, viewing them as annoying obligations instead. What's the big deal about doing what we're supposed to do? If anything, we feel that we should be doing even better and are failing. By sapping our enthusiasm about accomplishing, the *yetzer hara* has us right where he wants us — unmotivated and susceptible.

In *Avos D'Rebbe Nosson* (27:3), Rabbi Yochanan ben Dehavai teaches that a person should not distance himself from a work

that has no end. This “work” is the study of Torah. The Torah is so vast that nobody can know all of it, which could make a person feel overwhelmed.

Rabbi Yochanan illustrates with a parable. There was a man on a beach who was drawing water from the ocean with a bucket and pouring it onto the sand. After two days, the man looked at the ocean and noticed it was still full. This made him depressed. A wise man told him, “What do you care that the ocean is still full? So what if it looks like you haven’t accomplished anything? For every day you work, your employer is paying you an enormous sum of money!”

In the introduction to *Sefer Shemiras Halashon*, the Chofetz Chaim adds that this parable can help us in other areas as well. Whenever we try to improve, the *yetzer hara* tells us, “What are you putting in the effort for? Do you think you can act properly in this area for the rest of your life? No chance! Don’t waste your time and energy. Don’t even bother trying to improve.”

The *yetzer hara*’s argument is based on two points. First, he contends that we will be unable to succeed for more than a couple of days. Then, he follows up by arguing that since we can’t make it beyond those few days, it is not worth putting in the effort at all. He tells us that since we will not become great *tzaddikim* or even masters of that particular area, it is pointless to try. Because there will still be times when we give in, we will not gain anything and all our effort will be in vain.

The Chofetz Chaim explains that Rabbi Yochanan ben Dehavai rebuts the second argument of the *yetzer hara* by telling us not to look at the situation and say, “I will never be perfect,” but to realize that every time we control ourselves is a phenomenal achievement. **We receive tremendous reward for each moment of self-control, even if we give in one minute later.** As the Vilna Gaon relates, every instance of exertion is an independent

accomplishment that is profound in its own right. Putting up a fight against our desires instead of chasing them is impressive even if we end up giving in.

This is the message Rabbi Yochanan conveyed. We need to focus on how much we gain from even one minute of self-control instead of worrying whether we will mess up later. Like the man who failed to empty the ocean, we should focus on the immense reward we can earn and recognize how impressive our accomplishments must be since they merit such a lofty reward.

The Chofetz Chaim relates that a wise sage was once asked: What should a person do if he wakes up near the end of the *Shemoneh Esrei* and realizes he spaced out for the rest of the prayer? How should he motivate himself to concentrate for the last few *berachos* instead of feeling down and giving up?

The sage answered with the following parable: A young girl was selling vegetables in the market. A thief came and started grabbing vegetables from her basket. Startled, the girl stood there frozen. A wise man standing in the distance screamed to her, “Don’t just stand there! Grab some vegetables too! Whatever you grab will be yours. Don’t let the thief take them all!”

This parable demonstrates that if someone finds that the *yetzer hara* has caused him to space out during the *Shemoneh Esrei*, he should not feel it is too late and give up. Rather, he should be vigilant and “grab those last few vegetables” by concentrating during the rest of the *berachos*. With this attitude, he will be motivated to accomplish instead of feeling down.

The Chofetz Chaim applies this perspective to *shemiras halashon* as well. If the *yetzer hara* causes a person to slip up and speak *lashon hara*, he should not say, “I just can’t do it,” or, “I’ll never be perfect,” and give up. Instead, he should do whatever he can to “grab another vegetable” when the next opportunity arises by making sure not to speak *lashon hara*. His focus should

be on his opportunity to attain, not on his flaws. This will strengthen him, and rather than despairing, he will continue working to succeed.

We can also apply this outlook to challenges of desire. Many people caught in the web of desire feel they won't be able to withhold from sin forever. They might also be unwilling to give these pleasures up, and are reluctant to entertain the possibility of improving. As a result, they don't even try to succeed.

By default, some of us approach life with the perspective that our goal is to not mess up, as if we were created perfect and have to stay that way. We think, "If I ever mess up, especially with sins of desire, it will show that I am a failure who will always bear the scars of what I have done. A person who ever slips up in this area is not a successful Jew, and probably cannot even be considered religious." Of course, at some point most people mess up in some way, and if that happens to us and we conclude that we are inferior and flawed forever, we know what happens next. Life becomes miserable, and we fall deeper into sin. This is the trap of the *yetzer hara*.

It's bad enough that feeling like a failure makes us act in ways consistent with that image. But there is an even more disastrous outcome: we lose our excitement for life. This starts us on a dangerous downward spiral. Because we feel we are constantly struggling and failing, we begin to develop negative feelings towards being Jewish. As we continue to focus only on how we have sinned without appreciating all our effort, we become depressed and eventually give up. We feel that we are in a hopeless situation because we will not do everything right, and even if we somehow could, our past transgressions have permanently tainted us anyway. To top it off, we assume that even if we would do the right thing every time, it would be nothing special because we were only doing what we were supposed to do.

This depressing attitude drains our energy to fight. We try to survive by pressuring ourselves to stay in line, but the attempt is neither effective nor lasting. We end up fighting a losing battle and enduring an endless cycle of depression and failure.

Fortunately, this perspective is wrong. We were born with various drives that we must overcome, and they are perfectly normal. Hashem created us this way because our goal in life is to overcome them and reach greatness. We must take the attitude that we are growing and gaining by doing the right thing. Life is our opportunity to transform ourselves into people we can be proud of, rather than an obligation to stay perfect with nothing to gain and only the ability to lose.

Each victory over the *yetzer hara* is priceless. Our obligation to avoid sin doesn't take away from the significance of our accomplishments; in fact, it even adds to their greatness (*Kiddushin* 31a). It also doesn't matter that we will not be perfect — though of course we must do whatever we can not to sin — because our goal is to accomplish and reach great heights, not to just avoid messing up. Taking this attitude changes our entire lives!

Let's not make the mistake of thinking Hashem is waiting for us to stumble so He can zap us. No matter what the *yetzer hara* tells us, we must remember that Hashem loves us and is our Father. He is not a mean and demanding tyrant who angrily demands perfection and doesn't realize what we are going through. Hashem understands the great challenge of self-control. He relates to you on an individual level and realizes how hard it is to win this battle. He knows the emotions you experience when you want to give in to your desires. He feels your pain when you sway back and forth and are torn over what to do. Since He created the challenge and put it in the world, surely He understands better than anyone else how difficult it is to overcome.

Hashem is rooting for you to succeed! It would be

ludicrous to think that Hashem just sits there and says “Big deal” when you win, or worse, that He is waiting for you to mess up so He can punish you. Hashem created us in this world to give us the opportunity to earn the greatest pleasure (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 1). He only made our challenges so difficult because that makes it so amazing when we make the right choice. We are here to accomplish and become great. Obviously, while we are here, we are obligated to follow Hashem’s laws, and of course there are consequences when we err. Nevertheless, our primary purpose is to accomplish, whether by doing good or by exerting ourselves to resist doing wrong. This perspective will keep us strong so we continue to accomplish.

Regarding the first claim of the *yetzer hara* — that we won’t make it past a couple of days — the Chofetz Chaim informs us that this is simply a lie. Granted, we might slip up here and there, but overall, it becomes easier to control ourselves as we grow accustomed to not giving in. We acquire new habits of self-control, which make us much stronger. We even develop the ability to choose properly out of habit when we are not so motivated.

In addition, the longer we don’t experience desire, the weaker it becomes (*Sukkah* 52b). And each time we exert control over desire, we strengthen our ability to employ willpower in the future. All these factors make the battle easier once we start controlling ourselves.

Although it isn’t easy, we really can permanently leave the web of sin if we put in the effort. By changing our perspective and using techniques to attain self-control, we will escape the *yetzer hara’s* grasp and succeed. Controlling ourselves will become progressively easier once we start working on it.

Hashem gave us the greatest opportunity in history by placing us in this world at this time. If we don’t fall for the *yetzer hara’s* dirty maneuvers, and if we realize what we can accomplish

and become, we will go forward with excitement and deal him a crushing blow in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The *yetzer hara* tries to derail us by destroying our excitement about what we can accomplish, thereby sapping the motivation we need to defeat him.
- We must realize the foolishness of the *yetzer hara's* lies and unleash our excitement for life.
- Though it might be difficult to realize when we are trapped by desire, we can regain control over the *yetzer hara*.

CHAPTER THREE

What Really Makes Us Happy

Before we begin, we must remember that what we experience in the battle against desire is normal. Hashem created us with these tendencies for a reason. We must not fault ourselves for these desires, and we must not be overly harsh with ourselves if we fall for some of the *yetzer hara's* tricks.

It's time for the million-dollar question: Can physical pleasure make us happy?

Although it's difficult to see at first, when we think about it rationally, we will realize that chasing physical pleasure as a goal in itself brings us little satisfaction and plenty of pain. Even the greatest physical pleasures cannot make us happy. To understand why, we must examine our emotions at each stage of desire.

The first stage begins with a jolt of excitement at discovering something amazing that we hope to attain. Quickly, though, the excitement fades, and we find ourselves feeling that we *need* what we desire and cannot be happy without it. It hurts that we don't have it. Of course, everyone knows that this pain comes with desire; we just assume that the upcoming payoff will be well worth it, because if we desire it so strongly, attaining it must yield incredible pleasure.

The second stage of desire comes if we give in to temptation. We find out the hard way that too often, the strongest cravings

don't live up to the hype. No doubt, we feel physical enjoyment during this stage. However, the pleasure is lacking in that it does not give us the emotional kick we seek. We might feel physical enjoyment, but *we* don't feel good. Physical pleasure leaves us feeling empty and unsatisfied, as if something is missing. We feel, "Is there really nothing greater than this? Is that all there is to life?"¹

Even worse, giving in to our desires only strengthens them. The nature of desire is that it makes us urgently want even more. Because we feel this urge even while we are indulging, it hampers our ability to enjoy the pleasure. We feel unfulfilled and long for something better.

Constant longing for a higher level of pleasure is the essence of desire. Even if we would experience the pinnacle of whatever pleasure we seek, it would not satisfy us. No matter what we would attain, we would still want something even greater. This can be compared to a thirsty man drinking salt water. The more he drinks, the thirstier he gets. Similarly, a person's desires grow stronger and drive him crazy the more he chases them. The overwhelming desires that can't be satisfied doom the person to be miserable.

Another reason physical pleasures can't make us happy is that they only last for a short time and then are gone, leaving us with nothing. To make matters worse, realizing this limits our enjoyment during the short time we experience it. Deep down, we know that something that lasts so short can't be what we really seek.

If the pleasure is forbidden, there is the added problem

1. In contrast, emotional pleasure is not just an experience of a part of the body. The entire person feels it, and it is much stronger and more enjoyable than any physical pleasure. For some great illustrations of this, see pages 146-148 of *Stop Surviving Start Living* and Chapter 12 of *Two Worlds One Chance* by Rabbi Shafier.

of guilt. The uneasy feeling we experience when we know what we are doing is wrong is already in full swing by the time we give in. This limits our ability to enjoy the pleasure. Clearly, despite all the false advertising, pleasure does not make us happy, even during the short time we experience it.

The third stage of desire comes after the pleasure has ended. We usually get a small reprieve from our desires before they return to full strength, and we regain clarity. This is when we kick ourselves for giving in. Our conscience does not relent, and we feel shaken up. The regret is searing. Worst of all, we feel low as people. We feel like fools because we lost control. There is no doubt that at this point, rather than being happy, we are as miserable as can be.²

Yet perhaps the most painful part of this episode is when we give up on our dreams. Feeling permanently stained by our sins, we believe we can no longer become what we dreamed of. Even if we know that we should never give up on our dreams no matter how low we have fallen, emotionally we feel that anyone who has fallen this badly can't become great. We wanted to become special and significant, and instead, we feel doomed to be inferior forever. There is nothing more painful than this feeling.

As long as pleasure has not turned into a *need*, we can enjoy whatever appropriate pleasures we experience. In fact, Hashem created these pleasures because He wants us to enjoy them in our stay in this world. But when our desires go out of control and become an addiction, when we rely on physical pleasure to deliver us from misery to happiness, or when we chase forbidden pleasures, life becomes a living hell with a few short spurts of

2. It must be noted that even someone trying to overcome his desires might slip up and experience this reaction, which is painful and destructive. See Chapter 10 for how to deal with this.

empty highs that don't give us the happiness we were searching for. We end up feeling pulled around by desire instead of being masters of our own ship.

To make matters worse, pursuing our desires brings us inner turmoil when we notice that we keep only some *mitzvos* but not others. For example, a person might not be willing to eat non kosher food, but he might still look at things he shouldn't. If he walked into a dark room on *Shabbos*, he might be able to hold himself back from turning on the light to see something forbidden, but if it were already on, he might look . . . despite knowing that looking is also forbidden. These inconsistencies make us feel like hypocrites. We cannot figure out where we are holding or who we really are. At times, we wish something would just pull us out of the grasp of desire, but at other times, when our desires rage strongly, we only want to give in. This confusion is excruciating, and it is tragic that so many people experience it. Nobody should have to live with this pain.³

So how do we turn our battles around? It seems that we will experience pain whether we give in or not. How can we avoid the pain and turn our battles into exhilarating experiences?

We must realize that having to face desires is far from a misfortune. When the *yetzer hara* challenges us with strong urges and we defeat him, we can actually feel fortunate for our challenges because of how much we gain when we overcome them. We perform some of the greatest feats by winning! There

3. Thinking about this enables us to realize that even though pleasure might be tempting and enjoyable, we don't really *need* what we desire. This lets the air out of the balloon of desire and can even help us escape strong addictions. Of course, it takes much work to acquire and live with this perspective, especially if we face powerful desires. That's why for now it's just food for thought. But through contemplation, we will eventually no longer feel that we *need* what we desire, and with the newfound calmness this brings us, we will be able to slow down our desires to achieve astounding success. We will discuss this further in Chapter 34.

is nothing sweeter than the taste of success, especially when it really matters.

We all desperately want to feel good about ourselves. **Wanting to feel that we matter is our deepest desire.** From our youth, we dream of it. What boy doesn't dream of hitting the game-winning home run in the World Series at least once? How many people wish they could be celebrities? This is the real, underlying drive behind many of our other drives.

Though not everyone actually dreams of being publicly honored and praised, most people experience the desire for honor in some way. Some people crave attention and popularity, so they enjoy showing off in front of others. Others desire to be the best at something, or they dream of being remembered as legendary. Even those who don't have these dreams still care about what others think of them. Nobody wants others to look down on him. All these feelings stem from our desire to be special and great, a drive that Hashem placed within us for us to follow to greatness. We don't want to feel insignificant! We want to be proud of ourselves! As long as we don't believe the *yetzer hara* when it tells us that greatness is only for other people, we can use this drive to guide ourselves to greatness.

Feeling good about ourselves completely transforms our aspirations, our service of Hashem, and our entire lives. Although it is true that Hashem loves and values us even if we sin, it is difficult to feel good about ourselves if we know we lack self-control. But if we control ourselves and then think about the significance of a victory, we cannot help but feel good about ourselves. Self-control in the face of desire is rare. How often do people hold strong? When we control ourselves, we are doing something unique and impressive.

Acknowledging this drive for what it really is helps us understand why all the pleasures, money, and technological

advancements we attain don't make us happy. We long to be unique and significant, and this drive will not be satisfied with substitutes. Showing off and trying to impress others will never be satisfying if we are not happy with ourselves. We need to impress ourselves! And the only way to do that is to accomplish meaningful achievements.

Wouldn't it be amazing if we could know that what we accomplished was impressive and unique? What if we had a path on which *we* could reach real greatness? Well, there is such a path: overcoming difficulties. The rule of thumb is that the more challenging the spiritual feat is *for the person*, no matter where he is holding, the greater the accomplishment. *Mitzvos* done despite tremendous challenges are not just considered a little better than *mitzvos* done when it is easy. *Avos D'Rebbe Nosson* (3:6) teaches us they are worth over a hundred times more!

Not only that, it is the Creator Himself who decides what is great and impressive, and He does not grade us by comparison to others but by how hard we work relative to the situation He placed us in. He holds us up high with pride and rewards us by letting us come close to Him, both in this world and the Next. There is nothing more meaningful than that!

We are fortunate that Hashem gave us an open opportunity to become great. He gave us the battle against desire because He wants us to win! He is rooting for us to succeed because He wants us to reach greatness!

Growing up in the 21st century, we are repeatedly challenged with intense desires. From a young age, we learn how cool it is to chase our desires without restraint, and for the most part, we can do just that. Prevailing in any of the situations we constantly face requires going against our nature. Although this definitely does mean that we face greater dangers than people of previous generations did, we are not at a disadvantage. Challenges like

these have never been seen before in our nation's history. If we can prevail, we will accomplish something truly unique. The great people of earlier generations would in a way be envious of our achievements. Despite everything they have achieved, they were not given the opportunity to face these battles to the extent that we have. We must grab this opportunity and become excited by our challenges. They give us the chance to become great!

In his book *Listen to Your Messages* (pages 217-218), Rabbi Yissochar Frand relates a powerful story. Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twersky once visited a young woman suffering from multiple sclerosis. She was deteriorating rapidly and was a burden on her family. There was no hope for her recovery. Understandably, she was very depressed. What could anyone say to such a woman?

Rabbi Twersky told her the following story from the *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 101a): When Rabbi Eliezer became deathly ill, four rabbis came to visit him: Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria, and Rabbi Akiva. Each one tried to comfort Rabbi Eliezer.

Rabbi Tarfon said, "You are more precious to the Jewish people than rain because rain only brings benefit in this world while you bring benefit in this world and in the Next World."

Rabbi Yehoshua said, "You are more precious than the sun because the sun only brings benefit in this world while you bring benefit in this world and in the Next World."

Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaria said, "You are more precious than parents because parents only bring benefit in this world while you bring benefit in this world and in the Next World."

Finally, Rabbi Akiva spoke and said, "Suffering is precious." Rabbi Eliezer responded, "Prop me up so I can hear the words of Rabbi Akiva."

This story is hard to understand. Why did Rabbi Akiva's words bring greater consolation to Rabbi Eliezer than the words

of the other rabbis?

Rabbi Twersky explained: Rabbi Eliezer was lying on his deathbed, and he knew he would never have the opportunity to teach Torah again. The other rabbis had focused on what he had accomplished in the past, and that did not console Rabbi Eliezer because those accomplishments were never coming back. However, Rabbi Akiva told him that there was something he could still accomplish — he could accept his suffering with love and trust in Hashem.

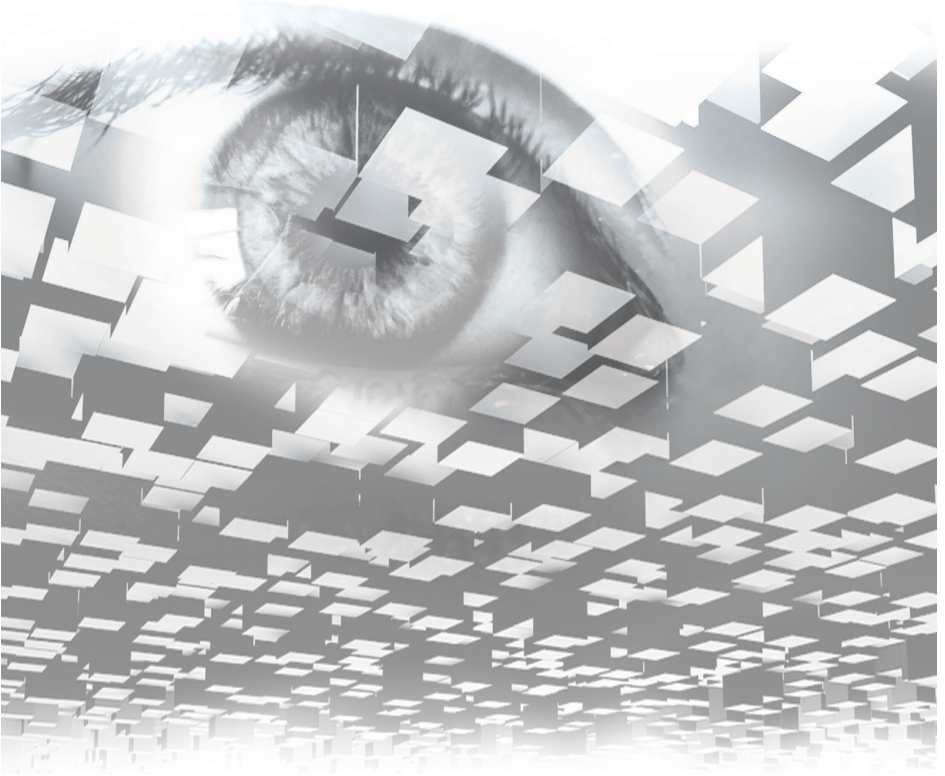
With this message, Rabbi Twerski consoled the suffering woman.

We need not feel that we are suffering. We can feel the thrill of going against our nature and prevailing in the most difficult challenge in the history of mankind. Cultivating this attitude will make our lives exciting and meaningful. Rather than constantly feeling the sting of unfulfilled urges and guilt, we will be fired up about life and we will be much happier.

Ultimately, what we really want most is happiness. Without it, all the pleasures in the world are worthless. We can get there if we develop the right attitude and decide to fight in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Attaining what we desire does not make us happy, because physical pleasure can't live up to the hype.
- Realizing this allows us to stay calm and in control when we face desire.
- Desire cannot satisfy us because it is not what we really long for.
- Our ultimate desire is to reach greatness.
- Hashem gave us the incredible opportunity to become great by challenging us with difficult spiritual battles, especially the battle against desire. **WE CAN BECOME GREAT!**



Part 2 – The Torah's Authenticity

CHAPTER

Four

The Importance of Emunah in the Battle Against Desire

Our entire service of Hashem stands on the knowledge that He gave us the Torah. Being certain about this is vital for every aspect of our service of Hashem, especially for being adamant not to give in to our desires.

To have the strength to conquer our desires, we must have a firm belief in Hashem and in the Torah's authenticity. This is a vital component of willpower. To create the feeling of determination that "**I must control myself and I will,**" and to appreciate the significance of our actions, we must be firm in our beliefs. If someone has doubts about the Torah and doesn't believe that chasing desire in a manner It forbids is really wrong, he will lack the resolve he needs to fight his desires.

We can only appreciate the importance of rock-solid *emunah* in the battle against desire once we understand how rationalizations work. There are two types of rationalizations: one when a person experiences desire and the other after he sins. These two types of rationalizations function in different ways.

When a person wishes to sin, he faces a major obstacle that threatens to stop him. This obstacle is his intellect, which tells him that sinning is both wrong and foolish. Considering the consequences, it is clear that sin is not worth it. If a person wants to get past his own logic, he is forced to rationalize.

But because a person's desires blind and weaken his intellect, he can easily choose to accept any minor rationalization. Usually, this happens "behind the scenes" in his subconscious mind, so the person does not realize that what he has come up with is just an illogical excuse. Not realizing that his vision is clouded by his desires, he thinks he is seeing clearly. This makes it easy for him to conclude that there is nothing wrong with what he is considering, and because he desires that outcome, he does not challenge these thoughts. He is extremely susceptible; even something silly can convince him that what he wants to do really is best.

The ramifications of this are obvious. When a person is tested with desire, unless he has a firm belief in Hashem and the Torah, he might suddenly feel that it doesn't really matter if he does not control himself. The *yetzer hara* needs only a few seconds to shake a person's perspective and get him to give in, so we must be clear-minded and on guard to withstand these sudden temptations. We must be able to dispel these rationalizations easily, and that requires unshakable confidence in the truth of the Torah.

However, there is a huge contrast between rationalization in the throes of desire and rationalization after a sin. After a person has given in to his desires, they temporarily let up and he can see clearly again. Recognizing the foolishness of his rationalization, he realizes that he acted illogically. He quickly regrets what he did and is distressed over having fallen so low.

To deal with this pain, the person feels an urgent need to justify his decision. But because of the clarity he has regained, he will not fall for the illogical rationalization he used when he was overcome by desire. He is forced to invent a new rationalization to explain that what he did was not shameful and wrong. In this state, often the person's only option is to invent new philosophies

about life that explain that what he did was fine. These philosophies are almost always ideas that take the person even further away from Hashem.

In fact, a way-too-common justification after giving in to desires is the denial of Hashem's existence and of the Torah's authenticity. The *yetzer hara* makes the person feel the intense pain of feeling like a failure until he can get away with telling the person, "You do not see Hashem. Come on! Do you think He really exists? It's just a fairy tale!" This is the *yetzer hara's* oldest trick, one that he has been using for thousands of years, as our Sages have repeatedly taught us. The *yetzer hara* loves to persuade people to follow their lusts and then get them to deny Hashem to justify their actions. It's his deadliest combination.⁴

This is the most dangerous aspect of desire. The pain and shame that come after a person sins drive him to react. He is in danger of straying far beyond where he was willing to go before — to develop perspectives that go against the Torah. Though denying Hashem's existence was a barrier he would not dare cross even to permit himself to sin, *after* the sin, when he can no longer handle his guilt, he might be willing to throw everything away just to get the pain to stop.

We cannot let the *yetzer hara* do this to us, especially when we know what is coming. But recognizing the danger and being careful to avoid it isn't enough to solve the problem. We cannot just hope we won't be challenged — because we will be. We have no choice other than to learn how to properly respond to guilt (see Chapter 10) and to develop unshakable confidence that Hashem gave us the Torah. This is vital for desire as well as for all other aspects

4. As the *Gemara Sanhedrin* 63b relates, "Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, 'The Jews knew that *avodah zara* (idol worship) has no substance [that it is illogical], but they worshipped it anyway to permit doing *arayos* (licentious acts) publicly.'"

of our lives.⁵

Most people who have difficulty with belief in the Torah, even those who choose to deny the Torah's authenticity to rationalize their mistakes, are not entirely confident that the Torah is not true. Rather, they sway back and forth, sometimes feeling that it is true and sometimes doubting it. Although these people might transgress certain sins quite easily, there are usually other prohibitions they are reluctant to transgress or at least feel uneasy when they do. Perhaps the best illustration of this is that most of them would not be willing to sell their portion in the World to Come for a few dollars, whereas someone who absolutely denied Hashem's existence would have no qualms about it. Noticing the incongruity between their beliefs and actions causes them much inner turmoil. People who have to deal with doubt feel lost and confused.

Everyone deserves to be free from this pain. We must learn how to deal with doubt if it creeps up, instead of feeling helpless.

We must have absolute conviction that Hashem really gave us the Torah. This knowledge is our birthright, and it is unfair if we lack it. Confidence in the Torah's authenticity will give us the strength we need to achieve astounding success in the battle of the generation.

Note: See *Chiddushei Lev Bereshis* pages 134-136 for more on the two types of rationalizations.

5. In general, addressing matters of belief is a sensitive topic and some feel that it is better to rely on *emunah peshuta*. That debate is beyond the scope of this book. **But for someone challenged with desire, *chizuk in emunah* is a must.** The *yetzer hara* will certainly try to erode his *emunah*, and *emunah peshuta* alone is not enough.

Ultimately, the best form of *emunah peshuta* is when a person is never fazed by any question or challenge because he knows that every question has an answer, even if he does not know the answer yet. Though he does seek an answer, the question doesn't weaken his faith, even on an emotional level. This will be expanded upon in Chapter 8.

Quick Recap:

- Knowing with certainty that Hashem gave us the Torah at Har Sinai saves us from dangerous rationalizations that the *yetzer hara* can spring upon a person both before and after he sins.

CHAPTER

Five

Hashem's Relationship With Us

Before discussing belief in the Torah, we must consider an important question: Are we better off if G-d exists or not? Unfortunately, some people feel they would be better off if there were no G-d because then they could do whatever they want without having to worry about consequences. Some even imagine Hashem as a harsh, uncaring dictator who is always fed up with them. They feel that He demands that they be perfect and that He will never be happy with them no matter how hard they try. This is so tragic because being religious frustrates them when it could make them happy.

We must learn the proper perspective in life by answering the question: Why did Hashem create us? He is infinite and does not need us, so why did He create us? We must answer this question if we want to get anywhere in our relationship with Hashem.

In Chapter 1 of *Mesillas Yesharim*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (the Ramchal) explains that **the only reason Hashem created us was to grant us kindness**. Hashem put us in this world and gave us the Torah and *mitzvos* so we could earn the ultimate happiness — drawing pleasure through a direct connection to Him — which we receive in the Next World. **This experience is by far the most enjoyable feeling we can experience; nothing**

in this world comes close. Our *mitzvos* are opportunities to earn that experience, and that is why Hashem put us in this world.

This knowledge grants us a different perspective toward the *mitzvos* and restrictions Hashem gave us. We can recognize that **every single thing Hashem does and every system He runs the world with, including restrictions and even punishments, is done out of love for us.** When we know that Hashem has our best interests in mind and never does anything except out of concern for us, we can realize that the restrictions He gave us are for our gain so we can accomplish. And even in this world, the Torah lifestyle is supposed to be the most enjoyable and happy way to live. One of the benefits is that when we are not chasing after passions and don't feel lacking, we can appreciate life and be happy. Also, the *mitzvos* enable us to live with excitement about what we are achieving. The main reason Hashem created passions was so they would challenge us and enable us to earn the ultimate pleasure — the pleasure of the Next World. Every *mitzvah* we fulfill earns us more and more.

Everywhere we turn, we see people searching for meaning. We all want to feel that we matter. When people think that there is no G-d and that they are just here to enjoy themselves until they die, the lack of meaning causes them much pain.

There can be no greater meaning in life than listening to what the Creator of the Heavens and Earth told us to do for our own benefit and having a relationship with Him through doing so. No actions can be greater than those that Hashem Himself has informed us are productive and draw us close to Him. The Torah makes our lives meaningful and significant. It tells us that our actions make a difference, and It teaches us which acts will bring us to greatness.

Nothing can make us feel as important as knowing that

the Creator wants a relationship with us. This feeling gets even sweeter when we realize that Hashem holds so highly of us and understands our challenges. Hashem values all our efforts to do the right thing despite the extreme difficulty we face. He is even impressed (in His way) by what we have accomplished.

This point is stressed by the Gemara (*Sukkah* 52a), which relates that after the arrival of the Moshiach, Hashem will slaughter the *yetzer hara*. The *yetzer hara* will appear before the *tzaddikim* as a mighty mountain, and they will cry and say, "How did we ever conquer such a mighty mountain?" And Hashem (if it could be) will wonder along with the *tzaddikim*, as the *posuk* says (*Zecharya* 8:6): "So said Hashem, 'As it will be wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in those days, so too will it be wondrous in My eyes.'" Hashem is amazed (if it could be) by the good we have accomplished in battling the "mighty mountain." Hashem approves of all the good we do and is immensely proud of us.

As we have discussed, there is a natural drive within people to want to feel significant and superior. This drive cannot be satisfied by showing off or by taking pride in talents and possessions, because these things are external and lack significance. People want to be proud of their essence, not some possession or talent they were granted. If we try to feel successful without genuinely impressing ourselves, we will end up feeling unfulfilled.

Fortunately, the Torah provides us with an opportunity to make our mark and attain true success. By performing the *mitzvos*, especially when it is difficult, we can succeed beyond our wildest dreams! There is no limit to the heights we can reach. That is why Hashem gave us the Torah with all its challenges, especially the incredibly difficult challenge of guarding our eyes and overcoming our desires. This is our opportunity to become

great forever! The more challenging our situation, the greater we can become. This is one of the many gains we receive from the Torah, the greatest gift and most incredible opportunity of all time.

Sometimes, people have difficulty dealing with their mistakes and thus feel discomfort towards the Torah. They feel that if not for the Torah, they wouldn't need to feel bad about their sins because nothing would be wrong. This can cause them to wish the Torah did not exist and perhaps to even deny it. Having a low self-image is so painful, and the repercussions of this pain can be devastating. We must learn to react properly to our sins so this does not happen.

The truth is that any negative self-image we have is probably inaccurate. Our battles are challenging, and as long as we are trying to succeed, we should not be too hard on ourselves. Although we might think that if others knew what we were struggling with they would look down on us, that is not true. Most people would empathize with us, and though unfortunately a few people might belittle us, it is only because they have never experienced our challenges and can't understand what we are going through. If they had been challenged, they might have fallen worse than we have. It is impossible for them to know they would do better, and they are making a mistake when they belittle our challenges. Ultimately, however, Hashem created all challenges, and He knows exactly what goes on. He knows we want to do good, and He never looks down on us or rejects us.

We should not be harder on ourselves than our loving Father Who made the rules. If we mess up, we should give ourselves a pat on the back for working so hard and then plan how to get back on the right track. Then we should regret our mistake, do *teshuva* to clean it up, and move on. No matter what happens, we must remember that although our battles are tough,

they are also opportunities to succeed and reach greatness.⁶

We must never forget that Hashem loves us despite our sins. No matter how badly we fall, Hashem still cares about us. He never gets angry with us, no matter how badly we sin.

The *Gemara* (*Megillah* 10b) tells us that when the wicked Egyptians were drowning in the sea, the angels wanted to sing *shira* to Hashem. Hashem did not allow it, saying to them, "My creations are drowning in the sea and you want to sing *shira*!?" Hashem was saddened that He had to kill His creations.

It is difficult to fathom the decadence of the Egyptians. They were some of the most wicked people who ever lived. They tortured and killed Jews for no reason other than that they were Jewish. The Jews endured slavery at their hands for about one hundred and forty years. The last eighty-six were so torturous that it was almost as bad as the Holocaust. The Egyptians did whatever they could to degrade every Jew. They beat them savagely for fun and derived sadistic pleasure from killing Jewish babies. They were some of the cruelest people to ever live.

When the Egyptians were afflicted with the ten plagues of open miracles that clearly showed Who the Boss really was, they still denied Him. Even when Hashem miraculously split the sea for the Jews in front of them, they chased after the Jews — right into the sea! Yet, wicked as they were, when they had to be killed, Hashem was saddened. He would not let the angels sing praise to Him, even though He had just saved His chosen nation! If this is how much Hashem loved these wicked gentiles, we cannot fathom how much Hashem loves every member of His chosen nation. Hashem never rejects any of His creations or stops caring about them, no matter how far they have distanced themselves from Him. Rather, He

6. This will be elaborated upon in Chapter 10.

longs for them to come back to Him (Rabbi Shafier, Shmuz 8: “The Power of Prayer,” www.TheShmuz.com).

By realizing Hashem’s unconditional love for us, we can experience the most comforting feeling in existence. Regardless of how far we have fallen, Hashem still loves us and cares about us. No matter how horrible we may convince ourselves that we are, we must admit that we are not as wicked as the evil Egyptians. Therefore, we must admit that Hashem still cares about us and will continue to care no matter what we do. He loves us and values us unconditionally because we are His creations.⁷

We are so fortunate that Hashem gave us the Torah. By realizing how much we gain from it and by acknowledging Hashem’s unconditional love for us, we will be excited to accept the Torah’s authenticity and to achieve incredible success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The only reason Hashem does anything is because of His ultimate goal: to give us the most pleasurable experience possible.
- The Torah provides us with the greatest opportunity of all time: the chance to live meaningful lives and to accomplish astounding achievements that we will be proud of for eternity.
- Hashem’s love for us is unconditional. There is **nothing** we can do to stop Him from loving us.

7. For more on this subject, I highly recommend reading *GPS! Navigation for Your Soul* by Yaakov Shain and Avi Fishoff.

CHAPTER

Six

The Torah's Authenticity

I will deal with our belief in the Torah here because this book would be lacking without it. However, I can only address a small part of this subject here. For more on this topic, check out Project Chazon's reading list (www.ProjectChazon.com). I also recommend Rabbi Lawrence Keleman's lecture entitled "A Rational Approach to the Divine Origin of the Torah," available for free download from www.SimpleToRemember.com.

This section is culled from the aforementioned lecture by Rabbi Keleman, his book *Permission to Receive*, published by Feldheim Publishers, and the lectures of Rabbi Daniel Mechanic of Project Chazon.

Our knowledge that the Torah is true stems from the amazing event when our forefathers received the Torah at *Har Sinai* about 3,330 years ago. Hashem appeared before three million of our ancestors — the entire nation at the time — and spoke to them. He told our nation that He is the God who took us out of Egypt and that we should not serve any other "gods." He then informed us that Moshe Rabbeinu was His prophet, and that He would convey everything He wanted to tell us through him.

It is **impossible** for this event to have been an invented

tradition.⁸ It would be impossible to get three million people to claim that they all heard G-d speak and to dramatically change their lives had it not occurred. It would be impossible for one man to convince so many people that they heard G-d speak if they hadn't. Even a single individual would not accept someone telling him that he experienced an event that never took place. An audience of three million would certainly never accept it.

The only alternative suggestion is that some persuasive man convinced a large group of people that he rediscovered their long-lost tradition. He would have to claim that the tradition was forgotten because otherwise, nobody would believe him. If the entire nation had experienced an event of such magnitude, it would have been told over through the generations. He would have had to somehow convince the people that due to some disaster, the event had been forgotten, and he was the only remaining person who knew about it.

Clearly, there are many problems with this. First, there is no reference in any Jewish tradition to the Torah being lost and rediscovered, which is the message that would have been passed down had that been the case. There also is no mention anywhere in the Jewish tradition of the identity of this important man who supposedly rediscovered the lost tradition. And there are many known direct chains of teacher to student that extend all the way

8. "Impossible" is a strong word. There is no doubt that someone could come up with outrageous "explanations" about the revelation at Sinai. For example, someone could suggest that aliens gave us the Torah and convinced us it was G-d. However, we must understand that any such explanation would be wild, ludicrous fantasy. We would never act upon "possibilities" that are beyond the realm of normalcy. We certainly would never give them consideration in any other area of our lives (did you ever consider that your mother might really be an alien?), so why should we do so with matters of faith? No educated person would give such ridiculous "suggestions" any credence; on the contrary, these ideas would be laughed at and disregarded. Thus, we can say that we *know* Hashem gave us the Torah, and we can consider the alternatives foolish and **impossible**.

back to *Har Sinai* with no gaps. Clearly, there is no tradition that the Torah was temporarily forgotten. On the contrary, the Jewish tradition is that the Torah was passed down from generation to generation without fail. We would not believe in an unbroken chain had there been a gap, which disproves this theory.

Another problem with this suggestion is that the Torah itself states that it will never be forgotten: “. . . for it will not be forgotten from the mouth of their offspring” (*Devarim* 31:21). How could a group of people have believed someone claiming to have found their forgotten tradition, a book allegedly written by G-d, which states within its own text that it will never be forgotten? It could never have happened.

Our tradition is unique. We are the only religion in history to relate that G-d appeared in front of three million people and spoke to them. We are the only nation that claims to have witnesses to a revelation who could be accessed afterward. Every other religion started with one man or a small group of men (most often no more than two people) who claimed that the L-rd told them to tell everyone to change their lives. Yeah, right! Our religion is the only one that says that the entire nation of three million people saw G-d appear to them together. The reason for this is that a claim like that is **impossible** to make up. A religion based on such a claim could never get off the ground unless the event actually happened. The founder of the religion would never be able to persuade his followers to listen to him unless they had actually heard G-d speak.

That is why every charlatan who ever wanted to start his own religion had to claim he had experienced a private prophecy. He couldn't start with a claim that people knew was untrue, nor could he make a claim that they could investigate and find to be false. It would have been the end of his religion. Although all the liars who started false religions would have loved to claim

a public revelation to add to the new religion's credibility, they did not because it would have worked against them. They had to resort to claiming a private vision — even though it has no credibility — so nobody could disprove it. We, however, have the well-known tradition of a public revelation in front of the whole nation, which would be **impossible** to make up.

A public revelation is the only sensible way for G-d to reveal His wishes. If He had appeared to one man and told him to convince everyone about His message, how would that be fair? How could people be expected to figure out whether this man was telling the truth? With so many people claiming to have experienced personal revelations from G-d, how could people be expected to figure out who the right one was? How could people even be expected to know that there *was* a right one, instead of assuming that all of them were lying? There would be no way for anyone to know the truth. That would mean that G-d would be expecting people to trust with no reason for doing so and to somehow guess whom to trust. It would be cruel for G-d to give His laws in an unverifiable way and then to punish everyone who didn't guess right! *That would be evil!* The only sensible way for G-d to reveal Himself was to do it in a way that could be verified. And that is precisely what Hashem did for us when He gave us the Torah publicly, in front of the entire nation.

We are fortunate that Hashem revealed Himself to us in an event that proves that His Torah is true. Armed with this knowledge, we will have the strength to stand strong against the *yetzer hara* and achieve incredible success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The most significant question in the world is whether Hashem actually appeared to our entire nation on *Har Sinai*, and we can prove with irrefutable rational evidence that the answer is yes.
- By asking ourselves how the Jewish people came to believe that Hashem spoke to their ancestors publicly, we come to realize that it must be that it really happened.

CHAPTER

Seven

Living With Emunah

A person can know that Hashem gave us the Torah and still commit many sins. This is because *emunah* that functions only on an intellectual level is incomplete. Though it certainly is beneficial, it lacks the life-changing benefits that come when we **feel** *emunah*.

Intellectual knowledge has only a minimal impact on our decisions. If we do not **feel** *emunah*, then when we are challenged we will find ourselves subtly feeling that our actions lack consequences. Intellectual *emunah* also isn't enough for us to live with the palpable feeling that Hashem is present. Therefore, our job is to take our intellectual knowledge and make it real until it permeates our essence.

Even when we reflect on the evidence and are confident that Hashem gave us the Torah, the feeling will not last long unless we review the evidence frequently. Emotions lose their potency over time, and our ability to feel this truth will slowly fade unless we constantly fortify it. Even those who witnessed Hashem's revelation at *Har Sinai* were commanded to review it, relive it, and invest special effort not to forget it (*Devarim* 4:9-10; see Ramban there). Thus, once we have internalized that Hashem gave us the Torah, we must constantly strengthen this feeling so it does not lose its potency.

One way to boost our ability to feel Hashem's presence is to read a section of a book about emunah every night. Over time, this will bring us to constantly remember that Hashem is with us, and we will even be able to feel His presence. This will also help us maintain these feelings so they don't slip away.⁹

It also is beneficial to frequently think about the kindness Hashem does for us daily and to read about His kindness to our nation. We need to remind ourselves at all times that Hashem loves us and only does good for us. This is crucial for cultivating a relationship with Hashem and feeling that He is present.¹⁰

When asked how we can increase our love for Hashem, Rabbi Akiva Eiger pointed out that before the Shema prayer, which contains the commandment to love Hashem, we say a prayer about Hashem's intense love for us. He explained that the reason is that realizing that Hashem loves us automatically unleashes our love for Him. When we experience His love for us, we instinctively love Him in return, and our ability to feel His presence is much greater.

The *Yalkut Shimoni* (226) relates that when Pharaoh was sent to *Gehennom* to be punished eternally, he was comforted in some small way when he saw that other wicked rulers who had persecuted the Jews would be joining him. Hashem admonished Pharaoh for his reaction, telling him, "You are comforted!? I still am not comforted about what you did to My nation!"

Rabbi Henoah Leibowitz, *zt"l*, commented that within Hashem's reprimand of Pharaoh, we see a little of how far His love for us goes. The Jews had just been saved in a miraculous

9. Start with Rabbi Avigdor Miller's books: *Sing You Righteous*, *Rejoice O Youth!*, *Awake My Glory*, and *The Truth of the Torah*. They are phenomenal. For more good material, see Project Chazon's reading list on www.ProjectChazon.com, and check out www.AniMaamin.org.

10. I highly recommend Rabbi David Ashear's lectures and his book *Living Emunah* (Artscroll Publishers, 2014). To sign up for his daily emunah lesson, go to www.LivingEmunah.com.

fashion, and their tormentors had been punished. Nevertheless, Hashem was not comforted from the pain He felt over the Jews' prior suffering. At the same moment that He miraculously saved His chosen nation — the greatest demonstration of His might and glory — Hashem still felt pain for the suffering we had endured.¹¹

But the lesson we take from this *Midrash* goes even further. We know that Hashem knows better than we do what is best for us. This might make us mistakenly conclude that Hashem does not care how we feel. We might even imagine that He demands that we ignore whatever pain we suffer because everything is really for the best. Yet we see from this *Midrash* that this cannot be further from the truth. We did not end up suffering as slaves in Egypt by accident. Hashem made it happen, and He did it for very important reasons. Though it might be difficult to understand, our enslavement was for our best. Nevertheless, Hashem still felt our pain, and He continued feeling it while we were rejoicing over finally becoming free!

This is but a minuscule demonstration of Hashem's great love for us. Hashem's compassion is unlimited. He is never indifferent to our suffering, even if we really deserve much worse. He guides every detail of our lives with love and care. He is our biggest fan Who still believes in us and values us no matter what we have done. He is rooting for us to emerge victorious from the challenges He gave us so that we could reach greatness. **No one is more on our side than Hashem!**

When we think about Hashem's great love for us, we will come close to Him and be able to feel His presence without interference. As a result, we will not have problems with doubt, and we will have the strength we need to win our battles.

11. *Majesty of Man*, Rabbi Aryeh Striks, Rabbi Shimon Zehnoworth, and Rabbi Henoah Leibowitz, (Artscroll Publishers, 1992), pp 129-130.

It is very important that we advance our relationship with Hashem by drawing close to Him in prayer. A great way to do this is to talk to Hashem in English at the end of the *Shemoneh Esray* (right before *Oseh Shalom*). Pray for whatever you want, even if others might consider it too trivial a matter to “bother” the Creator with. Talk to Hashem in your own words about every problem you have because He really cares. He understands how hard your challenges are, and He is proud of you for all your effort, even if you are struggling and feel like a failure. Hashem believes in you, and He understands every aspect of what you are going through. You can talk to Him about anything without feeling embarrassed. It is also important to thank Him for every blessing you are able to appreciate. Over time, this will help you feel that Hashem controls everything and that He is the only One who can ever really help. It will help you come close to Hashem, and you will begin to feel His love. Though it might take some time, your consistent prayers will eventually create these feelings within you, and they will bring you closer to Hashem.

It is vital that you have a relationship with Hashem. Call out to Him whenever you are in trouble, and thank Him whenever things go right. Always view Hashem as your loving Father Who is reaching out to you — especially when you sin. Although our actions have consequences, Hashem never rejects us. He is not a sadistic dictator looking to zap people, and we must not view Him that way. Always remember that Hashem loves you and believes in you, no matter what you have done.

If you continually think about Hashem and try to connect with Him, you will eventually acquire unshakable faith and a real relationship with Him. This will dramatically increase your success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- We must work on actually feeling belief in order to live life with *real* faith.
- One way to accomplish this is to constantly study material that strengthens our *emunah*.
- Another way to accomplish this is to develop a real relationship with Hashem, our loving Father Who cares about us.

CHAPTER

Eight

The Foundation of it All

A story is told about a Rabbi who had a young son. One day, the son asked him, “In the *Chad Gadya*, the goat was good, which means the cat was wrong for eating it. That means the dog was right for biting the cat, so the stick was wrong for hitting the dog. The fire was right for burning the stick, and the water was wrong for putting out the fire. That makes the ox right for drinking the water, and the butcher wrong for slaughtering the ox. Then the Angel of Death was right for killing the butcher. But that *chas veshalom* means Hashem was wrong when He slaughtered the Angel of Death! How can that be?”

The Rabbi did not respond.

Two days later, the Rabbi told his son, “The answer to your question is that just because someone was wrong, that does not make it everyone else’s job to punish him. Therefore, the dog had no business biting the cat, and neither did any of the other characters that punished the one before it. However, Hashem runs the world, and it is His job to punish those who need to be punished. Thus, Hashem was right and everyone else was wrong.”

The Rabbi continued, “Don’t think I didn’t know this answer when you asked. I didn’t answer you right away to teach you that

we don't go crazy from a question. We don't lose our equilibrium or do anything drastic. Instead, we rely on our knowledge that Hashem and His Torah are true, and we stay calm until we discover the answer."

This story illustrates an important point. There will be times when we have philosophical questions, and it is important that we get the answers. Nevertheless, so long as we remain calm despite our questions, they won't cause us any harm while we wait for the answers. However, sometimes certain questions bother us more strongly, affecting how we feel about our religion. These questions become dangerous problems that can cause much damage and might even threaten to shake our belief in Hashem, *chas veshalom*. Therefore, it is vital that we address any such problems that affect us emotionally.

Each philosophical question has its own answer, and we should try to get answers for all our questions. But if we have a question that bothers us so much emotionally that it causes doubt, the emotional aspect of the question can be dealt with by using the upcoming approach. This will remove the troubling part of the question, leaving over the intellectual aspect to be answered at the right time.¹²

We must understand the ramifications of establishing that Hashem appeared to three million of our ancestors at *Har Sinai*. This means that Hashem created and runs the world and that He instructed us on how to run our lives. It means Hashem commanded us to keep the Torah and to listen to everything our Sages have

12. Of course, the person with the philosophical problem has to be ready to hear answers. Sometimes, people are not ready for that. People experiencing intense emotional pain, for example, are not usually ready for anything other than empathy. The time is just not right for answers; they might even react negatively to them. As *Pirkei Avos* 4:18 teaches: "Do not appease your friend at the time of his anger; do not console him while his dead is lying before him."

taught us, as He instructed in the Torah (*Devarim* 17:11): “Do not divert from the word they [the Sages] tell you, neither to the right nor to the left.” This is the equivalent of Hashem appearing to you in a way that you would know it was Him and that He is God. You might not feel it with the emotional strength of our ancestors at Sinai, but you can realize that irrefutable proof that Hashem appeared to us provides us with as much evidence as actually witnessing the revelation does, even though it is harder for us to feel it.

Now, if Hashem would appear to you and tell you to keep the Torah, would you consider trying another religion to see if there is something to it? Of course not. If Hashem would tell you, “I am kind and everything I do is good,” and then something painful happened to you that you didn’t understand, would you say that *chas veshalom* Hashem does not exist or that He is evil? Of course not. If you stood at *Har Sinai* and witnessed Hashem’s revelation, and then heard of a controversial discovery or scientific theory that seemed not to fit with the Torah, would you consider that maybe the Torah is wrong, *chas veshalom*? Of course not. You would say that although you don’t understand exactly how everything adds up, Hashem and His Torah must be true because He appeared to you, which makes it **impossible** for the Torah to be false.

We must realize that knowing that Hashem appeared to our ancestors on *Har Sinai* is the logical equivalent of Hashem appearing to us, because even though we were not there, we can still demonstrate without any doubt that Hashem exists and wants us to keep the Torah. We can fall back on this every time we feel doubt or have questions that disturb our *emunah*. Every time our emotions play games with us, we can tell ourselves that what we are struggling with definitely is the truth, even though we are having difficulty *feeling it* to be true at the moment.

Getting our questions answered is important. It increases the meaning we feel in serving Hashem and deepens our relationship with Him. But until we get those answers, we can prevent any question from shaking our belief in Hashem. We can use this approach to make sure that any issues or challenges we face do not hamper our beliefs or our relationship with Hashem.

There is nothing wrong with having questions and not understanding Hashem's ways. The only issue is if we assume we know better than G-d, or worse, that there is no G-d.¹³ If we focus on the fact that Hashem created the entire world and that He pays close attention to every single facet within it, we will develop the strength to trust in Hashem no matter how difficult it is. We will be able to trust that He is arranging *everything* for our best and that He knows what He is doing. If we remember that we know for sure that Hashem gave us the Torah, we will have unshakable faith in Hashem that won't be affected by anything we can't understand. And if we top that off with remembering how much Hashem loves us, we will come close to Hashem, develop a real love for Him, and soar to the greatest heights.

Knowing without a doubt that Hashem gave us the Torah at *Har Sinai* is the foundation of our entire service of Hashem. This recognition provides us with the strength we need to stand up to the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

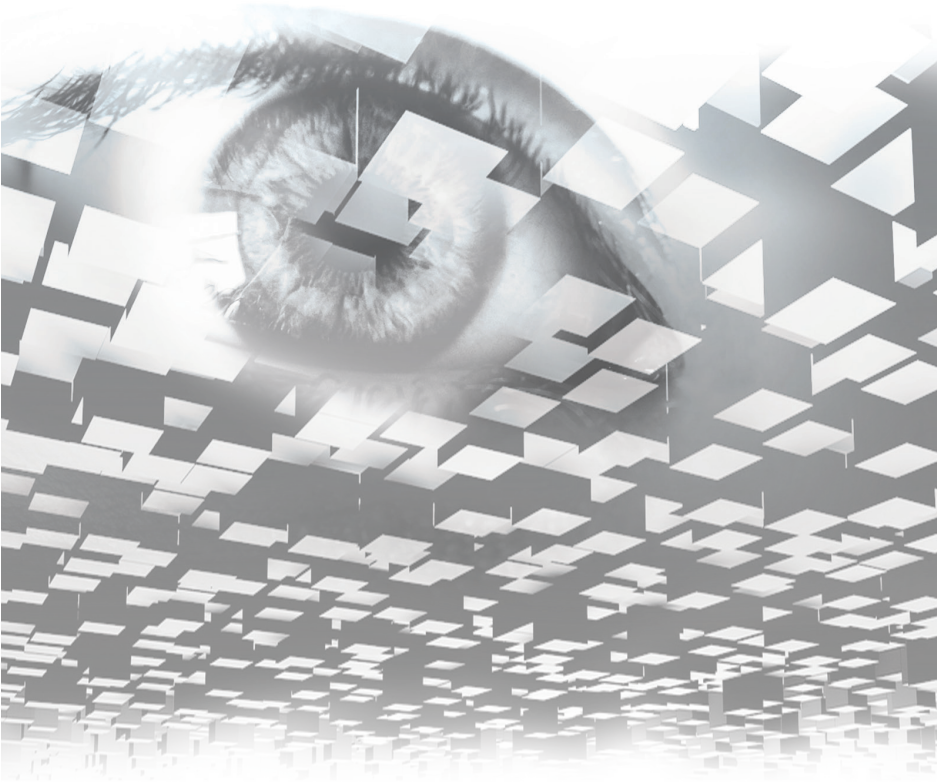
Quick Recap:

- Hashem's revelation on *Har Sinai* proves that all our questions ultimately have real, emotionally satisfying answers, even if

13. For more on this, listen to Shmuz 10: "Questioning G-d: Finding and Keeping Your *Bashert*," by Rabbi Shafier, www.TheShmuz.com.

we do not know the answers yet.

- Knowing and internalizing that Hashem revealed Himself to us on *Har Sinai* is the foundation of everything we are asked to believe in and do as Jews.
- If you ever are disturbed by a question or experience, ask yourself how you would react to it had you stood at *Har Sinai* and witnessed Hashem's revelation.



Part 3 – Getting Past the Obstacles

CHAPTER

Nine

Missing Out

One of the *yetzer hara's* nastiest tricks is that he makes us feel that by not indulging, we are missing out. He uses this ploy when we are challenged with desire, and even after we emerge victorious. Because its results can be devastating, we must learn how to defend against it.

The *yetzer hara* starts by hyping up the pleasure, trying to persuade us that what we desire is the greatest thing in the world. He then tells us that if we decide not to give in, we will suffer so much pain that we won't be able to be happy. He tries to convince us that our decision is whether to miss out on the pleasure and be miserable or to indulge and be happy. He asserts that if we don't give in, we will be left with nothing. This makes it difficult for us to fight our impulses.

At minimum, this tactic turns our challenges into "losing battles." Because we don't really want to win, we just hang on with willpower and aren't truly in control. This causes our strength to rapidly dwindle, and we are in danger of caving in if the challenge lasts long enough.

The *yetzer hara* also uses this devious ploy after we have resisted our desires. By telling us that we missed out on an incredible experience, he tries to make us question whether holding strong was worth it. His hope is that we will regret our

decision and give in the next time.

This feeling of “missing out” after a victory is the revenge of unfulfilled desires. Even when the test is over, unfulfilled desires can continue to gnaw at us. Left unchecked, they grow stronger and wear us down until they affect our thinking. We begin to feel that we missed out on something great, and on some level, we wish we had given in.

The *yetzer hara's* goal is that instead of us being excited about our incredible accomplishment, which would motivate us to future victories, we feel deflated and regretful. This puts us in danger of cracking in future challenges. With no excitement to succeed and with rapidly increasing desires, all we have left is our willpower. And when that finally cracks, we give in without restraint because we have nothing left to stop us.

The *yetzer hara* also uses this tactic to stop us when we decide to improve. He makes us think, “Can I really live without this pleasure forever? I’ll be missing out on life!” This makes us lose our will to fight.

The first step in addressing feelings of “missing out” is realizing that these feelings are irrational emotions stirred up by the *yetzer hara*. They have no validity. All we missed was a brief physical pleasure that would have left us feeling unfulfilled. As we discussed in Chapter 3, physical pleasure cannot quench the feeling that “something is missing.” That longing must be dealt with differently. The *yetzer hara* tries to hijack those feelings and use them to spark desire, but what he is trying to sell us on is actually the cause of our emptiness. Although we might experience some physical enjoyment from indulging, we don’t gain anything on an emotional level, certainly not the ecstasy the *yetzer hara* promises us.

Think back to one of the most miserable experiences in your life, a time when you felt like a failure or experienced a

tragedy. Try to re-experience what you felt. Would experiencing *any* physical pleasure have transformed your mood? Would the most delicious food have made you feel better? Of course not. You could hardly enjoy anything. Because of your extreme pain, physical pleasure lost its pizzazz, and you didn't care too much about it.

Though the *yetzer hara* tries to convince us otherwise, physical pleasure just cannot satisfy the feeling that something is missing. We must address the feeling that life is empty, but physical pleasure is not the way to do it. Neither is cheap emotional pleasure such as impressing others with something insignificant. Like any quick fix, these pleasures will not satisfy you, and they will certainly not make you excited about life. What do we really miss out on by not chasing them? We just miss out on being miserable.

Nevertheless, the question remains: how do we deal with the feelings of emptiness that prevent us from being happy? How can we possibly satisfy this inner voice and live a happy, thrilling life when we don't know what it really wants? Giving in will make us feel guilty and empty, but not giving in will make us feel that we missed out and are left with nothing! How do we avoid feeling that we are in a lose-lose situation?

The solution is to realize what an opportunity our challenges are. We can reach astounding heights that have rarely been attained! If we master this attitude, we will feel accomplished instead of feeling that we missed out. We will buzz with excitement as we taste the sweetness of success. We will confidently admire the strength we exerted with Hashem's help, and we will be proud of ourselves rather than regretting standing strong against desire. We will be thrilled about coming closer to our lifelong goal of greatness, and we will finally experience some of the emotional pleasure

we long for.

Only meaningful accomplishments, especially those done with excitement, can quench the dissatisfaction that “something is missing.” Feelings of dissatisfaction come when we are not happy with ourselves because we are not becoming the people we secretly wish we would become. That is why the only solution is to get on a path of growth and accomplishment that will lead us to fulfill our destiny. A great way to start is by standing up to the *yetzer hara* when he challenges us with desire. Each little burst of effort is a massive accomplishment, even if we have yet to attain mastery over our desires. These “small” feats are incredibly valuable, and Hashem takes great pride in them!

As we fight against desire, we grow and accomplish at an astronomical rate. Although self-perfection takes a long time, once we begin growing, we will already feel better about where we are headed. Even better, because we will realize that every second is an astronomical accomplishment, we will feel on top of the world! We will not feel inferior to anyone, and we will pulse with excitement! We won't feel bad for missing out because we will know that we didn't really miss out on anything.

In his amazing lecture entitled “Why Be Jewish?”¹⁴ Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky teaches a vital lesson for life. There are many times when we must make difficult decisions. Often, we cannot have it all — we must choose between the options. In these situations, there is no easy way out. **Taking a passive course of action is also a choice with its own ramifications.** We must decide what we really want in life and what we are willing to live without.

This applies particularly to challenges involving desire. It is impossible for us to feel the thrill of being successful in the

14. Available for free download from www.SimpleToRemember.com

battle against the *yetzer hara* and at the same time give in to our desires. We have to choose between the two; we cannot have both. If we decide that we just can't give up what we desire because we will miss out on too much, we won't be able to feel good about ourselves. Giving in makes us look down on ourselves. When we run after our desires and feel guilty, we are unable to be happy. Therefore, not choosing to stand up against our desires is a decision in itself, and unfortunately, it is a decision to be miserable. What do we want in life: true happiness and accomplishment or cheap physical thrills with misery? Choosing to be a slave to our passions means missing out on the most incredible life ever. If we don't stand up and fight our way out of the clutches of desire, we will miss out on an exhilarating, meaningful life.

Choosing happiness instead of pleasure is not a sacrifice. We only miss out on a bit of pleasure that comes along with emotional torture, while we gain the most thrilling feeling we can experience. When we make the right decisions with the proper attitude, we can taste real success and be happy. We will truly not be missing anything.

We must remember that the feeling that we are missing out on a great experience comes from the *yetzer hara*, who is trying to trick us and hurt us. We certainly should not trust these emotions and base our decisions on them. Addressing them properly enables us to achieve long-term success without falling for such tricks.

We must celebrate our victories whenever we defeat the *yetzer hara*.¹⁵ Otherwise, we will feel that we missed out on something incredible and gained nothing in exchange. We must remind ourselves that each victory is incredibly profound. It is quite impressive to go against our nature and control ourselves

15. This will be discussed further in Chapter 25.

when we want to give in. This success ranks very high on the barometer of true spiritual accomplishment. By recognizing that we gain immensely when we control ourselves, we will achieve breathtaking success against the *yetzer hara* with excitement.

All we miss out on by not giving in are cheap thrills bundled with misery, while what we gain by controlling ourselves is that we move closer toward becoming great people and being happy. When we realize that we have something much better than the second-rate pleasures the *yetzer hara* peddles, we will succeed in our challenges of desire, and we will be thrilled with our decision to stand up and fight in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- By telling us we are missing out on the best thing in life, the *yetzer hara* tries to make us miserable in an attempt to destroy us. But in reality, we will only miss out on the most amazing experience in life if we give in instead of fighting back.
- We must celebrate our victories and gain a glimpse of the glorious feeling we will experience in the Next World because that is the best way to overcome this dirty trick.

More Ways to Bring Meaning to Life

I must mention two important methods that help remove feelings of emptiness. One is learning Torah. It is vital that we have a daily *seder* in learning in which we push ourselves to understand Torah. Toiling in Torah study yields one of the most rewarding feelings we can experience, as we will explore further in Chapter 44.

The second method is to constantly look to give happiness to others and bring a smile to their faces. Bringing joy to someone else is so meaningful. If we forget ourselves and our problems for a short while and just focus on making others happy, we will begin to feel happy and fulfilled. Even if we start with the purely selfish intention of easing our own feelings of lack, our mood will slowly improve. Experiencing the lift that we bring to others by making a difference in their lives is one of the sweetest feelings there is. We will be genuinely happy and will not feel that we lack anything. (Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, pages 173-176)

CHAPTER

Ten

Don't Despair

Think about the five best *mitzvos* and five worst *aveiros* you committed over the past year. How does that make you feel?

Many people get depressed when they try this. This indicates a problem in perspective: they feel that their bad deeds far overshadow any good that they have done. In fact, while they would struggle to come up with five *mitzvos* they did that they consider special, they would have no problem naming more than five sins that they are dreadfully embarrassed about. This outlook makes them unhappy with who they are.

For some people, the issue is exacerbated because they view their good deeds as out of character yet view their sins as indicators of their true selves. When they sin, they feel, "This shows that I am a bad person. I am a sinner who has no control over himself." Because they don't tell themselves that they really are good people who slipped, they label themselves as bad. They refuse to accept that human beings make mistakes, and that mistakes do not define a person. In short, they demand perfection from themselves and are crushed by any error they make. Because they cannot live up to their impossible expectations, they feel like failures.

This is problematic because it makes people more likely to continue to sin. When people feel that they are bad, they get

depressed and are not ready to fight their desires. With the many challenges we face, this can be quite dangerous.

Further, viewing themselves as sinners after a few mistakes turns sinning into a habit. People who view themselves as bad do not change. They accept their label as an unfortunate truth they can do nothing about — thinking that even if they control themselves now, they will still be sinners because of their previous actions — so they continue to sin. They exert no effort to win their battles because they feel they would be missing out on pleasures with no gain in return. They think it is too late to turn things around and they feel hopelessly devalued.¹⁶

Even worse, identifying themselves as people who do these sins causes them to live up to that label. They do not hold themselves up to any standard because instead of developing the requisite feelings for resisting sin — “I don’t do these things” — they feel that this *is* the way they act. And even if they are not happy with how they have been acting, they still follow the path of least resistance — to continue acting in ways consistent with their self-image.

Another problem that emerges when someone is prone to these negative feelings is that when he is in the midst of a challenge and he slips a little, he is far more likely to give up. Though the battle is far from over and he has not lost, he feels no motivation to continue fighting because he thinks, “I’ve already failed anyway, so I might as well give in completely.” He is like a dieter who, after eating a small slice of chocolate cake, caves in completely and eats the rest of the cake. The person who has slipped up overrates his error. Deciding that all is already lost, he gives in, thinking, “I might as well enjoy myself.”

This line of thinking is a mistake. The correct way for us to

16. For more on this, listen to Shmuz 80: “It’s Never Too Late” by Rabbi Ben Zion Shafier.

view ourselves is as good people who “do not do that” when it comes to sins, even though we might sometimes stumble. Although our deeds do have consequences, we must not label ourselves as bad even if we sin badly many times. Instead, we must realize that we are good people who try to do what is right. Even if we did many things that we now realize were foolish, that does not make us bad. (Rabbi Ben-Zion Shafier, *Shmuz* 56: “The Death of Right and Wrong”)

When we stumble, we must remember that we sinned out of weakness, not rebellion. We might sometimes be overpowered by strong desires, but deep down, we want to be good. We want to do what is right. It is just that these feelings sometimes get covered up by the mountains of desire we face. It is a huge challenge to overcome these desires, and if we sometimes mess up, that does not mean we are bad people; we just mistakenly did something that was not in our best interest. Even if we did it willfully, we should still consider it a mistake because we did not realize the true ramifications of what we were doing. Desire makes it hard for us to see the consequences of our actions. We were not aiming to do bad. We are doing the most important thing: we are trying! That is what Hashem wants from us.

There will be times when we make mistakes. That is normal, because we are human. Whenever we strive to accomplish something, mistakes along the way are inevitable. It is right for us to regret our mistakes and resolve not to repeat them. Sins are serious and they damage us. We should realize that certain actions are wrong and must not be committed. But we must also be sure that our sins don't destroy us by making us feel ashamed of ourselves. Instead, we must get back up, dust ourselves off, and continue to chase our aspirations.

If we have already sinned and the challenge is still going on, we must not think that we have already blown it and it is too

late. That is wrong. Each second we held ourselves back was a tremendous accomplishment, and even if we ultimately gave in, we will deal with that mistake later through *teshuva*. Right now we have the incredible opportunity to achieve unprecedented success by getting back up and doing what is right. This victory will be even greater than a regular victory over the *yetzer hara* because we will overcome an additional challenge: the urge to give up after slipping. We must focus on what we can achieve right now because that is what matters.

Most important, we must not forget that we are good and are striving to achieve. If the *yetzer hara* tries to make us feel that we are bad because he got us, we must stand up to his lies.

It is crucial that we respond in this way. If we don't, we are at risk of feeling, "I am a sinner and a failure at controlling my desires. It doesn't pay to control myself. I might as well sin and get pleasure because I am a failure anyway."¹⁷ We will feel inferior and besmirched with sin. We probably won't control ourselves, and we will be miserable.

We must realize that although we are accountable for our actions, if we have committed one or even many sins in this area, that does not make us bad. Many good people and even some great *tzaddikim* struggled with their desires, because it is so hard to have complete control. We must remember that we are good and that deep down, we want to do what's right. Though we might not always feel it beneath our desires, that is the truth.

We must also remember that even one victory is a tremendous accomplishment. **It is worth coming to this world for even one second of self-control!** To go against our nature and succeed in this area is a legendary achievement because it is so challenging. It really does matter that we succeed. We will not

17. See Rabbeinu Yonah's commentary on *Pirkei Avos* 2:13.

be left with nothing; we will have an astounding achievement, one that everyone will be in awe of in the World to Come. This is something we don't want to miss. Even just one act of self-control is something to be incredibly proud of, and we will take pride in it forever.

Each and every one of us *can* become a mighty warrior in the battle against desire. We can amass accomplishment after accomplishment. Even just one success should encourage you because it proves you can succeed. You can achieve greatness, one act at a time!

Do not feel held back if you have committed ugly sins. It is misguided to think that the entire goal of life is to not mess up. Had that been the case, Hashem would not have bothered to create us, and He definitely wouldn't have created challenges. Rather, the proper perspective is the positive: that our goal in life is to accomplish, and that self-control is one of the greatest acts we can do. By cashing in on this opportunity, you can become a great person, and having sinned doesn't take that away. Greatness is in your hands! Remember that not too many people actually resist strong urges just because they know they should. Most people who appear unaffected by desire either don't face it to a strong extent or actually give in to their desires in private. Success in this area is remarkable.

If past sins that we no longer commit still gnaw at our conscience and make us feel down about ourselves, we must do a proper *teshuva* and move on. We must stop beating ourselves up, even if "that horrific sin" was our fault. Hashem created us knowing that we might make many bad mistakes. That is why He created *teshuva*. When you do *teshuva*, He forgives you and no longer holds your sin against you.¹⁸

18. See *Rambam Hilchos Teshuva* 7:4.

After repenting, we must no longer feel inferior for our wrongdoings. Instead, we should be proud that we admitted our mistakes and resolved not to repeat them. We should also take pride in the effort we invested to change despite the difficulty of kicking old habits. Past sins leave over powerful desires, and it takes constant vigilance to control them. This makes the accomplishment even greater.

Rather than holding us back, our mistakes give us a greater opportunity to accomplish. Getting excited about this will eliminate any poor self-image and help us attain self-control in the battle of the generation.

Note: See Appendix A for more on this topic.

Quick Recap:

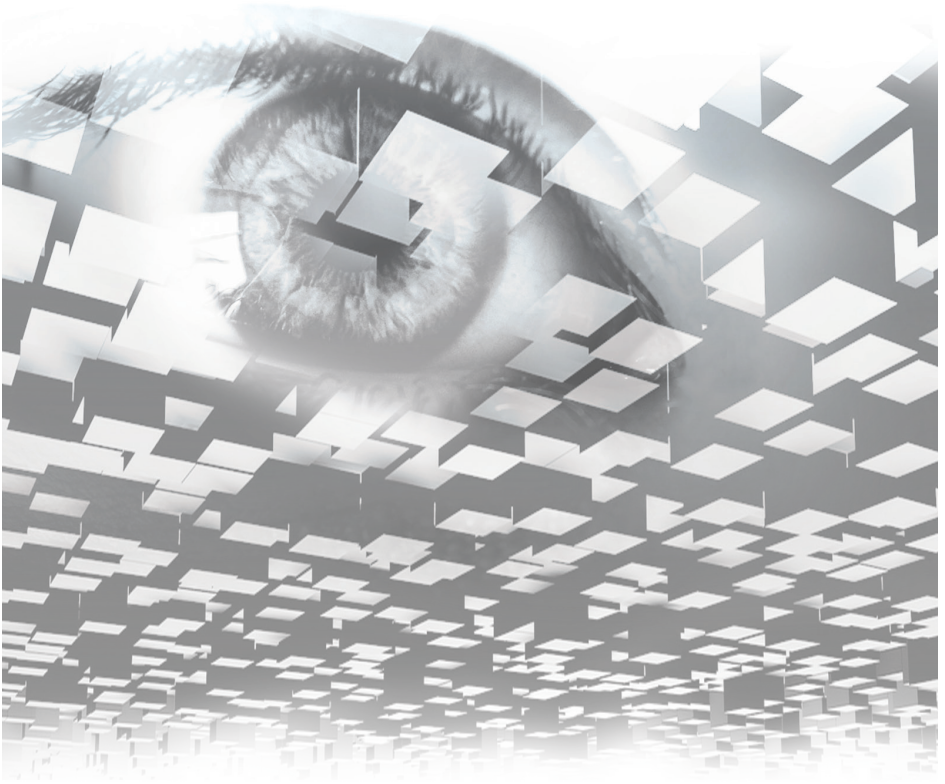
- The *yetzer hara* tries to use our sins to debilitate us with paralyzing guilt so he can win forthcoming battles of desire and destroy our lives.
- We must have the right perspective to save ourselves from this tactic so we can fight with enthusiasm in the battle against the *yetzer hara*.

How to Do Teshuva

These are the three steps to *teshuva*:

1. Turn to Hashem and admit what you have done.
2. Regret your decision and wish you had decided differently now that you know better.
3. Resolve not to commit the sin again.

(Verbalize all three steps.)



Part 4 – Planning for Change

CHAPTER

Eleven

Making the Decision to Change

The incredible story of the *teshuva* of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdia is related by the *Gemara* (*Avodah Zara* 17a). Elazar ben Durdia was known to have visited every woman of ill repute in the world. Once, he heard of such a woman who lived far away. He amassed a bag of gold coins and traveled across seven rivers to reach her. When she met him, this woman recognized his depravity and told him that he would never be accepted back in *teshuva*. Struck by her statement, he ran out of the house.

Elazar sat between two mountains and valleys. He cried out, "Mountains and valleys, beg for mercy on my behalf!" The mountains and valleys declined his request. He then asked the heavens and earth to beg mercy for him, but he was turned down again. He called out for the sun and moon to plead on his behalf, and they too refused. He begged the stars and constellations for help, and he was rebuffed once again.

Finally, Elazar said to himself, "It all depends on me!" He sobbed bitterly over his sins until he died. At that moment, a heavenly voice proclaimed, "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdia is ready to enter *Olam Habba*."

When Rebbe (Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi) heard this, he cried and said, "Some people acquire their portion in the World to Come

over many years, while others acquire their portion in one minute!" Rebbe continued, "Not only do they accept those who repent [in Heaven], they even call them 'Rabbi!'"

There is a lot to learn from this story. Let's start by examining what caused Elazar ben Durdia to do *teshuva*. What changed? Before this woman told him that he wouldn't be accepted back in *teshuva*, didn't he know that what he had been doing his whole life was wrong? Of course he knew Hashem didn't like promiscuity, but that did not stop him from acting as he pleased. What changed now? What woke him up and caused him to change his life?

Rabbi Shafier (Shmuz 3: "Yom Kippur: The Power of *Teshuva*," www.TheShmuz.com) answers that Elazar realized he had hit rock bottom. When that sinful woman made her remark, he understood that he had fallen lower than he'd ever thought possible, certainly lower than where he was comfortable viewing himself. That shocking realization broke through all his rationalizations, waking him up and enabling him to see clearly. Not liking where he saw himself brought him to tears, and he turned around immediately. Of course, Hashem accepted his *teshuva*; Hashem eagerly awaits the repentance of even the most sinful people because of His tremendous love for all His children.

For many people, there comes a point in their lives when they overstep their bounds and do what they never thought they would stoop to do. The shock and regret they feel afterward is searing. It is vital that they respond properly to this pain because **this moment is the most critical moment of their lives**. In that instant, they can decide to see past their rationalizations and change, or they can defend their decisions instead.

Unfortunately, no matter how they respond, it will be painful. Whether they commit to act differently or try to deny their mistakes, they cannot completely quell the agonizing

realization that they have done something wrong. Deep down, they know they failed, and that feeling is excruciating.

But there is a way for a person to mitigate much of this pain, and that is by saying to himself, **“I will make this the most productive thing that ever happened to me because I am going to use it to change my whole life!** Years from now, I am going to look back and realize that all I have become is because of what happened today, and that had it not happened, I probably would have continued to plummet further instead. **I am going to become a different person and reach greatness because of what happened!”** Making what happened productive by deciding to turn around because of it eases the sting of regret like nothing else can. Best of all, it is a huge shortcut on the road to self-control. It enables us to attain lasting change much faster than usual.

Of course, we must also remember that *teshuva* completely wipes away our sins as if we never did them.¹⁹ Once we repent, we no longer have to feel down about what we did. We can take comfort in the knowledge that our error has been erased and move on.

There is another lesson we can learn from this story. When Elazar ben Durdia tried to do *teshuva*, he first reached out to the elements of nature, requesting they do *teshuva* on his behalf. What was he doing? Did he really think the mountains and stars could repent for him?

Rav Yonasan Eibeshutz (*Ya'aros Devash*, Volume 2, *Derush* 10) explains that Elazar ben Durdia was trying to blame his behavior on his surroundings. He tried to blame society for his wrongdoings. But eventually, he realized that if he wanted to change, everything depended on him alone. No one else could change him and make him repent. If he wanted anything to

19. See *Rambam Hilchos Teshuva* 7:4.

change, he had to take responsibility for his mistakes, and even more important, for what his future would be like. He had to cut past all his excuses and his identity as a lustful person. He had to resolve that *he* would change things and not let **anything** hold him back. That was the only way for him to successfully do *teshuva*.

This is a critical lesson for us. We all have various rationalizations for our behavior when we mess up. Anyone who doesn't have these rationalizations wouldn't be able to handle the guilt and self-criticism that come after sinning. And the truth is that these excuses might be built on some very good points. We really are living in a challenging generation, and we face tests from all sides. Our friends might be into the wrong things, we experience social pressures from those around us, and we encounter warped perspectives from society on what matters in life. Sin is far more accessible than it ever was, and its sales pitch is much more tempting and far-reaching than it was even one generation ago. People in past generations could never have even dreamed of the challenges we face. For good reason, we wonder what could possibly be expected of us. Our behavior is typical for anyone challenged so much. It takes much planning and effort to succeed.

But those rationalizations won't get us anywhere. If we continue to use them, we will stay the same for the rest of our lives, wishing we could do better and feeling bad for giving in. Does anyone enjoy feeling that he is a slave to his passions? Do you want to feel powerless and inferior for the rest of your life? Nobody does. We only settle for that because we lack a better alternative. Well, there is a better alternative — to **get up and fight!** We can tell ourselves that we are sick of the guilt and that we hate feeling incapable of reaching greatness. We can leave our past behind and begin anew. We can free ourselves from the grip

of desire and follow our dreams of greatness, just by making that decision to fight!

The key to quick, lasting change is the statement Elazar ben Durdia exclaimed: "It all depends on me!" He was telling himself, "I cannot rely on anyone else if I want things to be different! I must take care of it myself! *I* have to make it happen, and that is exactly what I will do!" Taking responsibility enabled him to make the most dramatic transformation in history, and that is how we can do the same and reach great heights, no matter how challenging our situation is.

We do not need to blame ourselves or beat ourselves up to make this turnaround happen. We need not revisit the past to decide to change. (Although wishing we had acted differently is part of the *teshuva* process, we can leave it for later if it is too daunting to deal with right away.) All we need to do is think about our lives until we realize that we are not happy with the way things are and then say to ourselves, "*I* am going to make things different." Of course, we must rely on Hashem for His help because we cannot succeed without it, but then we must shed all our checkered history because all that is irrelevant now. Once we have decided to change and we know Hashem is helping us, we are capable of success!

Once we have decided to change, we no longer are our old selves who messed up so many times. We have left all that behind and have become new people. We are in control, and we are proud of who we now are! That is how we must identify ourselves from now on.

We must avoid making excuses or blaming our circumstances, which stops us from succeeding. But we must also forget about harshly judging ourselves, which would be wrong and irrelevant. Instead, we must focus on the exceptional person we want to be. We must have confidence that we will

eventually reach the great heights we aspire to because we have taken responsibility for getting there! Since we have decided to change, nothing can hold us back. Nothing will be stronger than our determination to succeed and reach greatness!

The Chazon Ish (*Emunah U'Bitachon* 4:1) writes that although our Sages taught us about many different *middos* and how to perfect them, one *middah* matters more than any other: the trait of deciding to fight our negative impulses. No matter what *middos* a person struggles with, the most important factor is whether he allows them to run his life or fights back. That will determine whether he will overcome his bad traits and where he will end up as a person.

It is easy to follow our impulses, especially because they are so strong. Giving up takes the least effort, while fighting them requires an incredible amount of energy. Nevertheless, it is crucial that we take control of our actions. Although we might feel weighed down by strong desires and bad habits, we can conquer these impulses if we say to ourselves, "I don't want things to go this way. I want to be in control and live a thrilling and rewarding life! I want to feel good about myself, and I want to be happy with the path I chose. I won't let *any* desire control my life any longer, no matter how strong it is! **I will stand up and fight!**"

If you need to muster more strength to make the decision, remind yourself that you will experience so much pain if you don't change. Think about it until you feel you have no choice but to change, even though changing will mean leaving some pleasures behind. You don't want things to remain the way they are! Think about all the pain those indulgences put you through and how unsatisfying it was. Realize that chasing after desire is just not worth it! Say to yourself that you are done with being a person you don't want to be, and that **you** are going to change things **no matter what!** Think long and

hard about where your life is heading and where you want it to be until you feel determined never to return to your bad habits.²⁰

Once you decide to fight your desires, you will see that you have the strength to succeed. Of course, you will still face strong impulses that will make you feel that you want to indulge and that nothing else matters. Determination to change doesn't make your temptations go away; you will still be challenged. But if you are determined and use a step-by-step plan, you will succeed.

Nobody other than yourself will make you change. You might be able to blame your life's circumstances for your failures, and nobody will argue with you. If a couple of things in your life were different, of course you would be doing a much better job controlling yourself. But those things are not different, and they probably won't change anytime soon. If you want your life to improve so you can become the person you want to be, **you** must make things change. You must take control of your life instead of letting your desires and circumstances control you. Take responsibility for your mistakes without beating yourself up. Tell yourself that though it would have been difficult to control yourself those times you didn't, and though it will take significant effort for you to take charge, you will regain control starting now. By accepting responsibility to change, you are taking the first step toward the self-control and happiness you seek.

There is one more lesson to take from this story. At the end of his *teshuva*, Elazar ben Durdia died. The Maharsha (*Chiddushei Agados*, s.v. *Hachi Ka'amar*) explains that Elazar was so entrenched in his lusts that it would have been extremely difficult for him to avoid sin had he remained alive. It was too likely that he would

20. See *Shaarei Teshuva* 1:4.

slip back into temptation. For that reason, Hashem had to take him from this world right after he repented.

It would seem that from a spiritual perspective, Elazar ben Durdia had it easy. He died right after repenting and went straight to the World to Come, where he immediately received the greatest pleasure in existence. He did not have to struggle to control himself. We, however, remain alive to face that difficult task. It would be much easier if we were never challenged again, but no doubt we will be — many times. If we don't want to slip back into the trap of desire, we must work so hard. It seems unfair! We don't want to give in again and we want to be good, so why must it be so difficult? Why did Elazar have it easy while we have to struggle?

In reality, however, we are way more fortunate than Elazar ben Durdia. We are lucky to face such difficult battles because these challenges are our opportunity to reach greatness! The more difficult the battle, the greater we can become by winning. Unfortunately for Elazar, he no longer had a reasonable chance of winning such battles, and thus Hashem had to take him from this world. Because he repented out of love for Hashem, his portion in the World to Come is amazing. He received reward for each sin he committed because the sins of a person who does *teshuva* out of love for Hashem are turned into merits (*Yoma* 86a). Yet, he never had another opportunity to overcome his nature in the battle against desire. We, however, were given this incredible opportunity! We get to face countless battles against the *yetzer hara*, which means we can perform many acts of greatness, each of immeasurable value.

It is true that it is harder to lose control when there are no challenges. It is much easier to stay perfect when there are no tests. But still it is to our advantage that we are constantly challenged, because it presents us with the greatest opportunity

ever: the opportunity to reach incredible heights!

We must never forget that the focus of life is to accomplish, not to stay perfect. This is why Hashem put us in this world — the reason we are not better off dead! Let us take advantage of this opportunity rather than focusing on the impossibility of staying perfect. We have the greatest opportunity there ever was! Let's not forget that.

Let's encourage ourselves further by remembering that Hashem had to take Elazar ben Durdia from this world because he probably wouldn't have been able to control himself had he remained alive. We can deduce from this that since Hashem has kept us alive after we decided to improve, that means we can regain control over ourselves. We *can* defeat the *yetzer hara*. It's not just that Hashem believes in us; He knows for a fact that we can do it. He is helping us, so we can definitely succeed. Let's never give up, because unimaginable success is within our reach. Let's go forward with confidence and reach the greatest heights!

Though it might seem difficult, we can attain phenomenal success if we decide to take control. The crowning peak of achievement awaits if we stand up and fight in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- If we ever slip up badly, we can use that to spring us forward to reach heights far beyond where we would have reached had we not fallen. We can turn our mistakes into the most productive events in our lives!
- We must decide to take control of our lives, no matter whose fault it is and how many excuses we have. The determination to stand up and fight will give us the strength to defeat the *yetzer hara*.
- As long as Hashem keeps us alive, that means He is helping

us fight our *yetzer hara* and **He knows for a fact that we can defeat him!** This is encouraging news for us because it means that we *can reach greatness!*

CHAPTER

Twelve

Quitting Cold Turkey vs. Quitting Gradually

There are two ways to change bad habits and break free of addictions. The first is to quit cold turkey: the person departs entirely from his unsatisfactory behavior at once. The other method involves gradual change. The person changes one kind of inappropriate behavior at a time until he escapes it completely.

Quitting cold turkey has its advantages. When done right, a person can leave entire addictions behind in a short time. He won't need to maintain his attention and effort for nearly as long. Although at first he will need extreme willpower, he will quickly develop new habits and need even less willpower than a regular person. Once he gets through the initial difficult period and eases into a new way of life, it becomes much easier to control himself.

However, quitting in one shot requires much internal strength and willpower. It is best employed by someone with a clear, unstressed mind. (See *Sefer Cheshbon Hanefesh*, subsections 11-12.) Usually, it takes strong motivation for someone to make such a dramatic change and stick to it.

Often, this method needs a life-changing experience that creates a sudden shift in perspective. Feelings that can spark such a change include a surge of strong positive motivation and healthy ambition, or the guilt and clarity obtained from hitting

rock bottom. The most effective transformations combine both — the person is shaken up but is also excited to do something about it and become great.

Healthy Ambition

Ambition is spiritually and emotionally healthy when the person wants to reach what he aspires for — rather than feeling pressured to do something against his will. The person is excited about fulfilling his dreams, rather than feeling that those “dreams” are unwanted obligations that just cause him pain. He must also feel capable of fulfilling his aspirations.

Thus, our true goal must be to put in effort and fulfill our potential, rather than to achieve a specific goal that might currently be beyond our control or capabilities. Although we should set clear goals to attain certain spiritual levels and achievements, our real goal must be to do our best. Specific goals are important because they help us grow, but at the core of any specific goal must be the understanding that true greatness is determined by effort and capability. We must also be flexible and adjust our expectations based on our circumstances. We must keep asking ourselves what is healthy for us and what will last.

We must remember that if we do what is appropriate for us, that is true success no matter what we tangibly accomplish. Achieving what we are capable of places us at the greatest spiritual heights with everyone else who has achieved greatness. There is nothing more that Hashem wants from us or that we should demand from ourselves.

For more on this, see Chapter 23.

This combination of clarity and motivation decreases the amount of willpower necessary to overcome bad habits. The person can ride this burst of determination to be much stronger than usual. Once he has acted properly for enough time, new habits will form and override his old ones. Thus, this initial burst of strength makes it much easier for him to quit cold turkey.

How do we figure out whether a sweeping, instantaneous change is a good idea? If the person wants to leave the bad behind and believes he can succeed, he should try it. But if he doubts he has the strength to pull it off, or if he is not sure he wants to give up his old ways, this method is unlikely to work. He should not expect himself to be instantly changed. Without that initial burst of energy, he probably won't be able to break free in one shot. He must plan accordingly and change gradually instead.

Thus, a plan involving gradual change often is the best way to attain self-control. If a person just "does not feel it," it will be hard for him to change his life. Though he knows he should stop sinning, he might not have the strength to sustain such a big change. But because deep down he wants to be good and do what's right, he can set up a plan to change his behavior step by step until he achieves his goals. This method requires much less motivation and willpower than instantaneous, complete change.

Gradual change is a system that requires a plan. Although randomly stopping one element of the problem is commendable, we strive for even more: to begin a progression toward complete self-control. We want to plan out what we will change and when. We should be flexible about it, but we must remember that we do aspire to reach the pinnacle one day.

A person should start by focusing on one area of his battle against desire. He should firmly commit himself to keep a certain *halacha* or aspect of self-control. Alternatively, he can decide to exert self-control in one particular common situation.

He should choose something easy so he will feel that he is on the road to success. He will feel energized and capable. In addition, he should be vigilant not to discuss or joke about inappropriate matters.²¹

He should also try to increase his desire to win, alertness, and willpower by reading about them (Parts 5-7). This will strengthen him to fight the *yetzer hara* in other areas of desire as well. Thus, the person focuses on one area but also improves subtly in other areas. Then, he gradually adds one element at a time to his specific focus until he attains complete mastery.

We must note that sometimes, a person can do something to take away his ability to sin in the ways most problematic for him. An obvious example is with struggles involving the Internet, which can be partly solved by installing filters. If the person is committed enough that he is willing to give up whatever he will be forfeiting, this should be his first step. Because this change can eliminate much of the problem of exposure beforehand without much effort — and perhaps without going directly against the brunt of his desires — he must try this option whenever possible. He must remember that although avoiding challenges does not seem impressive, it is. (See Chapter 36.)

Nevertheless, this is only a first step toward regaining complete control. A person who limits his access to temptation is not cured. He must follow up by strengthening himself, as described in Parts 5-8.

For gradual change to succeed, the person must respond properly when he errs in the area he has been working on. Rather than feeling like a fool for thinking he could succeed, he should give himself a pat on the back for working so hard until now.

21. See Chapter 42 for why this is so important for success.

When a person takes on such a challenging and encompassing task, it is likely that he will slip along the way. There is no reason for him to look down on himself.

It takes great effort to decide to change, and even more effort to stick to that resolution for even a short time. As we know, effort is all that matters, and every instant of effort is priceless. The battle against desire is a challenging, lifelong battle, and it was not created to be easy. It is supposed to be a struggle, and the odds are strong that some battles will be lost. But by keeping his determination to fight despite the difficulty, a person can achieve the ultimate success: emerging victorious from the most intense battle ever. A person should feel proud and encouraged about every ounce of effort he has exerted. As a result, he will emerge stronger from his errors rather than losing his will to fight.

The *yetzer hara* tries another trick on a person changing gradually. He berates the person for his sins in the areas he is not yet working on. He calls the person a hypocrite for working on “minor matters” while messing up on serious ones. This deadly attack threatens to sap the person’s excitement and resolve until he gives up.

There is only one response to this terrible tactic. The person must tell himself, “I am working toward a lofty goal. In my situation, this is the best way to attain that goal, which means it is exactly what Hashem wants. Although I shouldn’t have sinned now, that does not detract from my program. This is the most effective system for me, and though I have been slipping in that area, soon I no longer will. And anyway, my feelings of regret are at least a partial *teshuva*. At the right time, I will do a full *teshuva* and erase all my sins.” Then, the person should be proud of what he has accomplished and of his goals. He should never feel embarrassed about setting his sights so high because the higher he aims, the prouder he makes Hashem. No one should

feel unworthy and incapable of accomplishing.

Finally, when using a system of gradual change, it is important to stay motivated. One way to do this is to celebrate your successes. Take small steps toward change, and celebrate each time you get it right. Also, spend time thinking about the emotions you felt when you decided to change. Think about what you want to change, and exactly how you want to act when you face particular challenges. Then close your eyes and visualize yourself making those choices. Envision the greatness you seek and the levels you aspire to reach. Though the journey is long, greatness is attainable. By taking it one step at a time, you can reach it sooner than you think, and it will be the most thrilling adventure of your life!

Ultimately, we must choose the best system of change for our unique circumstances. By following the best plan for us, we will soar higher and higher and attain unimaginable success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Immediate turnaround and gradual change are the two methods for attaining self-mastery.
- Each person must use the best method for himself and be ready for the challenges that come with that method.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

The Plan

Desire can take over a person's mind. When it hits, the person's interests instantly change, and suddenly all that matters is getting what he wants. A person under the influence of desire can act in a completely irrational manner while thinking he is acting rationally.

Our Sages teach us (*Chagiga* 11b) that licentious desires can affect us even when we are not in the middle of a challenge. Of course, our desires grow even stronger if something triggers them awake, and they are at their strongest when what we desire is in front of us. This makes it difficult to work on self-control at any time, and incredibly tough to prevail when a desire hits and we suddenly yearn to give in.

To overcome this, we need a thorough game plan that we can start to implement when we're not under the influence of desire. This strategy must deal with the many aspects of the battle against desire and must cover as many of the *yetzer hara's* tricks as possible. It must build us up until we are strong enough to overcome intense challenges, and it must include techniques that help us win our battles.

To succeed in the battle against desire, we must be constantly on guard for the *yetzer hara's* traps. This will prevent him from surprising and clobbering us with desire before we can

react. If we wait until after the battle has begun to start working on ourselves, our abilities will be limited. The odds are stacked against a person who has been caught off guard. Victory in such situations requires superhuman strength.

Thus, the first step of a successful battle plan is figuring out our upcoming tests and preparing for them. We must work on ourselves *before* we are challenged to stop our rational minds from falling asleep when our desires start up. Part 5 of this book will deal with that first step in the plan: **awareness**. By training ourselves to be alert, we will maintain our focus and be ready for any stirrings of desire. We will not lose ourselves, so we will stay awake and keep our ability to make the right choice. We will also be able to use techniques during the challenge that will help us win.

Another vital part of the battle plan is developing the desire and excitement to defeat the *yetzer hara*. We can do this by contemplating how much we gain when we exercise self-control. We will discuss this in depth in Part 6: **Wanting to Win**. This is the most important weapon for battling the *yetzer hara* in any area, not just desire.

The *yetzer hara* likes to attack us in “the gray area.” He tries to get us to commit actions that might make us uneasy but don’t seem overtly wrong. Even if part of us senses that these questionable actions are wrong, we lack the resolve to control ourselves because we are not thoroughly convinced. This makes it easier for the *yetzer hara* to get us to give in. Thus, another vital ingredient of our plan is the development of willpower strong enough to overcome the *yetzer hara*’s tricks. We must clarify that what he is telling us to do really is wrong, and we have to commit not to give in no matter what. Part 7 will be all about **willpower**.

Finally, if we can weaken the pull of our desires, that will help us dramatically. The weaker the pull, the less the *yetzer hara*

can blind, trick, and overpower us. Many situations that would normally spark a challenge will no longer bother us if we can weaken the intensity of our desires.

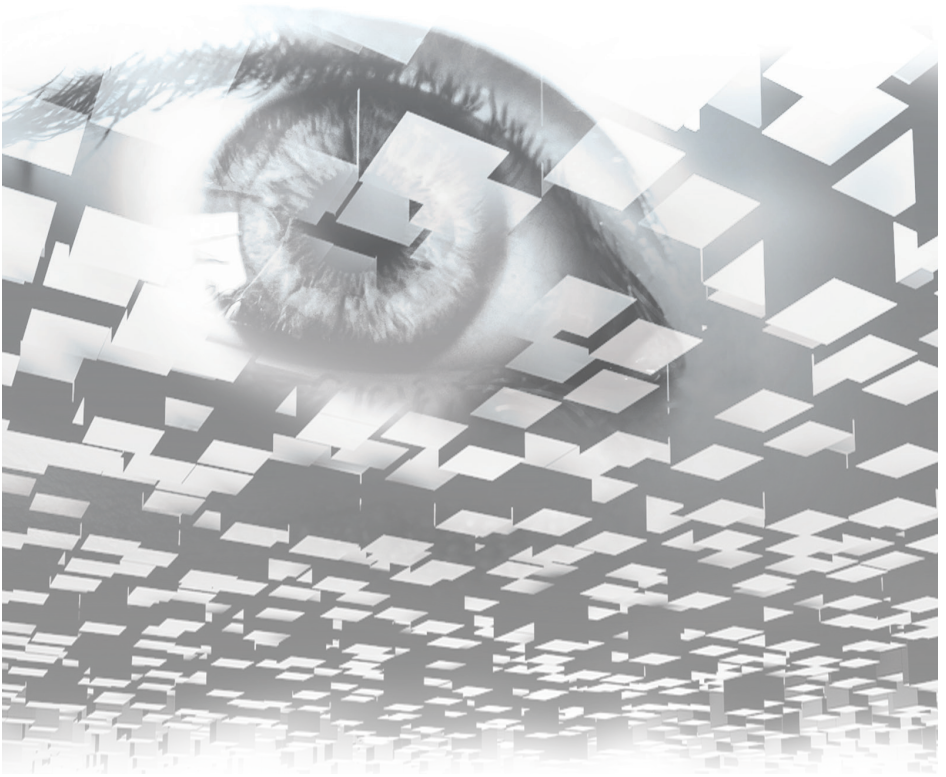
Another benefit of weakening our desires is that it becomes easier to win battles that go on for long. Such battles are the most difficult challenges we face. Once our desires take hold, they grow stronger every minute while our self-control weakens. The longer the battle rages, the harder it is to hang on. Eventually, our inner strength cracks and the *yetzer hara* overpowers us. But if we learn how to stop our desires from getting out of hand in the first place, and how to calm them down if they do start up, we won't be overpowered by desire.

For these reasons, learning how to **calm our desires** is important. This will be the focus of Part 8. Our ultimate objective is to quiet our desires enough that rarely will we lose control over our emotions. This will make our battles much easier.

The *yetzer hara* has employed all his tricks against us in the battle of desire. We need a thorough, well-rounded strategy to defeat him no matter what he tries. With our balanced plan, we can achieve unfathomable levels of self-control and deal him a crushing blow in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- We can be affected by desire in three ways: in general, through triggers, and directly.
- We must work when clear from desire to implement a thorough, diverse plan for victory.
- Our plan must include the following elements: awareness, the desire to win, willpower, and calmness. These elements will be explored in upcoming chapters.



Part 5 – Awareness

CHAPTER

Fourteen

How Awareness Helps

Being caught off guard by desire puts us in a precarious position. It is hard to stay in control when we are blindsided by desire. Therefore, we must do whatever we can to prevent this from happening.

When desire catches us by surprise, *we* change in an instant. Our desires awaken so fast and we suddenly find that we want to give in. Feelings of desire are strong enough to blind us and make us stop caring about anything else.

Once overcome by desire, we lose our ability to think rationally. It's almost as if our brains have shut off. Everything else loses its significance and urgency. We can no longer appreciate the consequences of our actions. We don't even let ourselves think about it, because we know that would stop us from doing what we want. At this point, it is difficult to regain control and stop ourselves from giving in. It is much easier to invent rationalizations to assuage whatever is left of our intellect instead.

Awareness prevents this from happening. We are much less likely to sin in our regular state than when we are affected by desire. If we were challenged while standing in front of the *Kosel* on *Yom Kippur*, would we sin? Probably not. This illustrates the difference between when we are aware and when we have lost ourselves.

Stopping our intellect from falling asleep dramatically increases our odds of winning. Remaining alert instead of being blown away automatically limits the strength of our desires and stops them from going out of control. That alone makes it easier to prevail.

Further, remaining awake enables us to consciously implement all our weapons. We are able to use willpower because we can still internalize the consequences of our actions and remember our commitment not to give in. We can calmly remind ourselves that the pleasure is overrated. Most important, we can make ourselves excited to win by remembering our opportunity to reach unprecedented heights. Awareness allows us to put all we have worked on into practice.

Imagine a person was being mugged, and his friend whispered to him, "Don't worry about these muggers. I have a machine gun back home that will scare these muggers silly." Obviously, that is foolish. A gun back home does nothing to help the person if he can't access it.

Similarly, the greatest perspectives and techniques are of little help without awareness. If we can't stop ourselves from being overrun by desire, we will want to indulge. Our perspective will change and we will lose our clarity of thought. We will no longer want to use those techniques or think about anything that could stop us from giving in.

But if we keep our focus, we can calmly remember what the correct decision is. We can recognize that controlling ourselves is right, and is best for us as well. Instead of being blown away by desire, we can think clearly. We can tell ourselves that giving in is bad for us and isn't worth it. Then, we can use techniques that will keep us strong.

Thus, we must prepare ourselves to stay alert and not be overcome with the feeling of "I want it, and nothing else matters"

at the initial moment of challenge. Desires can radically change our perspective in an instant. We must be ready in advance to stop our desires from increasing and overpowering us. This is different from willpower, when we have been affected and try to stop ourselves from doing something we want to do. With awareness, we try to stop the desire from getting out of control in the first place. We try to keep our perspective and stay in control when our desires ignite.

How do we do this? The basic way is to anticipate being challenged and prepare yourself not to get lost. In your rational state, you commit to sticking to your decision not to give in. You tell yourself that you know you will experience surges of desire to indulge, but you will stay calm and not fall for them. You ready yourself so that when your mind says, "I want to give in," you will respond, "No I don't. I want to win!" You prepare yourself mentally to stay alert no matter how long the battle rages on and how much your desires increase. Then when you are challenged, you stick to it and stay calm. This stops your desires from going out of control.²²

We can do this even better if we think before the challenge about our desire to win and become great. This makes it easier because we will want to win even more than we want to give in. If our will to accomplish is strong, it will carry over into the challenge. (See Part 6.)

The time to work on staying alert is before we are affected by desires. **Although the battle must be fought at the moment of challenge, it is the preparation that determines how much strength we will have.** Thus, we must set our foundation before we are challenged. We must work on keeping our perspective,

22. This chapter explains the basic outline of awareness. I will expand on everything here and add techniques in the next chapter.

be ready for the *yetzer hara's* various tricks, and prepare to use techniques during battle.

We must also do what we can to anticipate challenges. Being surprised by desire puts us at a huge disadvantage. Often, it even allows our desires to penetrate our defenses before we realize what is happening. At that point, our weapons are weakened, and we fight a losing battle, struggling to hang on while our strength wanes. These kinds of battles are difficult to win. It is much easier when we notice the challenge we will face, set strict guidelines of what we won't do, and prepare ourselves to do battle.

No matter how strong we become, **we still need to work daily to stay alert and ready for the *yetzer hara***, who can strike at any moment. If we are unprepared, our feelings will instantly change, and we might even desire what we thought we would have no interest in. We cannot know exactly how the *yetzer hara* will make us feel. We must be ready so this does not happen.

We must note that the awareness required to overcome desire differs from the awareness needed for other *mitzvos*. For example, to avoid *lashon hara*, a person must pay attention to everything he says so nothing slips from his mouth before he realizes it is forbidden. He must also be alert about what he hears. But for desire, the awareness we need is different. Desire works by shutting off our minds and altering the way we think. By becoming alert instead of just reacting, we will catch the *yetzer hara* before he starts. We will stop our perspective from changing, and we will stay focused on what we want in life. We can prevent our desires from taking control, but only if we are ready for them.

Staying alert keeps us from being overwhelmed by desire and enables us to use all our techniques to stop the *yetzer hara*. Thus, it is vital that we prepare ourselves for battle. This will bring us astounding success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Staying aware enables us to keep our perspective and to use techniques to win our battles.
- We must put in effort and preparation *before* we are challenged so we are not caught off guard.

CHAPTER

Fifteen

Preparing for Battle

The first step in awareness is figuring out what challenges you might face in the future. By knowing what is coming, you won't be caught off guard, and you will be able to prepare for battle.

To start, figure out the triggers you are susceptible to based on what has challenged you in the past. The best way to do this is to document your battles. Keep a small notebook, and each time you are challenged, write it down. Try to answer the following questions:

1. What was the situation? (Include anything relevant, such as the time and day of the week, the place, who was there, and anything else that might have contributed to the challenge.)
2. What caused the desire? (Write what you saw, thought about, experienced, or were able to do that awakened your desires. But be sure to use veiled language; see Chapter 42.)
3. Did you act on your desires? If so, how do you feel about your decision now that the challenge is over? Was giving in worth it?

Also, consider writing the steps you will take to ensure that it will not happen again.

After a short time, you will have enough material to start. Use this information to figure out what sets off your desires and what you must prepare for.

Please don't skip this step. Writing it down is necessary for developing awareness, and awareness is crucial if you want to get anywhere. Some people might feel lazy or uncomfortable putting this information into writing, and they should at least answer these questions in their minds the day after the challenge occurs. But seriously, write it down. It can mean the difference between success and failure.

Once you have established some of the triggers and situations that activate your desires, it is time to deal with the specific situations that might arise. First, you must try to determine when you will be challenged. When you are calm from desire, think into the upcoming future and try to figure out what is likely to happen. Where will you be going and who will you be with over the next few days? Based on what you have recorded and what you know about yourself, are you likely to be somewhere where you will be susceptible to desire? What challenging situations might you face? Is there something specific you struggle with? When is it most likely to happen?

The planning phase of this exercise should be done at a set time at least once a week, preferably toward the weekend, when more challenges occur.²³ Map out your week, playing out in your mind what activities you will do and where you might go. What challenges are you likely to face? Then, plan how you will deal with those challenges. Decide how you will protect yourself and

23. If your situation is different, try to do this close to when you are most frequently challenged. Of course, doing this twice a week is better than doing it only once a week. And if doing this exercise is difficult at first, start by just accounting for two days at a time, even if you only do it once a week and leave some days unaccounted for. Any small effort you invest will pay major dividends.

how you will stay sharp.

Next, envision those challenges arising and see yourself doing the right thing. Visualize yourself holding back from indulging or even leaving the situation. Picture yourself being firm and not allowing desire to awaken and penetrate. And envision yourself saying no even if you will want to give in.

In addition, build your determination to win by thinking firmly over and over that you will not fall for temptation, and that you won't let it start up. This must be done calmly and with conviction. Feel confident that you will be in control over yourself and that you are determined not to give in. Repeatedly think to yourself, "I am going to succeed!" And "I will not do that!" And pump your fist with each thought. Decide once and for all that "This is inappropriate, and I'm not doing it!" Or that "I might desire it, but I won't do it." It is so empowering when you are in control instead of desires controlling you!

It is critical that you build up your determination before the challenge starts. By firing yourself up in advance, you will have the strength to do the right thing. Rather than being caught off guard, you will be ready and motivated to win. Even better, your desires won't be as strong in the first place.

If you have been slipping frequently, part of building determination is to make yourself feel, "Enough! I won't let myself be run over any longer! I no longer want this, and I am not doing it anymore." Keep thinking this over and over. The conviction that results will help you break through the strongest urges and regain control.

Some situations present an extra challenge to our awareness. When we face prolonged battles against desire, it is difficult to keep our awareness for so long. When we are challenged, the *yetzer hara* makes us feel, "I want it!" Over and over. Each time this happens, our desires grow a little stronger and our resolve fades

a bit. Thus, as the battle stretches on, our awareness is threatened. As our desires increase, our determination to succeed weakens, and we feel desire overpowering our ability to think rationally. We feel ourselves losing our perspective on what matters, and we are in danger of losing our grip on reality.

Another difficult situation is when we are blindsided by desire. No matter how hard we try, there will be times when we are caught off guard, leaving us with but a split second to stop ourselves from losing our awareness and control. We need special techniques to help us spark our alertness in these situations.

One such technique is to use physical objects as visual reminders to keep you aware. Just as Yosef *HaTzaddik* envisioned his father's face when tested with Potifar's wife (*Sotah* 36b), you should look at something that will remind you of Hashem. A small *sefer* or picture of a *gadol* will do, but the best object for this purpose is your *tzitzis*. When you find yourself caught off guard or when you realize an intense challenge is coming, quickly hold onto the strings of your *tzitzis* and keep glancing at them. Hold them for as long as you have to and remember not to lose yourself. Remember that Hashem put you in this situation to withstand temptation and accomplish something incredible. Contemplate that Hashem gave us the *tzitzis* to remind us not to chase our desires and to instead keep the *mitzvos* so we can accomplish amazing achievements that are easy only for angels. Doing this might feel strange the first time, but it works.

When preparing ourselves for upcoming battles, we should hold our *tzitzis* and anchor our thoughts to them. We should also do this when thinking about what we want in life. And we should hold our *tzitzis* when we learn *mussar*. Hashem gave us the *tzitzis* as a tool to help us remember Him and His *mitzvos*. They have the power to help us keep our perspective on what is best for us. Our *tzitzis* keep us from losing ourselves by

helping us remember what desire so easily makes us forget. They also bring back some clarity if we start to slip. Thus, it is vital that we “power up” the *tzitzis*. Then, when the challenge comes, we can quickly glance at or grasp them and remember what we thought about earlier. This will help us rapidly regain our focus and defeat the *yetzer hara*.

Preparing ourselves for challenges keeps us alert so we are not overcome by desire. By being ready for temptation and using techniques to maintain our awareness, we will achieve numerous successes in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Study your life, preferably with a notebook, to determine your susceptibilities and the upcoming challenges that might arise. This way you will be ready for them and you will stay alert throughout the challenge.
- Build your determination to win these battles so you enter them motivated and committed to succeed.
- Use physical objects such as your *tzitzis* to help yourself keep perspective when you are challenged.

CHAPTER

Sixteen

When We Are Caught Off Guard

No matter how well we prepare ourselves, there will be times when we are surprised by desire. Our urges activate and cloud our perspective, and suddenly we want to give in. We must learn how to “snap out of it” and escape the clutches of our desires so we can think clearly once again.

Desire causes us to become confused. This confusion is the result of a subconscious internal battle between our logical and emotional parts. The two sides fight back and forth, and we find ourselves thinking, “I want to do it . . . But I *don’t* want to do it! But I *do* want to do it! But I *don’t* want to do it!” We are unsure about what *we* really want. This often gives the upper hand to our emotional part because it is naturally stronger, and we are in danger.

One way to overcome confusion is to clarify what each part of you desires. Ask yourself what each part of you wants while viewing them as independent entities. Think to yourself, “I feel a strong urge to fulfill my desires, but I will first take a step back and figure out what the two forces within me want. The logical part of me realizes what will happen if I give in and what I gain by standing strong. It knows that doing right will leave me best off, and it wants me to make that choice. But another real part of me desperately wants to give in and makes

me feel that I *need* it. This is how I feel. I must accept that as a fact I must deal with rather than feel inferior for my desires, because desires were created by Hashem and are part of life. Anyway, denying my desires won't make them disappear. I acknowledge that I want to give in and yet I will not." Be specific with what each side wants, and jot it down on paper for additional clarity.

Isolating the two sides and understanding each side's goal helps us snap out of confusion. We are able to think about each side rationally and then strengthen our logical part so we choose correctly. And our resolve to succeed will be so much stronger since it won't be swayed by confusion.

A similar way to do this is to figure out what the *yetzer hara's* goal is and what your goal is. Ask yourself, "What does the *yetzer hara* want me to do? Oh, he must want me to do *this*, and if he cannot get me to do it, he wants me to at least do *that*. My goal (the way to success) is to act in *this manner* without being affected by those feelings. I want to make sure not to do *that action* even if those feelings start to affect me." Figure out what the *yetzer hara* would like you to do, and then figure out what your goal is by asking yourself:

- What does Hashem want me to do?
- What is the opposite of what the *yetzer hara* wants me to do?
- Which choice will lead me to greatness, and which will result in misery?

If you are still confused, ask yourself, "What is the right thing to do?" This question usually enables us to pierce through the darkness and regain clarity (Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier, Shmuz 9: "*Akaidas Yitzchak*," www.TheShmuz.com). It makes it easier to realize what we must do.

Clarifying the *yetzer hara's* goal and our goal is a vital

technique. It helps us see clearly and maintain that clarity throughout the battle. And even if we are caught off guard and face raging desires, identifying the two voices pulling us in opposite directions helps us escape confusion. By viewing each part of ourselves independently, we can regain clarity and determine our goal. We can make the right decision and be more determined to win. The stronger we become, the easier it will be to use this technique during battle, and the more powerful it will be.

The *yetzer hara* tries to blow us away with desire so that we won't want to see clearly or do anything that goes against our desires. If we reach this point, we won't want to fight back. But if we strengthen ourselves not to get lost and to maintain our will to win even as our desires activate, we will remember our aspirations and prevail.

The *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 81a-b) relates that there was a *tzaddik* named Plimo. Plimo had an interesting practice: Every day, he would say to himself, "Arrows in the eyes of the Soton (the *yetzer hara*)."

One *Erev Yom Kippur*, the Soton disguised himself as a pauper and begged for food at Plimo's door. The members of Plimo's household brought bread out to the Soton. He said to them, "On such a day, are you going to leave me outside when everyone else is inside?"

They brought the Soton into the house, sat him down in a separate room, and offered him bread. He said to them, "On such a day, are you going to make me sit alone?"

They brought the Soton into the dining room and sat him at the table with them. As he sat there, his body became full of boils and he began acting repulsively.

"Sit properly," Plimo rebuked him.

"Give me a drink," the Soton requested.

Upon receiving the drink, the Soton coughed and spit phlegm into the cup. The members of Plimo's household scolded the Soton for his disgusting behavior. The Soton fell and made believe he had died because of their screaming.

Suddenly, the members of Plimo's household heard people saying that Plimo had killed someone. Plimo ran away, hiding in a bathroom. The Soton followed him and appeared to him there. The Soton once again fell and feigned his death. Seeing that Plimo was distressed, the Soton revealed his identity to Plimo.

"Why do you say 'Arrows in the eyes of the Soton' every day?" The Soton asked Plimo.

"Well, what should I say?" Plimo shot back.

The Soton answered, "Say, 'May the Merciful One (Hashem) rebuke the Soton.'"

This story is puzzling. First, why did Plimo feel the need to say daily, "Arrows in the eyes of the Soton"? It seems this was important to Plimo, as he asked the Soton what he should say instead after the Soton rebuked him. What was Plimo trying to accomplish with these words?

Rashi explains that Plimo's question to the Soton was what he should say to drive the Soton away so he would not sin. We see that Plimo would say, "Arrows in the eyes of the Soton" because this mantra would keep him strong and stop him from sinning. But we still must clarify how this phrase would actually help Plimo avoid sin.

Second, what was wrong with Plimo chanting this phrase? Why did the Soton instruct him to stop?

To answer these questions, we must understand that although we might not realize it, we are constantly fighting against our greatest enemy, the *yetzer hara*. He is a mighty warrior who tries to obliterate us in this world and the next. He plots all day to trap us, and he waits in ambush for us.

What makes the *yetzer hara's* tricks so effective is that we don't see them coming. It is hard for us to be ready for what we don't see in front of us. We tend not to think about what challenges might arise in the future; we don't notice the danger that lurks. It is difficult for us to see the *yetzer hara's* attacks coming and that makes us susceptible to his traps.

In addition, we have difficulty noticing the *yetzer hara's* work because he covers his tracks by doing everything in our own inner voice. When he makes us desire, he doesn't just use a sales pitch to persuade us to succumb, like how we try to convince a friend. Rather, he makes us feel that *we* want it, and we don't realize that *he* made us want it. We feel, "I want it," not "You want it." This makes it hard to view these impulses as coming from a shady separate entity whom we should think twice before listening to.

Plimo, however, realized he was battling a mighty enemy. He alerted himself to the enticements of this enemy operating within him, and he strengthened himself to conquer those impulses by saying to himself, "Arrows in the eyes of the Soton." This mantra fired him up to battle the *yetzer hara*. By expressing his determination to crush his hated enemy, he gave himself the strength to defeat it.

But as the *Kochvei Ohr* (Chapter 10) explains, Plimo forgot one important principle: that man lacks the strength to defeat the *yetzer hara* without Hashem's help (*Sukkah* 52b). The *yetzer hara* is a mighty warrior whom Hashem created to challenge us. He is an angel who knows every trick, while man is just flesh and blood. The *yetzer hara* is much stronger than us; however, Hashem limits the *yetzer hara's* power to the exact amount we should face according to our level,²⁴ and He also gives us the strength to fight

24. See Shmuz 43: "Soton Out of the Box" by Rabbi Shafier (www.TheShmuz.com) for more

back and win. It is only because of Hashem's constant assistance that we can prevail.

Therefore, when Plimo fired himself up by saying he would destroy the *yetzer hara*, he was making a mistake that touched upon arrogance. He felt stronger than the *yetzer hara* without recalling that he was succeeding only with Hashem's help. Thus, the *yetzer hara* had to teach him to instead say that Hashem should help him beat the *yetzer hara*. This would remind him of this important message: without Hashem's aid, man cannot overcome the *yetzer hara*, but because Hashem is always helping man, he can find the strength within himself to win.²⁵

The *yetzer hara*, disguised as the voice of desire, is our most dangerous enemy. He entices us with all sorts of excitement and claims to only want us to enjoy. But when the dust settles, we realize that he was never trying to bring us any pleasure at all. He was just trying to make us miserable and to ruin both worlds for us. How determined should we be to obliterate such a ruthless enemy? We should pray for Hashem's help, and then we should be fired up to clobber the *yetzer hara* by winning our battles, knowing that these victories also bring us the best life in both worlds.

Plimo's mantra teaches us the importance of remembering that we have an enemy trying to make us stumble. If we remember what the *yetzer hara's* goal is and what ours should be, it will be clear that it really is him talking in our heads, deceiving us in

on this topic.

25. Hashem created the world with this reality so that we wouldn't forget Him, especially in our spiritual pursuits. Even if we reach great spiritual heights, if we lack a relationship with Hashem, we are missing out on the most incredible experience life has to offer. By begging Hashem for help in our spiritual battles, we come close to Him. And this also makes our successes infinitely greater. (For more on this topic, see Chapter 45.)

order to hurt us. We will recognize him and not fall for his traps, and we will have the strength to defeat him.

Another tactic we can use to see through desire is to calculate the probable results of each of our options. This works best when we write them down on paper. (We can shred it afterward if we are worried that others will see it.) Writing it out clarifies the situation, saving us from confusion. By determining the short- and long-term outcomes, we will have the clarity to make the right choice despite any urge to act differently. When we calculate those future consequences, we will realize there is more than just this moment. By asking ourselves which decision will leave us happiest and best off in the future, we will have the strength to choose correctly.

We should also try to remember that Hashem is watching and rooting for us to succeed. Hashem gave us this challenging situation as an opportunity for us to become greater, and He is at our side as we battle. If we remember this, we will appreciate the significance of our actions and feel so fortunate that we can succeed. This outlook toward our challenges will help us achieve phenomenal success.

Remembering that Hashem is present helps us prevail. The way to remember Him when we are challenged is to develop a relationship with Him and to remind ourselves frequently during the day that He is present. When we do *mitzvos*, we must remember that He is watching and smiling (if it could be). It also helps if we spend time contemplating that Hashem keeps every inch of the universe in existence constantly — nothing can exist for an instant without Him keeping it in existence — and that He runs everything in this world, from the big picture events down to the tiniest details. The more we think about Hashem, the more likely we will remember when we are challenged that we are in His presence.

When we are caught off guard, we instantly change and our battle against desire intensifies. But if we catch ourselves and remember ideas that grant us clarity, we can overcome this incredible challenge and achieve some of the greatest successes ever in the battle of the generation.

Note: For more on battles when we are caught off guard, see Chapter 28.

Quick Recap:

- We can regain our clarity when caught off guard by isolating our logical and emotion parts and clarifying what each one wants. Similarly, we can do this by clarifying what our enemy the *yetzer hara* wants and what we want.
- Another method to overcome confusion is to write down the probable outcomes of the choices we are deciding between.
- A great way to maintain our clarity is to remind ourselves about our loving relationship with Hashem, Who is begging us to succeed and only brought about this challenge for us to attain greatness by winning!

CHAPTER

Seventeen

Accepting The Desire

Lengthy battles with desire can be quite tricky. Aggressive approaches against the *yetzer hara* — techniques that make us feel that we are actively fighting him — don't always work in these battles because these methods are not geared to work for an extended period. A person can only fight himself for so long. If we use a forceful approach, then the longer the battle goes on the greater the danger that we might crack.

Often, the most effective way to deal with desire is to use a non-aggressive manner. Your desires will not escalate as much if you focus on accepting that you have them and not getting flustered by them. Remaining calm also stops the desires from creating confusion, which would ruin your balance and ability to think rationally. Instead, you feel confident and in control. Though it takes work to be able to do this easily, it is very effective when employed.²⁶

The next time you face off against desire, think to yourself, "I desire to indulge and I acknowledge that a part of me wants it. I won't deny that I have these impulses or hope that they suddenly go away, because that just makes things worse. I won't

26. The stronger and calmer you become when out of the test situation, the easier this will be. In Part 8, we will learn how to decrease the strength of our impulses and attain calmness.

feel overwhelmed and confused. I will remain calm, confident, and in control.

“I will not feel inferior for having a part of me that desires. That is normal — it is how Hashem created the world. This desire does not make me a bad person; I am a good person who wants to do what’s right. Though this other part of me sometimes covers up my aspirations, that desire to be good is the real me — even if I sometimes act differently.

“I will address my impulses calmly. I won’t beat myself up for them. Desire is a challenge created by Hashem, not something wrong with me. I will not let my urges escalate into a “desire rush” that overwhelms my rational mind and makes me lose control. The best way to prevent that is to keep my cool instead of getting worked up, so that is what I will do.

“Although I want to indulge, I will keep my balance instead of letting my desires escalate until I desperately *need* it. In my calm state, I will play things out and think to myself, ‘If I get what I want, will that make me happy, or will it just momentarily satisfy the impulses only for them to return even stronger? Will I regret my decision afterward and be ashamed of myself? I just don’t think it’s worth it.’

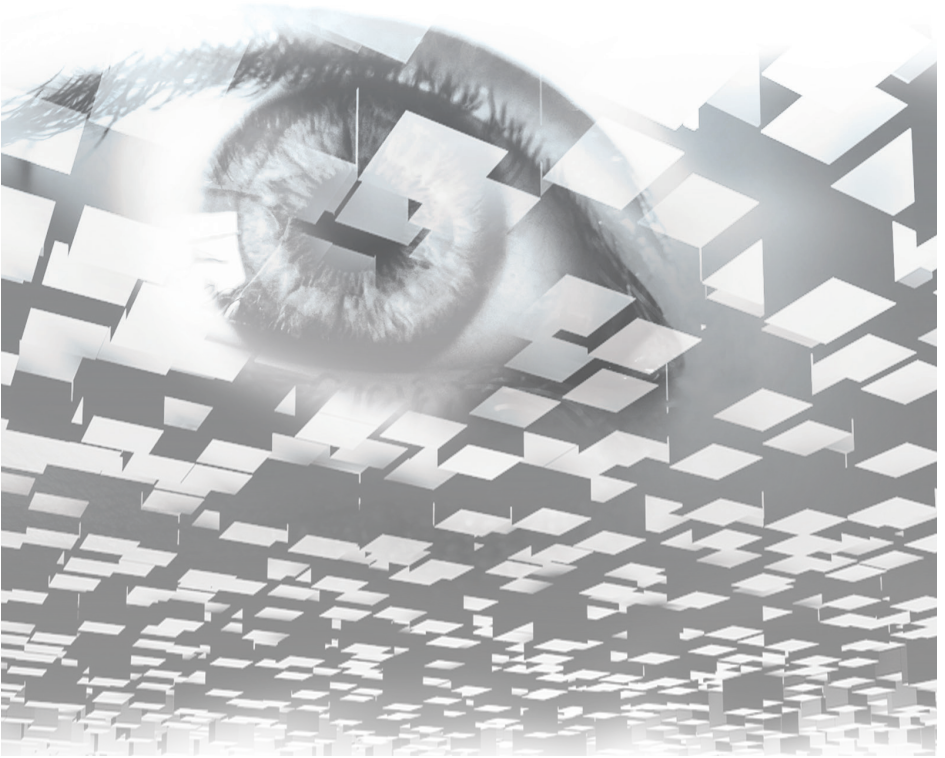
“If I stay calm, I can think to myself, ‘I want to give in but nonetheless I won’t. I am doing the right thing and gaining so much. This is my moment of destiny, the moment when I propel myself to greatness! Success isn’t being born without desires; it is dealing with them appropriately, which is exactly what I am doing right now! It was worth being created just for this moment!’”

A person needs some level of self-control to use this method, and of course, you should experiment with all the different techniques and see what works best for you. But if it works for you, this technique is the most effective way to deal with the *yetzer hara*. Mastering it will lead you to great heights.

We must maintain control and not lose ourselves to the rush of desire that threatens to shut off our brains. If we lose ourselves, all the tricks in the world will be worthless because we will not use them. Remaining in control enables us to implement all our techniques to defeat the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Remaining calm instead of becoming agitated by our desires is usually the best method to deal with them. This is especially true for lengthy challenges.



Part 6 – Wanting To Win

CHAPTER

Eighteen

The Secret Weapon

In Chapter 1, we met Palti, arguably the most successful person ever at controlling his desires. We learned that he had a secret weapon: he was motivated by his challenges. Palti was pumped up to fight his desires because he realized what he could accomplish. He knew what he would gain from beating the *yetzer hara*, and he wanted it so much that he cried when his challenge ended. He wanted to win so badly that he obliterated the *yetzer hara* in an intense battle that lasted for five years!

This is the secret weapon in the battle against the *yetzer hara*: wanting so much to overcome temptation that your aspiration to win is stronger than your urge to give in. This comes from recognizing how much you gain from victory. We need to want the greatness and everything else we gain by defeating the *yetzer hara*. This makes our battles exhilarating rather than painful and draining.

If we lack motivation, we will just hang on as our strength slowly wanes, hoping we can hold off the *yetzer hara* until our desires go away. But if we cultivate excitement about our opportunity to reach greatness, we will be full of energy. We will be ready to win the battle no matter how long it rages. We will win without straining ourselves and we will be flying high as we succeed.

To spark this excitement, we must have the right attitude toward *nisyonos*. We must remember that challenges are really opportunities from Hashem to accomplish. They are our big chance **to become great** through spiritual accomplishment, the only way that matters. Our battles are something to be excited about!

Once we acquire this attitude toward *nisyonos*, we can put it into practice by pumping ourselves up when we expect a challenge. These feelings will continue during the challenge, and we will want victory more than what we desire. The battle will be neither painful nor draining. Rather, it will be exhilarating and empowering because we will be doing what we want to do rather than straining ourselves to act against our will.

Another advantage of developing excitement about our ability to accomplish is that we won't make excuses. When we really want something, we don't make excuses why not to get it; we do what it takes to get it done. When we are challenged we will not look for an excuse to give in, because we will be chasing victory with all our energy. We will really want it, and we will do whatever it takes to attain it.

Being motivated to accomplish enables us to succeed even when we are challenged in our gray area, the situations when we are unsure whether we are obligated to hold back. These are some of the most difficult challenges — and some of the greatest opportunities to accomplish. Realizing our opportunity to accomplish will fuel our excitement to do the right thing even if we're not sure it is required.

Most important, excitement about succeeding makes our success far more valuable. Our *mitzvos* will be done with zeal rather than as a burden. *Mitzvos* done with excitement are much more beloved to Hashem, and they are much greater than *mitzvos* done while resenting Him for not allowing us to do what we want.

Developing the desire to accomplish transforms our lives. It gives us a fire for life and helps us achieve astounding success. This makes it our most powerful weapon for defeating the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- A real desire to win our battles and attain unprecedented accomplishments is the key for our success.
- Although we might need to change our perspective on life to attain it, the effort is worth it.
- Mastering this perspective is the key to living the most thrilling and successful life possible.

CHAPTER

Nineteen

Shelo Lishmah & Being Effective

Some people object to the idea that we should be excited about our opportunity to accomplish. Thinking about what we are accomplishing while we are doing *mitzvos* does not seem so noble. Aren't we supposed to serve Hashem out of love without thinking about anything else?

Unfortunately, life does not work that way. Most people don't yet have the emotional relationship with Hashem to be able to serve Him purely out of love. It is even more unlikely that they will draw enough excitement from that drive to overpower their urges. Though we aspire to get there, we probably aren't there yet. We must do what is best for us right now instead of worrying about "where we should be holding" or lying to ourselves that we are holding where we're not — both surefire ways to fall flat on our faces. Our job is to be effective, which is why we must develop our drive to accomplish.

Ultimately, we know that deep down we want to serve Hashem; it just gets covered up by our desires and other interests. If we want our noble part to win, we must use other motivating drives to strengthen our will to win. Otherwise, when the battle begins, our wish to serve Hashem will probably be overpowered by our desire to indulge. That is why we fire ourselves up with dreams of greatness — because that is the way to win our battles.

Of course, we hope to someday love Hashem so much that serving Him will be our only wish. We aspire for our love for Him to be stronger than any desires we experience. One day, we will view our challenges as opportunities to show Hashem how much we love Him, and this excitement alone will give us the strength to win. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that we have not yet reached this lofty level, and thus we prepare responsibly for what will challenge us. Because we want to serve Hashem, we create strong aspirations to accomplish through defeating the *yetzer hara*, which increases our odds of success.

In fact, Rav Chaim of Volozhin writes (*Ruach Chaim* 3:1) that it is impossible to attain the level of serving Hashem *lishmah* (purely for His sake) without first serving Him with intentions that are not entirely pure. Serving Hashem *lishmah* is a lofty level that is beyond us when we start out. We must grow into it, and it takes time. Although we aspire to reach this level someday, and we inch closer with each *mitzvah* we do, there is no expectation that we serve Hashem that way now.

Rav Chaim illustrates this with a parable: If a man tells his servant to bring something from the attic, he won't be upset if the servant ascends the ladder instead of jumping straight up. He will only be dissatisfied if the servant doesn't try to climb up. Similarly, Hashem only asks us to serve Him as we can now, and through that service, we will ascend the ladder to great heights.

Here's a big secret: If we have not yet developed a deep relationship with Hashem and pure love isn't yet our most powerful motivator, any "noble" drive to eliminate the motivation that works for us is just the *yetzer hara* in disguise, trying to weaken our motivation in order to defeat us.²⁷ We must disregard any

27. Rabbi Shafier in Shmuz 85: "Motivation," www.TheShmuz.com, quoting his rebbe Rabbi Henoch Leibowitz, *zt"l*; listen for more on this topic.

such feelings. But what we can do is begin developing a relationship with Hashem (see Chapters 5, 7, and 45). As that relationship grows stronger, we will automatically need less of other motivations.

If we want to succeed, we must first increase our desire to accomplish rather than actively trying to remove it. As our love for Hashem grows, it will at some point outpace our desire for personal accomplishment. Then, our other drives will automatically pale in comparison and we will serve Hashem purely out of love.

But in the meantime, we must cultivate our desire to become great through winning, because it is the key to success. We know that our efforts stem from our desire to do good — we are not mercenaries who care only about the payoff — and we have nothing to be ashamed of. Our desire to win will help us achieve our greatest acts of serving Hashem as we score major victories in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- To overcome our desires, we must fire ourselves up with what actually gets us excited. This will bring us the success we covet — incredibly lofty service of Hashem.
- We must not listen to the voice that tries to ruin our excitement by condemning our motives — because it is just another dirty trick of the *yetzer hara*.

CHAPTER

Twenty

Our Unique Opportunity

In the Middle Ages, there was a caste system in which there were different levels of importance. For the most part, a person was stuck for life with the status he was born into. A person born of nobility would be important and powerful, but a person unfortunate enough to be born a peasant would be inferior. He would be doomed to toil for life with no hope of becoming significant.

At times, we might feel stuck with a status we cannot change. We might feel incapable of reaching certain spiritual heights that others have reached, or of even matching the success of those around us. This can make us feel stuck, unable to attain the identity we want. It seems unfair to us that others were given more talents and easier circumstances, because we think it makes them more capable of spiritual greatness. This makes us feel trapped at the bottom of the caste system with no way to move up.

However, this perspective is utterly foolish. When it comes to serving Hashem, there is no caste system. Each person has his own opportunity to serve Hashem in his unique situation. We cannot compare people, because we cannot know what someone would do had he been given another's life-setting and natural temperament. Although people seem to respect outward

success, that is not the true measure of greatness. Greatness is accomplishment in the face of great challenge. It is putting in the effort when we are struggling to succeed.

Understanding this causes us to appreciate our incredible opportunity: We can reach the greatest heights by controlling ourselves when challenged with desire. Because it is so difficult to overcome the *yetzer hara*, defeating him is an incredible achievement! We *can* escape our current status and achieve high levels of accomplishment! We can accomplish what is truly impressive and reach incredibly lofty levels in the World to Come.

Hashem has tremendous respect for those who struggle and nonetheless continue to try. When we push on even though we don't see success, Hashem beams with pride (if it could be). He is so excited for us because we are accomplishing acts of greatness, and He will hold us high for all eternity! We must not be fazed even if people don't properly value these accomplishments, because their perspective is wrong. And anyway, when everyone leaves this world, they will no longer view life the way they do now. They will respect whatever Hashem does and they will realize their perspective was off. They will learn what is truly impressive, and everyone will admire every bit of effort we invested when it was difficult for us.

We must remember that overcoming difficulty is the main purpose of life! Hashem put us in this world for us to accomplish while we are here and then enjoy what we have earned in the World to Come. Hashem's goal in creation was to give us the greatest pleasure in the next world. So why did He make it so hard for us to choose right? Why didn't He give us a huge desire to learn and do *mitzvos*? Why did He create us with bad character traits? Why did He implant within us such strong desire for sin?

The answer is that **the point of life in this world is to succeed in the face of challenge** (*Mesillas Yescharim*, Chapter 1).

If there would be minimal or no challenge, doing the right thing would not be impressive. That's why it's no big deal when angels do good. Nothing pulls them in the wrong direction. Facing spiritual challenges is an opportunity reserved for man alone, and overcoming these challenges is the point of life.

At some point, we come across the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* (5:26): Ben Hei Hei taught, "*Lefum tza'ara agra*," which means that heavenly reward is granted in accordance with the level of challenge. We tend not to think too much of it and don't apply it to our lives. After all, aren't the people who are doing better the real *tzaddikim*? Aren't they "more religious" than those who are less successful? This outlook stops us from appreciating the significance of this principle.

We must overcome this shallow perspective so we can realize the profound significance of this teaching. In *Avos D'Rebbe Nossan* (3:6), Rabbi Yishmael the son of Rabbi Yosi relates that a *mitzvah* done despite difficulty is worth more than a hundred *mitzvos* done without challenge. Again, **a *mitzvah* done despite challenge is over a hundred times as great as a *mitzvah* done when it is easy!** What an eye-opener! We see that the real greatness is when a person succeeds despite challenges.²⁸ This is good news for us, because when we win our difficult battles, we acquire numerous acts of greatness and reach astounding levels in the next world! Amazing!²⁹

28. Of course, we must remember that people cannot be compared to one another, especially now that we can appreciate that we really don't know. How do we know what a person's life is like? How can we know the challenges he faces? Our job is to pursue the actions that bring us to greatness while avoiding the topic of which person is greater — something we cannot possibly know.

29. Of course, one is obligated from the Torah (*Vayikra* 19:32) to respect anyone who has attained the level of rabbi or *rebbe* because of his status in this world. Nevertheless,

There once was a *yeshiva* student who suddenly became very ill. Sick and weak, he couldn't come to *yeshiva*. He was in so much pain that he could barely get out of bed.

One day, he decided to push himself to learn for just fifteen minutes. He picked up his favorite *masechta* and learned for fifteen minutes. When he was done, he remembered this teaching of *Avos D'Rebbe Nosson*. He took out a calculator and did the math: 15 minutes x 100 = 25 hours! "Twenty-five hours!" he exclaimed. "That is half of what a *yeshiva* guy learns in a week!" With that, he pulled out his *gemara* again and learned for another fifteen minutes. The next day he learned for another fifteen minutes, and he learned for another fifteen minutes here and another fifteen minutes there until he finished the entire *masechta*! What he accomplished in his state is incredible, and what enabled him to do it was realizing how impressive his learning was because of the difficulty. Because of his perspective on accomplishment, he became excited by what he could achieve, and he accomplished something he will be proud of forever.

But this idea goes even further. In *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* (Volume 3 Pages 14-15), Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *zt"l*, quotes an incredible explanation of this teaching of *Avos D'Rebbe Nosson* from his father. Our sages teach (*Arachin* 16b) that when a person wants to take three coins from his wallet and accidentally withdraws only two, requiring him to put his hand back into the wallet to take another coin, Hashem in His infinite mercy counts that as a form of suffering, and it helps atone for some of the person's sins. Rav Dessler's father explained that when *Avos D'Rebbe Nosson* taught that once with difficulty is greater than a hundred times when easy, that refers to the lowest level

we cannot know who will be greater in the next world, because greatness there — the true greatness for eternity — is calculated differently than greatness in this world.

of challenge, one that would take this minuscule amount of suffering for the person to prevail. Each additional level of challenge or pain multiplies the reward another hundred times (meaning the second level would be $100 \times 100 = 10,000$ times, and the third level would be $10,000 \times 100 = 1,000,000$ times, and so on). The value of a *mitzvah* done despite great difficulty cannot be fathomed, and our ability to accomplish such astounding achievements should make us light up with excitement!

But amazingly, this concept goes even further. The *Midrash* (*Midrash Rabbah, Parshas Pekudei*) relates that there was a pious but impoverished *tanna* named Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta. One Friday, Rabbi Shimon had no money and could not afford to buy food for *Shabbos*. Rabbi Shimon prayed to Hashem, begging Him for some food. Suddenly, a hand came from the sky and dropped a precious gem into his hand. Rabbi Shimon sold the gem and bought food for *Shabbos*.

That night, Rabbi Shimon's wife came to the table and saw the food. Knowing they couldn't afford anything, she demanded that Rabbi Shimon tell her how he got the food. Though he didn't want to say, Rabbi Shimon eventually gave in and told her what had happened. Rabbi Shimon's wife ordered him to retrieve the gem after *Shabbos* and return it, admonishing him, "Do you want our table in the next world to be lacking?" Still, Rabbi Shimon did not want to return the gem. Finally, they agreed to go to Rebbe (Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi) to ask his advice.

Upon hearing the story, Rebbe told them that he would replace any loss they would incur from his own portion in the World to Come. Rabbi Shimon's wife countered with a cryptic response that the commentators explain to mean that Rebbe couldn't replace their loss. Rebbe conceded and Rabbi Shimon agreed to return the remaining money. After *Shabbos*, a hand came from the sky and Rabbi Shimon gave it the money.

This story is puzzling. Why did Rabbi Shimon's wife refuse to accept the gem? They were destitute and could not even afford to buy food. Wouldn't accepting this gem be a worthwhile investment? Though they would lose a little in the next world, it would surely be worth it because Rabbi Shimon would have an easier time learning without starvation and worry!

To answer this question, the *Kochvei Ohr* (Chapter 8) quotes this teaching of *Avos D'Rebbe Nosson*. He explains that Rabbi Shimon's wife did not want to accept the gem because she realized the immense value of a *mitzvah* done despite difficulty. Her husband learned Torah despite overwhelming poverty. Had they kept the gem, it would not be as difficult for Rabbi Shimon to learn and his learning would no longer be as great. It wasn't just the sacrifice of some *Olam Habba* that made her object; rather, it was the diminishment of all his future learning.

But this story requires further explanation. Rebbe was by far the greatest *tzaddik* in the generation. He was certainly on a higher level than Rabbi Shimon. Why wouldn't he be able to replenish the losses, even if they were significant? What was the meaning of Rabbi Shimon's wife's response?

The *Kochvei Ohr* explains that each *mitzvah* has its own type of reward that cannot be compared with the reward for other *mitzvos*. The calculation of reward is unlike money, with which a five-dollar bill is worth five singles. Rather, the various rewards are like different flavors. Just as different flavored delicacies are not comparable and there is no value system with which to compare them, there is a different type of reward for each *mitzvah* and the rewards cannot be compared. Not only does this apply to different *mitzvos*, it applies even to differences in the other calculations that affect the greatness of the *mitzvah*. One of the most important measures is the difficulty involved in performing the *mitzvah*. Thus, a *mitzvah* done despite difficulty is not just

worth over a hundred times a *mitzvah* done without challenge; it enters an entirely different dimension. Each variation in the extent and style of difficulty yields a unique reward for success that cannot be compared to any other.

This was Rabbi Shimon's wife response to Rebbe. Although Rebbe was the *Gadol Hador* and his Torah study and *mitzvos* were greater than Rabbi Shimon's in many ways, he lacked one thing. Rebbe was wealthy. He had never learned Torah despite poverty. He had never learned despite pangs of starvation and without knowing where his next meal would come from. Thus, even Rebbe couldn't replace the reward that would have been lost.

We learn a profound lesson from this story. Challenge is the opportunity for greatness. **Succeeding despite difficulty is your opportunity to accomplish what cannot be matched by anyone else, because nobody else faces the exact same challenges you do.** This makes your accomplishments unique and significant. Further, succeeding despite great challenge is your opportunity to do *mitzvos* that are in a different stratosphere than *mitzvos* done without difficulty. Great deeds of others can't compare to the *mitzvos* of someone who is looked down upon and faces intense challenges. Succeeding despite daunting obstacles is the most impressive accomplishment. It is the way to attain greatness.

Guarding one's eyes and controlling one's desires was always a challenge. In our times, this already difficult test has skyrocketed to unimaginable levels. It is so hard to fight, and people who have battled and mastered these temptations are rare. Most people either are failing far more than they wish — whether it is publicly evident or not — or have not been challenged with strong impulses. Conquering this challenge requires going against one's nature, and that makes it so impressive. That is why people who consistently overcome this challenge are so rare. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to be a part of this exclusive

group. It isn't easy, but that's the point. That is why Hashem put us here: to succeed in perhaps the most difficult battle ever and reach greatness.

Realizing the difficulty of success can deflate us and sway us to give up. To stay motivated to fight, let us remember that because the battle is so hard, each bit of effort is so valuable. **Even if we don't succeed, each second we try and every time we push back against the *yetzer hara* is phenomenal in itself.** Hashem cherishes each of these accomplishments and takes great pride in us. We cannot fathom how amazing it is and how proud Hashem will be when we actually win the battle! Controlling ourselves is so impressive because it is so difficult. Because of the challenge, it is an opportunity for greatness.

When we face great challenges, we should be excited! Rather than being upset because it will be harder to do what we have to do, we should remember that now we can become even greater because the challenge is so strong. Rather than being down, we will become so pumped up that the battle will be a breeze. **Succeeding when it is rough is the point of life,** and this success is in our hands! We can do it!

We must never forget that Hashem only created and challenged us so that we can reach great heights. He wants to give us the best experience possible, and that's why He gave us this opportunity. Contemplating this will help us realize that Hashem is so happy for us when we win, and will pump us up to capitalize on our opportunity.

We are so fortunate that Hashem gave us this opportunity. Had Hashem not given us the Torah, we would not receive any real gain by acting with self-control. All we would benefit from self-control is the "gain" of not losing something, such as not wrecking our marriages and not making ourselves miserable by becoming addicts. But we would not *gain* anything from

controlling ourselves. But fortunately, Hashem gave us the *mitzvos*, and now when we control ourselves, we break free from our status and reach astounding heights!

It's time for us to throw away our limiting beliefs. We *can* attain unprecedented greatness. Let's cash in on the greatest opportunity of all time by resolving to fight in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The pinnacle of life is success in the face of challenge.
- Each person can accomplish phenomenal achievements that cannot be attained by anyone else.
- The greatest achievements come when the odds are stacked against us. That's why we are so fortunate that Hashem gave us perhaps the most difficult challenge ever, the battle against desire in our generation — because by succeeding we can reach unprecedented greatness.

CHAPTER

Twenty One

“But I Brought This Upon Myself”

A major obstacle that saps people’s enthusiasm is the feeling that they themselves caused their challenges. This stops them from appreciating their acts of self-control, because they feel that they should not be facing these challenges and any difficulty is their fault.

At first glance, this idea makes sense. After all, they caused things to be so difficult. They sparked their challenge by not avoiding what would trigger desire. Even more, they caused themselves to become lustful by sinning when it was easier. Had they not indulged then, their impulses would not be nearly as strong. It does seem that succeeding in the mess they made would be nothing to be proud of because they brought the challenge upon themselves.

But this perspective is dead wrong.

The Torah (*Bereishis* 26:29) relates that our forefather Yitzchok traveled to Gerar to buy food during a famine. After a short time, he was forced to leave because of a dispute with King Avimelech over Yitzchok’s wells. After he left, Avimelech traveled to Yitzchok and requested that they sign a peace treaty. Avimelech told Yitzchok that he should agree because Avimelech and his nation had done so much good for him by sending him out without harming him.

The *Da'as Zekeinim* explains this exchange with a parable: Once, a lion had a bone stuck in his throat. The lion announced that whoever would remove the bone would be rewarded with great wealth. A bird came along, stuck its head into the lion's mouth, and removed the bone. When the bird demanded its reward, the lion replied, "Is it not enough that I didn't eat you when you had your head in my mouth? You want a reward too?!"

Similarly, explains the *Da'as Zekeinim*, Avimelech told Yitzchok, "Our nature is to attack everyone who comes to our land. We did you a huge favor by overcoming our nature and not harming you."

This *Da'as Zekeinim* is hard to understand. The parable seems inconsistent with its application. A lion's inborn nature is to want to eat, and the lion had to overcome that urge to spare the bird. But man is not born with a desire to damage. Avimelech and his people had corrupted themselves by choosing to harm people until it became their nature. Why should not harming Yitzchok be considered a huge favor?

Before we answer this question, let's examine a perplexing *Midrash*. The Torah (*Bereishis*, Chapters 32-33) tells us that Eisav was upset at Yaakov for taking the blessings from their father, and he came after Yaakov to kill him. Yaakov appeased Eisav by sending him a large gift of animals.

The *Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 1:17)* relates that when Yaakov sent the gift to Eisav, Eisav tried to return it. As a result, Eisav received a substantial reward later on.

This *Midrash* is puzzling. Why should Eisav be rewarded for trying to return the gift? Yaakov only offered it because Eisav wanted to kill him. Why should Eisav be rewarded for trying to turn down a present that was only offered because of his wickedness?

Rabbi Hensch Leibowitz, *zt"l*, answered (*Sefer Chiddushei Lev Bereishis*, pages 140-141) that this *Midrash* proves something amazing: Hashem judges each *mitzvah* without factoring in whether the person brought the challenge upon himself. Even though it is the person's fault that he put himself in this situation, and even if he sinned by doing so, Hashem still rewards him fully for overcoming his desires now in this challenging situation. Hashem does not subtract from the greatness of the accomplishment; He grants the same reward the person would have received had the challenge come on its own. That is why Eisav was rewarded for returning the present.

Rabbi Leibowitz continued that this is why Avimelech's restraint was considered a favor. Avimelech and his people had to go against their nature to hold back from harming Yitzchok. It was very hard for them. Although they caused the difficulty by corrupting themselves, that did not make their act of overcoming their nature any less impressive. That's why not harming Yitzchok was considered such a huge favor.

The message is clear: If a person puts himself in a challenging situation, or even if he strengthens his lusts by constantly giving in and now faces overwhelming battles, he still receives the same reward for struggling to overcome his desires as if it had not been his fault. Although bringing the struggle upon himself adds to the gravity of his earlier mistakes, it does not take away from the greatness of his accomplishments.

The *Gemara* (*Berachos* 34b) relates: Rabbi Avahu taught that in the place where *ba'alei teshuva* (people who have repented) stand, even pure *tzaddikim* who never sinned cannot stand. This means that pure *tzaddikim* cannot reach the level of those who have done *teshuva*. This is hard to understand. Why should a person who never messed up be lower than one who ran after sin and only later repented? A person who never sinned should

be far greater than someone who repented!

The Rambam (*Hilchos Teshuva* 7:4) explains that by sinning, *ba'alei teshuva* activated their desires and became more susceptible to the pull of sin. Their desires are many times stronger than those of a person who never sinned. For them to win their battles, they must exert much more effort.

People who have gotten caught up in the web of desire face extremely difficult battles. Seemingly innocuous situations awaken their desires, and suddenly they feel, "I want it! I need it! I can't live without it!" The intensity cannot be fathomed by one who has never faced such desires. It takes much more strength for the *ba'alei teshuva* to win, and that's why they are higher than those who never sinned.

In a similar vein, the *Tomer Devorah* (Chapter 1) answers that because their challenges have become so strong, *ba'alei teshuva* cannot get by with the safeguards of those who have never sinned. *Ba'alei teshuva* have already breached those barriers. They are susceptible to urges that others don't experience, and their desires are more powerful. The safeguards of those who never sinned are not enough to hold them back. They must set up fences that go far beyond those safeguards, and they must be careful to avoid situations that might trigger *their* desires. This extra effort to implement these safeguards puts the *ba'alei teshuva* on a higher level than those who never sinned.

At this point, it should be clear that **the lower we have fallen, the higher we can reach**. We should never be discouraged by where we are holding or think it is too late. We shouldn't think of ourselves as lowly sinners, doomed to bear our scars and be inferior forever. Rather, we should be excited about our opportunity, because we can reach much higher than those who haven't fallen and don't experience the challenges we face. We *can* become great! Though it takes great effort, if we appreciate

our opportunity, we will be excited to succeed.

The *posuk* in *Michah* (7:8) says, “My enemies should not rejoice over my fall, because I have risen up. Though I sit in darkness, Hashem is a light for me.” The *Midrash* (*Yalkut Tehillim* 247) relates that this *posuk* contains a secret message: “If I had not fallen, I would not have risen to where I am now. If I did not sit in darkness, Hashem would not have been a light for me.”

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, *zt”l*, (*Sichos Mussar*, 5032 *Ma’amar* 37) applies this *Midrash* to our battles against the *yetzer hara*. After we fall, we can rise to incredible heights that we could never have reached had we not sinned. When we realize how low we have fallen and cry out to Hashem over straying so far from Him, this spurs us on to dramatically change our direction. Quickly, we fly way past where we were before we sinned, and we soar to the greatest heights. We gain strength that we never had before, and we start serving Hashem with emotion and meaning.

Our failures present an opportunity for greatness. They are not obstacles that hold us back, and we must not allow them to. Not only don’t they make us incapable of greatness, they can even become the sparks that bring the most growth. They can spur us on to reach amazing heights that we would never have aspired to had we not fallen so badly. Not only that, the added difficulty of having tasted sin gives us the opportunity to achieve incredible acts of success. This is another way our situation enables us to reach astounding heights! We should not be depressed by where we are. Rather, **we should be excited** because the lower we have fallen, the higher we can reach!

Finally, we must remember that at the right time, we can do *teshuva* to eliminate any sins we have committed, no matter how bad they are. *Teshuva* really works! It becomes as if we never sinned. We can wipe away all our sins and never have to deal with them again.

The *yetzer hara* tries to stop us from striving for greatness by bringing up our sins. We must not fall for this trick, because our sins don't hold us back at all. By responding properly, we will continue to strive to reach greatness, and we will be motivated to fight in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The further we have fallen, the greater we can become, even if the difficulty came about from our own actions.
- Not only can we accomplish greater achievements due to the challenge, we can even reach incredible heights in this world by using our failures to spur us on to reach for the stars.

CHAPTER

Twenty Two

Finding Our Ambition

Sometimes, we struggle to tap into our desire to become special. There are times when we just don't feel excited. We feel flat and unready to take on the *yetzer hara*.

This might come from years of the *yetzer hara* telling us, "You are a nobody. There is nothing good about you. You are nothing special and you can't become anything. In the olden days there were big *tzaddikim*, but nowadays it is hard to come close, and *you* definitely can't! You are inferior to everyone, especially those you see succeeding. You are worthless!" We might even hear this from people around us, especially from overly competitive, jealous, or insecure friends. If we think that we can't succeed or that we are nothing, we will lose our thrill to fight.

Having the wrong attitude when we contemplate the greatness of previous generations can also ruin our desire to succeed. The *yetzer hara* tries to make us think, "They were so great and *you* can't reach those heights. You can't become anything. You are stuck being a second-class citizen." The *yetzer hara* disguises his comments in our own voice and we assume they must be true.

Even though we know these messages are lies, we still might be affected, especially because they seem so convincing. If they influence us emotionally — even if logically we know

they are wrong — it becomes difficult to be excited about what we can accomplish. Thus, even if we know these arguments are false, we still need to work on overcoming these feelings. **Every day**, we must review these lessons about our great opportunity — or better yet, look up the sources and stories quoted in this book. Over time, this will overwrite those internal messages with enthusiasm about our chance to accomplish. We will constantly be excited to reach great heights, and we will be ready for all challenges. **The importance of doing something each and every day that motivates you cannot be stressed enough.**

When a person has difficulty feeling ambition, he might think, “That’s just not me. I’m not ambitious. I have no drive to be any better than the regular Joe that I am.” Many people face this at some point, when they just “don’t feel it” and wonder whether their dreams have died. Emotions are erratic and there will be times when we don’t feel inspired — especially when we are down. Reading about our amazing opportunity to become great is usually enough to motivate us. But sometimes we need a little more to find the excitement within us. It is time to draw out our ambition so we can live a thrilling life.

One of our strongest drives is the desire for honor. We don’t always realize we have it because when we think about the desire for honor, we envision an obnoxious man shamelessly showing off. But this drive is manifest in different ways depending on the person and where he is holding in life. Some people want to be popular. Others like to show off. Many people have a secret desire to be uniquely successful or even legendary. Some don’t feel such strong desires, but at least are self-conscious when in front of certain people whose opinions they care about. And everyone wants to feel important. All these urges are different manifestations of the desire for honor. This is why people like to get attention at parties. A person wants others to think highly of

him. He doesn't want to feel ordinary. He wants to feel special.

Consider the following:

- Do you ever daydream about what it would be like to have a talent that nobody else has, like the ability to do magic or to fly?
- In competitive areas that matter to you, don't you ever wish you stood out and were the most successful? (For example: the best basketball player, the smartest, the richest, or the most respected.)
- Don't you try to be the best in the class? Don't you at least find yourself daydreaming about being the best? Do you ever wish you had a secret edge that put you a bit above everyone else?
- When you are at a large social gathering, do you thirst for attention? Do you wish there was something unique about you that would make everyone think highly of you?

These are all manifestations of your drive to become great. When you experience these emotions, you should tell yourself, "Getting attention for things that don't matter is not the way to satisfy my desire; achieving monumental accomplishments that make me shine for eternity is. Though I might not have so many of these accomplishments now, **you better believe I will do whatever it takes to become great.** I don't want to be a nobody. I am going to become special with something that really matters — accomplishment."

Desire for honor is a cover-up for our strongest drive, the desire to accomplish and become uniquely great. We are born with this ambition. The problem is that it is easily sublimated into the drive for honor. Instead of trying to become special, we show off our talents or possessions. We want everyone to think highly of us. But this does not make us happy, because what we really want is

to feel good about *ourselves*. When we are not who we want to be, we feel the need to show off. We must ask ourselves, “Do I want to show others how great I am while knowing it’s all a lie? Do I want to impress others with my possessions while feeling down about myself? Or do I want to feel great knowing I have changed myself into someone worth being proud of? I want to impress myself, not someone else!”

Once we contemplate this, we will unleash our desire to become great. We will realize that honor is not the real goal, even when we want it. Our desire for honor will transform into real ambition and we will start accomplishing.

Unfortunately, many people feel incapable of reaching greatness. They don’t think they can accomplish anything significant. This kills their ambition. If a person feels insignificant and believes he can’t become someone special, he won’t have the right ambition. He will just try to satisfy this drive with honor and attention, which won’t work. No matter how much admiration he receives, he will remain unsatisfied and distressed from his unfulfilled desires.

Many people look up to those who have used their amazing talents to accomplish great feats, convinced that they are superior. People think that only someone born with unique talents can become great. However, Hashem determines success based on what the person accomplished with *his* capabilities and challenges. A person must do his best with whatever he was given. Greatness is not measured by what was actually accomplished.

What makes a deed great is the difficulty. When a person does good despite overwhelming challenges or goes against his nature to do what’s right, he creates the most special accomplishments. These deeds are worth being proud of. *Mitzvos* done despite difficulty are not “just a little better” than *mitzvos*

done with ease. **They are infinitely greater.**

Growing up in the 21st century, we face many challenges. Immorality is rampant. From a young age, we learn about how amazing it is to run after our desires, and it is so easy to indulge. For us to prevail in any of the challenges we are bombarded with, we must go against our nature. Though this means we face great danger, it doesn't mean we are at a disadvantage. Rather, we have a tremendous opportunity to become great.

Challenges like these have never been seen before. If we can prevail despite them, we will accomplish something unique. Each act of self-control we achieve in this generation is an accomplishment the great people of earlier generations didn't have. Though they achieved tremendously and reached levels we cannot fathom, Hashem did not grant them the opportunity to face the challenges we do. We must become excited by our challenges because they provide us with the chance to become great. We must grab this astounding opportunity to accomplish!

Take advantage of your ability to reach greatness. Dream of becoming great and know you can achieve it. Follow that drive and become someone significant whom you will be proud of being forever. You will be happy and feel great when you accomplish.

We must be careful not to sublimate this drive into a desire for honor. This can happen if we chase after honor when we feel the urge for attention. This increases our desire for honor until it takes over and diverts our dream of becoming great. It can also happen if we don't taste success often enough, or if we become disheartened because we believe we can't accomplish. Desire for attention stems from our desire for approval, which comes from an unfulfilled desire to feel good about ourselves. If we don't taste success or think we can't succeed, our desire to feel good about ourselves will transfer to something we think we can attain, such as honor. We might even feel a stronger

urge to run after physical pleasures. We might be tempted to invent meaningless “accomplishments” to strive for instead of real ones. Ultimately, however, none of this will make us happy. We will keep longing and searching, but nothing will satisfy us.

We need to realize that though it might be covered up by other desires, **what *we* really want is to accomplish and become special.** We want to *be* great. We want greatness that lasts forever. When we work toward this goal, we will know that we are accomplishing. We will leave the longing behind, replacing it with happiness and fulfillment.

If we unleash our desire to become significant, we will change our lives. We will approach life with fire and ambition. We will be excited about accomplishing, instead of feeling forced to do good against our will. We will be excited each time we choose correctly, especially when it is difficult. We will feel ourselves growing and becoming people we will be proud of forever. There is nothing more exhilarating than this feeling.

We must remember that *we* were given the greatest opportunity of all time — to become significant forever by winning the greatest challenge ever. If we dream big, our battles will be so sweet because we will feel ourselves attaining greatness, and we will find the motivation we need to succeed in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The desire for honor — and caring what others think about us, its common manifestation — is a sublimation of our greatest drive, the desire to reach greatness. We want to be impressed with ourselves and what we have accomplished.
- Let’s dream big and act on the inspiration to achieve the greatest experience ever, both in this world and the next.

CHAPTER

Twenty Three

True Greatness

Torah tells us (*Shemos* 6:25) that Elazar the son of Aharon Hakohen married a daughter of Putiel, and she gave birth to Pinchas. The Ramban (on *Shemos* 6:23) comments that the Torah tells us whom Elazar married to bring honor to Pinchas that his lineage can be traced back to Putiel. The Ramban explains (based on *Sotah* 43a) that Putiel descended from two great people. One was Yosef Hatzaddik, who belittled (from the Hebrew word “*Pitpet*”) his *yetzer hara* when Potifar’s wife tried to seduce him. The other was Yisro, who fattened calves (from the Hebrew word “*Pitem*”) to be brought as sacrifices to idols.

This statement seems quite perplexing. We can understand the prestige of being a descendant of Yosef, but how did it bring honor to Pinchas that his grandfather Yisro fattened cows for *avoda zara*? That is something to be embarrassed about, not proud of!

Rabbi Yehuda Jacobson answers that the Torah’s praise obviously isn’t that Yisro fattened calves for *avoda zara*. Rather, the praise is that he changed himself. Yisro went from being the high priest of idol worship to discovering Hashem. Thus, mentioning that Yisro had been an idol worshiper is true praise because of how far he had come since then.

The true measure of greatness is how much we have

exerted ourselves to change, not our current spiritual level. If a person is on a high level but did not improve to get there, what has he really accomplished? What does he have to be proud of? He has not grown and is not truly great, even if it looks like he is. What is there to be impressed with? He just followed his instincts and did what he was inclined to do. Of course he will be rewarded for what he has accomplished, but he has not reached true greatness. Only one who overcomes obstacles to change himself can be considered great. **Changing ourselves is the point of life!**

It takes work to live with this perspective. This is one of the challenges of life. Even people with spiritual perspectives — people who don't believe that success or significance should be measured by lineage, money, or occupation — are still impressed by those who look so religious and learn long hours. And being religious and learning long hours definitely is great! We are supposed to respect those who are on high levels in this world. But the true measure of success is what the person has accomplished with what he was given. How much did he change? What major spiritual obstacles did he overcome?

These obstacles can range from being challenged with desire to growing up among friends who preach the wrong values. It can consist of having to battle through extreme hardship and emotional pain that challenges one's faith. It can be having a tranquil life so the person never thinks about life or feels the need to accomplish. It can be wealth or it can be poverty. Everything is a challenge in its own way (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 1). The measure of a man is how much he succeeds despite the challenges that try to drag him down.

Hashem does not judge people based on outward success. He does not say, "You are a *tzaddik* because I created you with a righteous family and good character traits, while the other guy is

a *rasha* because I gave him desires and challenges.” That would be silly. Do you really think the fair and true Judge would do that?

Hashem gives each person a unique situation in life. Everyone is challenged, but some people get more obstacles and some get less. Some generations are challenged more than others. We can't understand why each person receives his situation, but we know that Hashem gives each person the challenges that are best for him. These challenges are his specific mission. Though it might not seem fair even from a spiritual perspective when some people have it easy while others must struggle, in reality Hashem chose the best life-setting for each person. Some people seem disadvantaged physically and others spiritually, but it all makes sense when we remember that the point of this world is for man to accomplish and earn the greatest pleasure in the next world. Hashem gives each person the life that is best for him. Hashem challenges each person differently, and He judges each person's actions based on the situation he was given.

This should make us get up and dance! We are not judged against the accomplishments of anyone else. We are judged based on what we do with our tendencies and challenges.

The *Tiferes Yisroel* (*Kiddushin* 4:77) relates a story with an astounding message:³⁰ When Moshe Rabbeinu led the Jews from Egypt, news of his greatness and of Hashem's miracles spread across the land. One Arab king was mesmerized with what he heard, and he sent his best artist to paint a portrait of Moshe. The

30. In this story, the *Tiferes Yisroel* suggests that Moshe Rabbeinu was born with negative character traits and had to toil to change them. However, many great *achronim* strongly disagreed and brought proofs that Moshe Rabbeinu was not born with negative traits. And they say it's disrespectful to Moshe Rabbeinu to say that he ever had bad traits, even if he was born with them. Obviously, the *Tiferes Yisroel* disagreed and saw fit to print this story in his *pirush* on *mishnayos*, but it remains controversial. Perhaps we must consider this story as just a *meshal* that didn't happen. Nonetheless, I decided to insert this story because the *Tiferes Yisroel's* message is definitely true, and it is a vital lesson for us.

artist returned and gave the portrait to the king.

The king had a group of wise men who could determine a person's character by his facial features. The king gave them the painting and asked them to tell him about Moshe's great traits. After studying the painting, the wise men told the king, "If the portrait is accurate, this man is evil! He is arrogant, loves money, and has every character flaw that exists!"

The king's face turned red. "What's going on?" he demanded. "I heard about Moshe's greatness from across the land. How could this be true? Either the portrait is inaccurate or my wise men are making a mistake!"

The king traveled to Moshe to see for himself. When he saw Moshe, he took out the portrait and saw it was accurate! He approached Moshe, told him the whole story, and expressed his confusion. Moshe responded, "Your artist painted an exact representation and your wise men were not mistaken. All the flaws they reported about me are flaws I was born with. If anything, my flaws were even worse than your wise men said. I had to work for years to change my temperament, and that is how I got to be who I am today. And know that if I were by nature the great person I am now with all my sterling character traits, I would be no better than a stick of dry wood. A piece of wood doesn't have any of man's flaws, but it is just a piece of wood. Would I be worthy of being valued by Hashem and man if I were born this way?"

This story teaches us a profound lesson. **Moshe Rabbeinu, the man who reached the highest levels possible, said that had he been on the exact same level with the one difference that it had come naturally, he would have been no better than a stick of wood!** Had he not worked hard to grow, he wouldn't have attained greatness despite being on the highest level possible! This is because **the point of life is to make yourself as great as**

you can, not to be born great. Being born great is no big deal, no matter how holy the person is. He didn't do anything, so why should anyone be impressed? A person on a much lower level who is working hard to grow — especially if he must overcome spiritual challenges — is much greater because this is the true measure of greatness!³¹

Growing up in this generation, we face the toughest battles known to man. The *yetzer hara* uses so many sneaky tricks to trap us with desire, and if he succeeds even once, he then tries to challenge our entire spirituality. We must realize what this means — we can achieve true greatness by winning these battles! **We can become great!** Nothing can stop us because the significance of our achievements is determined by the difficulty and the exertion needed to overcome our challenges. We cannot fathom how great it is when we go against our nature and accomplish! By overcoming our urges and changing our direction, we can become great!³²

When you finally penetrate your old beliefs, you will enter a new world! You will reject the outlook that possessions

31. Of course, we cannot know whose challenges are greater. We can't know who had to exert himself more to get to where he is. Thus, we should refrain from thinking we know where others are truly holding.

32. To illustrate, a person in a coed school or facing an addiction might feel disadvantaged because it seems impossible for him to avoid sinning. But he can change his perspective and become excited to fight if he trains himself to say, "Great! That means that I can attain much more success! Every time I push myself is *far* greater because of the difficulty involved. I am so fortunate to face this challenge. My situation is so difficult, so I can achieve greatness by winning. Giving in is easy, but I will rise above my nature and accomplish something I will be proud of forever! I will cash in and succeed!"

This excitement will lead the person to enormous success, no matter how difficult the battle is. If we master this perspective, we will have astounding strength to battle the *yetzer hara*, and we will be dumbfounded when we look back and realize what we have accomplished.

and innate talents make people great, and you will focus on what matters instead. You will internalize this life-changing perspective and live life on such a high. Life will be so sweet! You will be accomplishing and you will know it.

With this perspective, you will realize what matters and what doesn't, whether it presents its appeal physically or spiritually. You will see through what only looks good because people value it, but in reality is secondary. You will confidently determine what you value and make sound life decisions. Your ambition will awaken and your strongest drive will be to accomplish. Rather than feeling that you can't, you will feel capable and it will make you ecstatic. You will feel good about yourself and you will feel like you are flying!

The sweetest feeling that exists is the taste of success. There is nothing like knowing you are growing and becoming a better person. No excitement can match the thrill of accomplishing and becoming stronger. You will be able to tell yourself, "I can say 'No!' I *can* control myself! I can accomplish in the way of the great ones with this act of self-control!" There is nothing like looking back and realizing you are miles beyond where you were a few months ago. You realize you are doing something with your life and feel on top of the world!

Growth

One reason growth is so inspiring is that it can be felt right now, unlike reward in the next world, which sometimes seems a million years away. Further, we don't naturally *feel* the eternal reward so tangibly, even though we know it is true. Thus, it takes work to turn it into a powerful motivator. We have a hard time relating to it,

even though we know it's amazing, because we have little frame of reference to understand it. And we hopefully won't experience it for a long time. But it is easy to get excited about how we are growing, reaching greatness, and accomplishing phenomenally.

Feeling great about where we are headed is an exhilarating experience that can't be matched. It's thrilling to be able to say, "I am growing! Every second I hold myself back from looking at what is forbidden, every inappropriate thought I stop thinking about, and every time I fight back in my mind against my desires, I am coming closer to the person I want to be, a person I will be proud of being forever! With each action and every bit of effort, I am growing! I am better and stronger now than I was five minutes ago!" Growth is one of the most exciting experiences in life. Feeling good about your direction is priceless

We were put here to take the situation we were given and grow as people. The point of life is not to never mess up, though of course we must win every battle we can. If we have the wrong perspective, we will get frustrated whenever we face a challenge or when it is hard to achieve our goals. But once we realize that Hashem created us with flaws and challenges because the point of life is to grow and accomplish despite them, we will taste the excitement of life! We will realize that we can be incredibly successful in the true measure of spiritual accomplishment, and we will start growing in all areas. This excitement can carry us to achieve many impressive accomplishments *because we will want to act that way*. Life is an exciting opportunity, not a chore.

Let's realize that and we will rejoice and accomplish!

It does not take a long period of success to feel we are growing. Our sages teach us (*Chovos Halevavos* 3:3) that every act of self-control shapes us into better people. Our actions change our essence. When we exert effort to maintain self-control, we grow stronger. Each correct decision changes us and makes us grow as people. Thus, when we win any battle, we truly can say to ourselves, "I am growing! I am becoming stronger! I am better than I was before!" (Rabbi Shafier, Shmuz 13: "*Nefesh Habahami* and *Nefesh Hasichli*," www.TheShmuz.com)

Hashem put us in this world and told us, "Become someone! Change yourself and grow stronger! Become a person you will be proud of! Stand up to the battles of this world and demonstrate the strength I gave you! Make yourself great because it will make you ecstatic in both worlds and bring you close to Me!" If we listen and make this the focus of our lives, we will live the most amazing life! We will feel the magic and our lives will be incredible! This is what Hashem put us in this world for.

Let's take advantage of the wonderful opportunity Hashem gave us. Let's not hold ourselves back by believing the voice that tells us, "You can't become great." If anything, the more we were convinced that we can't become anything, the greater we can become because of this added obstacle — these beliefs that sap our enthusiasm. Let's bust through the barriers of our limiting beliefs and become great people for all eternity. Let us live with this fire and drive. Let's experience the greatest pleasure and thrill by turning ourselves into something special.

True greatness is striving to serve Hashem despite great difficulty. Let's master this perspective, realize our unique opportunity, and unleash our excitement to reach greatness through battling our *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- True greatness is the effort a person invested to accomplish after factoring in his specific circumstances and challenges.
- In the next world, **this is the only thing that matters for eternity.**
- This perspective should make us get up and dance! We must master this perspective and live life with it.

CHAPTER

Twenty Four

Ambition and Avoiding Arrogance

I'm sure by now you've been wondering about arrogance. Doesn't wanting to be great constitute arrogance? And won't being proud after we win a battle make us arrogant?

To avoid arrogance while staying excited to win, we must understand the challenge arrogance presents. Imagine there is an arrogant person. Realizing that arrogance is improper and wanting to rid himself of it, he reads many *mussar* works about how terrible it is, and he increases his desire to be free of it. But ultimately, he still feels that he is greater than everyone else. He doesn't want to be arrogant, but what can he do?

If we want to eliminate arrogance, contemplation about how bad it is and motivation to change won't be enough. The only way to cure ourselves of arrogance is to change our perspective on what matters. We must figure out what has true significance. Once we master this perspective, we will know how to avoid arrogance.

There are many factors that can bring a person to arrogance. The first category of these is feeling superior to others because of physical advantages. For example, a person might feel superior because he is smarter, richer, more handsome, or more athletic. Any physical advantage or possession can cause a person to feel better than others. But just knowing that he has physical

advantages is not arrogance. Only if these talents and possessions make him feel superior as a person and deserving of praise does this constitute arrogance (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 11).

Avoiding such forms of arrogance takes contemplation. You must remember that it wasn't you who made you smart. You didn't create yourself with these gifts. Hashem gave them to you. It wasn't in your control. Hashem decided that this situation is best for you in this world. It wasn't your greatness that caused you to get it. Hashem could have created you unintelligent, and if He wants, He can make you poor or sick in an instant. Does it make sense to feel superior because Hashem gave you talents or money?

Ask any bald person whether he decided to become bald. It wasn't his decision; it was Hashem's. Had Hashem wanted to, He could have made *you* bald and there would be nothing you could do about it. Having hair is not in your control. Similarly, all your talents and possessions are not in your control. Hashem gave them to you, and having them doesn't make you greater than anyone else. Be grateful to Hashem for these gifts, rather than becoming arrogant.

Another reason your gifts shouldn't make you arrogant is that they don't last. Hopefully, you will be fortunate enough to reach old age, which sure beats the alternative. When you are old, nobody will be impressed with how smart you are. All your handsomeness will fade, and no one will care how you once looked. Nobody will give two hoots about how cool you were when you were twenty. When you are in a nursing home, it won't matter how much money you have; nobody is jealous of a person who has one foot out the door and the other on a banana peel. All the prestige and respect can't be held onto forever, and after death, these things surely won't matter at all.

Most important, remember that physical talents and

possessions are not what's important in life. Serving Hashem is all that matters, no matter what anyone else values and respects.

A wealthy man once came to Rav Chaim Kanievsky, Shlita, and asked him, "I am so wealthy that money is no issue at all. Can I buy a fancy car, or must I be concerned that people will be jealous of me?"

Rav Chaim responded, "Are you fluent in *shas*?"

"No," the man answered.

"Have you even learned through *shas*?"

"Unfortunately, I have not."

"Is there a *masechta* of *gemara* that you know cold?"

"No."

"Do you know at least a *perek* of *gemara* inside out?"

"No *Rebbe*, I can't say that I do."

"Is there at least one page of *gemara* that you know well?"

"No."

Rav Chaim told the man, "If so, go buy the car. Nobody will be jealous of you."

This story demonstrates the clarity of a great person on what matters in life. Serving Hashem is the only thing that makes a difference. In the long run, everything else is meaningless.

If we lack spiritual accomplishments, what do we have? Fancy possessions are unimpressive. If everyone drools at the gifts Hashem gave us because they don't understand life, we must not let it get to our heads. We know that our gifts don't make us superior to anyone. We must repeatedly remind ourselves that these things just aren't significant. Otherwise, we will be affected by what others think.

If it is hard for us to appreciate this, we should think about what will matter when we die. In the next world, everyone will know what's important. None of our possessions will matter. All everyone will care about forever is our spiritual accomplishments.

Death

Sometimes, it is hard to see that these things don't really matter. We are swayed by the values of those who think money and outward success make people superior. We are also affected by what people will think about us, and it becomes difficult to regain our clarity.

Thinking about death helps us regain perspective. Take a few minutes to think about what it will be like when we die. What will be significant in the next world? What will matter forever? How should we live our lives to set us up best for eternity?

But many people are afraid to think about death. They view death as a scary situation that will be terrible because of their wrongdoings. They think of it as a time when many terrible things will happen to them coupled with feelings of regret that will last for eternity, no matter how much good they have done. Thus, they prefer not to think about it.

This does a lot of damage. Using death as a scare tactic against ourselves too often destroys our perspective on what truly matters in life. Viewing death as a time that will be horrible no matter how hard we try to be good will cause us to ignore it. Although of course we know that we will die, we won't care about what will be then because we will be in denial about it ever happening. And this makes sense. Why wouldn't we be in denial about something we know will be horrible?

But if we think about it, we will realize that death brings us to the world with the most amazing reward. The experiences there are so amazing that they are the point of life. Hashem only created everything in existence to give us that pleasure. We might not have any desire for it because it is hard for us to relate to it while in this world, but we must at least realize that things will be very good. Then, we will not have such negative feelings about eventually moving on to the next world after what will hopefully be a long, happy, and successful life.

Hashem only created this world to give us the bliss of the next world. If we think we will try hard now and it will still be horrible, what are we saying about Hashem? We are calling Him a failure, *chas veshalom*. We are saying that He did everything to give to us but set it up that He won't be able to. We are selling Him so short.

When we no longer think of death as a horrifying experience, we will be able to deal with it. We will be able to think about death and actually see it happening. Then, we will be able to use the clarity it brings to realize what really counts — what will matter then and for all eternity.

This message holds true even if we have sinned greatly and don't repent, *chas veshalom*, thereby requiring atonement after death. Even though the atonement process is painful — we definitely want to avoid it by not sinning and by repenting — what happens after death is still amazing overall. Even if we must atone for our sins before receiving the most pleasurable experience, it is well worth it. (For more on this, see Chapter 33.)

Having the wrong perspective on what's important causes arrogance. By reminding ourselves of these truths, we will remember what matters and not grow arrogant because of our possessions.

Arrogance that stems from spiritual accomplishment is much harder to cure. A spiritually successful person might feel superior to those around him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he thinks, "Look at how great I am! I do so many *mitzvos*, I learn all day, I dress like a *Ben Torah*, and I keep these *chumros*. Everyone else I know doesn't come close to what I am doing. And even if some people do more than me, *that* guy doesn't, so I am much greater than him. Those are the facts!" Solving this type of arrogance requires a much deeper understanding of life.

This attitude is completely mistaken. The person is comparing himself to others, which is illogical for many reasons. First, our entire nation is one unit with a common goal of serving Hashem. Life is not a game of who can be better and put others down. We are all on one team. If we do well and others don't, it shouldn't make us happy.

Every Jew's greatest wish must be that our entire nation serves Hashem properly. That will bring Hashem the utmost satisfaction because He will be able to reward everyone, and it will bring us joy because all our brothers and sisters will be happy.

We must internalize that our whole nation is on our side and is part of "us." The *yetzer hara* loves to create conflict and destroy our unity. Unfortunately, many times in our history, anti-Semitism reminded us who is the "us" and who is the "them." We are all one family. Our goal is to serve Hashem together, not at the expense of other Jews to be higher than them or to put them down.³³

There is another reason we shouldn't compare ourselves to others. We have learned (Chapter 23) that we are not judged based on our outward accomplishments and errors. Rather, we are judged based on what we did with the talent and challenges we were given. Clearly, comparing ourselves to others is just plain foolish! How can we know what anyone's life is like? How do we know what each person's challenges are?

Every person is given a different life-setting with distinct challenges. How do we know what life would be like had we been born a little less smart? How well would we do had Hashem created us with less natural motivation to do the right thing? What if we were born with bad character traits? What

33. For more on this, listen to Rabbi Shafier's Shmuz 81: "All for my People," available at www.TheShmuz.com.

if we never tasted any success or were social outcasts? What if we had different friends or tough challenges when we were younger? What if we had gone to a less religious school? What if we had gone to a school that was rigid and strict? What if we didn't enjoy learning and found it boring? What if we had been born into a family or society that cared only about the wrong things? Wouldn't things have been different?

How can we compare ourselves to others? Do we really understand what is going on? It is impossible for us to know. We are incapable of saying that we would do better than any person — or even that we wouldn't do worse — had we been created exactly like him, with his personality, desires, inborn values, and situation in life. It makes no sense to feel superior to anyone, no matter how great we become, because **we just don't know**.

Hashem gave us the perfect life-setting for us. Had He tweaked it a bit, life would be *a lot* different. Each person receives his own set of challenges that were set up exactly for him. Each person has his unique role and mission to accomplish. It's almost as if he is in his own world. Comparing people is foolish.

Of course, when we succeed, we should feel great about ourselves. We should be thrilled that we have acquired eternity! We should rejoice that we made Hashem happy! We just must remember that we cannot compare ourselves to others because who knows how we would do had we been given another person's life? But that doesn't take away from the greatness of our effort to accomplish. We are accomplishing with the strength Hashem granted us in the situation He chose for us. These accomplishments are incredibly significant, and they bring us to greatness.

The *Gemara* (*Bava Basra* 10b) relates that Yosef the son of Rabbi Yehoshua was deathly ill. In this state, he had an out-of-

body experience and could see what was happening in the next world. Eventually, he recovered. His father asked him, "When you had that near-death experience, what did you see?"

He answered, "I saw an upside-down world. The prominent people were lower, and the inferior people were higher."

"You saw a clear world," his father responded. "But what did you see about us, the learned people who study Torah? Where are we in the real world?"

He answered, "Just as you are important in this world, you are important in the next world."

The simple interpretation, as Rashi explains, is that Yosef saw that wealthy and powerful people were insignificant in the next world. Because money is irrelevant there, they were no longer respected by anyone. People who were poor and downtrodden in this world were far greater.

However, Rav Yisroel Salanter and Rav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, offered an alternative interpretation of this story: The "higher" and "lower" people refers to their outward spiritual levels in this world. Yosef was saying that in the next world, people on a lower spiritual level in this world were often higher than those who attained more success. This was because the "lower" people were challenged more and fulfilled more of their potential than the "higher" people. Despite accomplishing less in this world, they were greater than those who had it easy and accomplished more. Thus, "the higher people were lower and the lower people were higher."

We cannot know who has it harder. Challenges come in many forms, each with its own flavor. We can't know who is greater. When we find ourselves growing haughty, we should think that maybe the other person's battle in "minor matters" is greater than our successes, and we should have newfound respect for him. We must refrain from belittling others, which

is something Hashem hates. Instead, we should feel fortunate to be part of this amazing nation that keeps trying despite the overwhelming challenges we face every day!

To grasp the trait of humility, we must understand the difference between confidence and arrogance. Is it possible to lack confidence and still be arrogant? Absolutely. We must understand the subtle distinctions between the two, and figure out how to be humble and confident at the same time.

A person who lacks confidence feels incompetent and incapable of dealing with life's challenges. He feels inferior and is convinced that he can do nothing about it. Often, such a person thinks he has never done anything impressive and is incapable of achieving. If he stands strong when challenged, he doesn't feel proud of his achievement. He doesn't feel good about himself. Instead, he feels that anyone could do it, and that it is insignificant because it is required of him. And if his accomplishment is too impressive for such logic, he considers it an out of character onetime occurrence that says nothing about him.

An arrogant person thinks he is better than everyone else. He might feel superior because of his possessions or even his accomplishments. But many times, arrogance is a reaction to feelings of inferiority. When a person realizes he is not accomplishing anything significant and feels helpless to change that, he might try to avoid the pain by finding a way to feel above others. This often happens subconsciously, without him realizing it. He might feel superior due to a prestigious lineage, wealth, intelligence, education, handsomeness, popularity, or a host of other advantages. But all these have nothing to do with true accomplishment — which is why it doesn't make him feel better.

In contrast, a person who is confident and humble realizes he can defeat the *yetzer hara* because Hashem is helping him. He feels capable of accomplishing significant achievements. He feels

good when he does the right thing, especially when it was difficult. He feels close to Hashem, knowing that Hashem is his biggest fan and is rooting for him to succeed. He lives with enthusiasm for accomplishment. He doesn't beat himself up even when he errs, and he never feels inferior.

What keeps him free from arrogance and its even more dangerous counterpart, complacency, is the knowledge that people cannot be compared to one another. He knows that each person was born into a unique setting with different people around him, different values, and different challenges. He thinks, "If I were put into this person's situation with his family, school, and traits, who knows how I would act? Maybe I would do the same or worse."

Thinking about our background enables us to realize that Hashem put us in our life situation because He wants us to become all we can be with this situation. He wants us to overcome our obstacles and reach as high as we can. We can never be complacent, no matter how much we have accomplished. Why would Hashem keep us alive if there were nothing left for us to accomplish? Hashem wants us to continue achieving because He wants more for us.

We must always aim even higher, because that is the point of life. This world is a phenomenal opportunity. As long as we are alive, we can reach higher and become greater! If we remember this and live with excitement about our potential, there is nothing wrong with us being proud of our accomplishments. In fact, it is healthy for us to be excited by the rarity and immense value of what we are accomplishing, so long as we avoid arrogance and complacency.

Although we should never feel above anyone else, we should feel good about ourselves and strive to reach even higher. We should dream of becoming great in the next world,

the only place that really matters. We should notice ourselves accomplishing and rejoice! Though we can't know exactly where we are holding, when we get upstairs, we will be immensely proud for eternity of what we have accomplished.

As always, we must remember that the barometer of whether our feelings are good for us is whether they cause us to serve Hashem better or worse. Does feeling good about ourselves and capable of reaching greatness make us serve Hashem better, or does feeling inferior and hopeless? The answer is obvious. This should prove to us that feeling excitement about accomplishment is the way to go.³⁴

To avoid arrogance, we must also be truthful with ourselves. Even if we have accomplished some incredible achievements, that doesn't place us on the highest levels of spirituality. Our achievements might be astounding, but they don't make us completely holy people. Reaching those lofty levels takes a lifetime of work.

We still have much to accomplish. We aim to eliminate many *aveiros* and increase our production of *mitzvos*. These tasks take a lot of effort because they are so vast. Though this is not a complaint against us and we can still be excited by our progress, we must remember where we are holding and what we have left to attain.

Reading about great *tzaddikim* helps us appreciate this. When we learn about the incredible levels in *middos* and *bitachon* they reached, we marvel at their greatness. Though of course we don't compare ourselves to them — we were given a different life situation with different expectations — we still realize that there are many more heights that we aspire to attain.

We must remember that what we celebrate when we score

34. See the quote from *Chovos Halevavos* (5:5) quoted in the next chapter.

big victories against desire is the great achievements Hashem has helped us attain. These merits draw their greatness from our effort and the difficulty involved, not from our spiritual level. Hashem takes actions that seem small and makes them big. Even if our actions weren't done with the loftiest intentions, Hashem treasures them and makes them significant. We rely on Hashem to see our toil and accept and magnify our achievements. If He wouldn't do this for us, how much would our accomplishments be worth?

And though Hashem considers overcoming difficulty the pinnacle of accomplishment, it does not place us on lofty spiritual levels. We must not lie to ourselves about where we are. In general, we should focus on accomplishing, rather than on our status. This will enable us to be excited when we accomplish without feeling better than anyone else.

In addition, we must understand our relationship with Hashem to avoid arrogance. Feeling we have accomplished extraordinary achievements might on some slight level make us feel that Hashem owes us and that He must comply with our demands "because we are so great." Obviously, we want to avoid this.

Hashem does not need us. He is omnipotent; He doesn't need anyone. He doesn't owe us anything no matter what we do. Of course, He will reward us handsomely for every good deed, as He promised. We just need to make sure not to think He owes us. We must not approach our relationship with Hashem with arrogance or demand that He do what we want. Rather, we must approach Him with reverence and request that as our loving Father, He grant us our wishes out of kindness and mercy.

We must always remember that Hashem is the Boss, not us. Hashem does not need to do anything for us, but He always does the absolute best for us because He loves us. He even allows

us to have a relationship with Him! He is our best friend and our greatest ally. He is always on our side and never leaves us. But we must not forget Who the Master is and who the servant is. If He does something we don't like, *chas veshalom*, we must try to accept it even though it is so hard, and we must know that one day, hopefully while we are still in this world, we will catch a glimpse of how it was best for us even though it hurt so much.

If you want to build a relationship with Hashem, spend time thinking that He loves you. Think about His care for you and your wishes, and appreciate that He is looking out for you. Think about all that He does for you, and all the extra things He gave you just for your enjoyment.

Realize that Hashem's entire relationship with you is built on His love for you. Everything He does is only because He cares about you. He never loses His cool or becomes fed up with you. Remind yourself about all the times Hashem has helped you. Every time He makes something go your way, especially if you prayed for His help, write it in a notebook or on your phone and review it often. This will remind you that Hashem is running your life and that He cares about whatever you care about, just because you care about it.

Remember that Hashem is the One Who gives you the strength to defeat the *yetzer hara*. As you do battle, realize that Hashem is with you. He is always at your side giving you strength, no matter how far you have strayed. If Hashem wouldn't help you, it would be impossible to win any battle.

Hashem gave you everything you need to help you serve Him better, and He set up every challenge you face. He gave you the opportunity to overcome your challenges and accomplish, and you can only accomplish anything because He gives you strength. Hashem does all this because wants to give to you. Therefore,

thank Hashem for His help instead of growing haughty and demanding because of your victories. Appreciate that Hashem is on your side. You are never on your own. Rejoice! You have the best ally in the world! And make sure to pray constantly for Hashem's help to conquer the *yetzer hara*.

We must ask ourselves: Are we inspired to accomplish even more, or have we grown complacent? Do we respect others, or do we think they are inferior? Do we thank Hashem and rely on Him, or do we act as if He owes us? Do we feel capable of winning our battles with Hashem's help? If we can answer these questions properly, we will have a healthy relationship with Hashem and with ourselves.

Finally, we must make sure never to boast or to show off our talents and accomplishments. Rather, we should keep them to ourselves. Showing off goes completely against humility and detracts from our reward. Obviously, even if we understand humility, we will nonetheless be far from it if we act arrogantly.

A person can be excited about his achievements and his potential without becoming arrogant or complacent. Mastering this goes a long way in the battle of the generation.³⁵

Note: Many ideas in this chapter come from Rabbi Shafier's Shmuz 59: "Humility: An Issue of Perspective" (www.TheShmuz.com).

Quick Recap:

- We can feel great about accomplishing and still avoid arrogance if we remember that:
 1. Our entire nation is one unit with one common goal.
 2. We are incapable of comparing ourselves to others because we don't know their circumstances.
 3. We still have much work to reach the lofty levels we aspire for.
 4. We can only succeed spiritually because of Hashem's help.

35. For more on this topic, see *Chovos Halevavos* 6:9 and *Chiddushei Lev Vayikra* pages 19-22.

CHAPTER

Twenty Five

Celebrating Our Victories

Overcoming desire is an astounding accomplishment. The *Sefer Menoras Hama'or* (1:2:3:4) relates that a person who is challenged with a strong craving for sin but controls himself receives the reward of performing a *mitzvah*. Not only that, he even merits having a miracle done for him!³⁶ This is derived from the *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 39b-40a):

Rav Tuvi the son of Rav asked Rava a contradiction: The *Mishnah* (*ibid* 39b) states that when a person does a *mitzvah*, they do good for him [from Heaven]. This implies that if he didn't do a *mitzvah*, they don't do so — meaning the only way to earn reward is to do a *mitzvah*. But a different *Mishnah* (*Makkos* 23b) teaches us that a person who holds himself back from sinning is rewarded as if he performed a *mitzvah*! [There seems to be a contradiction whether a person who refrains from

36. Hashem no longer performs open miracles so often. This is to avoid interfering with the free-will challenges He has chosen for our times. Further, one should never expect or demand that Hashem do something for him because of his great deeds. But the point is that we should appreciate the greatness of acts of self-control. These feats are so incredible that Hashem deems it appropriate to grant an open miracle in response to them. And we never know what subtle miracles and gifts Hashem might grant us because of these incredible acts. As we know, Hashem still does “hidden” miracles. He runs every single occurrence in our lives down to the minutest detail, and the world could not exist without Him constantly keeping it in existence.

sinning is rewarded!]

Rava answered, “[A person isn’t rewarded for not sinning if he wasn’t tested. But] if an opportunity to sin arose and he abstained, he is rewarded.”

Rashi explains: “The statement that ‘one who refrains from sinning is rewarded like one who does a *mitzvah*’ refers to a situation where he was able to sin and he overcame his impulses. **There is no *mitzvah* greater than this.**”³⁷

The *Gemara* continues with stories of people who overcame challenges and were granted miracles:

A noblewoman approached Rabbi Chanina Bar Pappi and tried to persuade him to sin with her. He said some incantations and his body became full of boils. She said some incantations of her own and the boils disappeared. Rabbi Chanina ran away, hiding in a bathhouse that was haunted by dangerous demons. The next day, he emerged unscathed.

The Rabbis asked him, “Who watched over you and protected you from the demons?”

“Two of Caesar’s guards protected me all night,”

37. This *Mishnah* in *Makkos* implies that a person is rewarded for restraining himself if he has the opportunity to sin, even if he is disgusted by the thought of that sin and was not really challenged. The *Mishnah* there states:

Rabbi Shimon the son of Rebbe said, “[We see that one who abstains from sinning is rewarded] from the *posuk* (*Devarim* 12:23): ‘Just be strong not to eat the blood because the blood is the soul.’ If one receives reward for abstaining from eating blood, which repulses a person, then for holding back from stealing or from engaging in licentious behavior — actions that a person by nature lusts for and desires — he will surely be rewarded, as well as his descendants and their descendants until the end of all the generations.”

The *Mishnah* implies that a person will be rewarded if he had the ability to sin and did not, even if he had no desire to sin. The *Mishnah* then says further that if the person actually desired to sin and held himself back, the reward will be far greater. (See *Shitah Lo Noda Lemi* on *Kiddushin* 39b s.v. *Kegon Sheba Dvar Aveirah*, who explains that the person is rewarded even when he had no urge to sin, just not to the extent of one who did a *mitzvah*. That is reserved for someone who was tempted to sin.)

he answered.

Realizing this was a miracle, they told him, "Perhaps you were tested with immorality and held back from sinning, as it was taught in a *Beraisá*, 'Anyone who is challenged with a matter of *ervah* (licentiousness) and doesn't sin merits that they perform a miracle for him.'"

The *Gemara* continues: The *posuk* says: "Mighty and strong ones who do Hashem's command to follow His word." An example of this is Rabbi Tzadok and his contemporaries. A noblewoman approached Rabbi Tzadok and tried to force him to sin with her. He told her, "I am too weak. Is there anything to eat?"

She answered, "Only a piece of non kosher food."

"What do we learn from this? That one who does this act deserves to eat this food," he replied.

Not getting the message, she lit the oven to put the food inside. Rabbi Tzadok got up and sat in the oven.

"What are you doing?!" she blurted out.

"One who does this [acts of immorality] falls into this [referring to the fire of *Gehenom*- Rashi]," he responded.

She told him, "Had I known how severe this is to you, I wouldn't have bothered you."

In this story, Hashem performed an open miracle for Rabbi Tzadok that the flames of the oven didn't burn him. This story demonstrates the great strength of Rabbi Tzadok, and shows that Hashem does miracles for those who conquer their temptations.

The *Gemara* continues: Rav Kahana was selling baskets [in the marketplace]. A noblewoman approached him and tried to force him to sin with her.

"I will go beautify myself," he said.

He went up to the roof and jumped off. Eliyahu Hanavi came flying and caught him just before he hit the ground.

Eliyahu told Rav Kahana, “You troubled us to come four hundred *parsos* to save you!”

Rav Kahana responded, “What caused me to have to sell baskets and brought about this situation? Is it not poverty?”

Upon hearing this, Eliyahu gave him a chest full of money.

We see that Hashem performs miracles to protect and benefit a person who overcomes challenges of immorality.³⁸ Hashem does this because it takes great effort for a person to overcome his nature and thus it is considered a legendary act. Hashem treasures these victories so much that He makes miracles for those who accomplish them. If we take advantage of our opportunities to conquer our desires, we can accomplish great achievements! Let’s remember the significance of what we are accomplishing and fire ourselves up to accomplish even more.

We must celebrate every victory we score against the *yetzer hara* in battles of desire. This brings home the message that we gain immensely by doing the right thing. It helps us appreciate what we are doing. Celebrating our accomplishments will make us eager to fight the *yetzer hara*. We will be so energized

38. In fact, it is good to pray right after each victory because it’s an auspicious time for prayers to be answered. And pray for me too! But we must make sure not to approach our prayers as if Hashem owes us something. That prevents prayers from being answered. Rather, we should pray that Hashem grant us a gift out of love, as always. Hashem answers our prayers by granting us free gifts, rather than paying us with what we have earned. (For more on this, listen to Rabbi Shafier’s Shmuz 101: “Why Pray?”) This is just a time when we find more favor, increasing the likelihood that Hashem grants us the free gift we request. Our prayers are more beloved and powerful at this time. It’s a special time of mercy.

But if we demand something and say we deserve it instead of asking for Hashem’s kindness, our heavenly file is opened up and inspected to see whether our confidence in our worthiness is accurate. If we have ever done anything wrong, that might be dealt with first (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 98:5). Further, we might face scrutiny to determine whether our merits are enough according to extremely strict justice. This would involve deducting for every single thing we have received in this world and calculating what merits we have left (see *Chovos Halevavos* 4:4 Part 6). It might also involve examining the purity of our intentions. Obviously, we want to avoid this.

that we won't feel we missed out on anything by not indulging. We will feel ourselves gaining and growing — we will see that we are doing much better than we ever have! We will have something so exciting that we won't even *want* to give in to our desires.

When you stop the *yetzer hara* in his tracks, you must get excited. Think about how hard it was to win, and how great that makes your accomplishment. Recall the list of legendary *tzaddikim* who did similar acts. Think about how much Hashem cherishes such accomplishments. Remember the true definition of greatness, and realize that these acts put you on your way there. Pump your fist with excitement over what you were able to accomplish.

Think about how fortunate you are. Instead of following a desire, which would have only brought you a brief enjoyment but left you with nothing, you have accomplished something you will be proud of **forever!** This is another step toward greatness! You are so lucky that Hashem challenged you to enable you to accomplish.

Remember that Hashem is proud of you. This is a special time to talk to Him. Tell Him, "I know You are so proud of what I just did. I know You consider it a significant accomplishment. You are so excited that I accomplished this with Your help, and that makes me very happy."

Pump yourself up, and your success will spill into your next battle. You are accomplishing what you were put here for! You are succeeding! You are on the road to greatness! Use the exhilaration to impress upon yourself that spiritual accomplishment is worth aspiring for. **Celebrating your victories is the most important thing you can do to develop a drive for success through self-control.**

This message is stressed by *Chovos Halevavos* (5:5), which tells the reader:

Don't listen to [even the smallest of] the *yetzer hara's* wishes. Rather, hold highly in your eyes even the most minuscule victory and slightest increase of power over the *yetzer hara*. This will lead you to reach even greater success. The *yetzer hara* will be quick to obey you and he won't stand up to you if you stand up to him.

This is what happens when we fight back against the *yetzer hara* and celebrate every victory, no matter how small it seems. Celebrating our victories brings us to win our battles and rule over the *yetzer hara*.

Because rejoicing over your victories is so vital for success, the *yetzer hara* will try to ruin your excitement. Sometimes, he will try to convince you that if you are proud of what you have accomplished, that is arrogance — which it's not so long as you remember that Hashem gives you the strength to prevail. Other times, he will try to make you feel that self-control is nothing special because it is required. He will also try to draw your attention to something you could have handled better.

The *yetzer hara* will disguise his arguments, making them sound like your own voice. You will hear yourself think: "I can't get excited. That would be arrogance. And there is nothing to get excited about anyway because I had to do it. When I read about celebrating my victories, it wasn't talking about an insignificant victory like this. It would have been a disaster had I sinned in such a lowly manner. Anyway, how can I be excited? I messed up at that moment! I failed, and that's all that matters."

You must realize that though it sounds like your own voice, it's the *yetzer hara* speaking. You must defuse all his arguments and become energized by what you have accomplished.³⁹ Remember, if the *yetzer hara* feels he must stop you from becoming excited,

39. See the end of Appendix A if you need help defusing these arguments.

it must be a major weapon for defeating him. Thus, it is proper service of Hashem not to fall for his tricks. You must realize what you have just achieved so you will gain enthusiasm and feel good about your decision.

Conversely, minimizing or disregarding the greatness of these victories makes you lose your excitement for accomplishment. It causes you to feel flat. It might even make you feel miserable for missing out on what you wanted. That's why the *yetzer hara* devotes so much effort to stop you from feeling good about your successes.

Often, we don't realize that we are racking up priceless accomplishments at an astronomical rate. We focus on what we messed up rather than on what we got right. We even fault ourselves for our impulses, acting as if we created them. To change your perspective, do the following exercise for three weeks:

Take an index card or small piece of paper and keep it in your pocket. Tally on one line for each time you make any bit of internal push against your desires. This includes clearing your thoughts, not looking at what you shouldn't, or doing any action to beat your desires. Add a point for each time you push, even if it is in the same situation and even if you ended up giving in. For example, if you were challenged and wanted to look at or think about something and had to strengthen yourself three times within ten seconds not to give in, add three points. (For each fifth point, draw a horizontal line across the four vertical lines to make it easier to keep track of how many points you have.) At the end of the week, see how many points you earned. Then, start again on the next line. (It's easy and it works wonders! **Do it!**)

Recording a point for each bit of effort will help you *feel* that your initial impulses are not your fault (as we will discuss in Chapter 43). You will realize that these desires come from the *yetzer hara* and that your job is to deal with them properly. You

will stop looking down on yourself for having these thoughts pop up, no matter how bad they are. Instead, you will realize the incredible opportunity they provide, and you will focus on gaining by controlling yourself.

This exercise will also help you focus on accomplishing instead of focusing on your imperfections. You will realize that the goal of life is not to be born perfect and stay that way. A piece of wood is perfect. It never sins and has no bad character traits, but that doesn't make it significant. Of course, you must be careful not to sin, but you cannot forget that **the point of life is to accomplish and to grow as a person**. Rather than focusing on not becoming damaged and viewing your battles against the *yetzer hara* as nuisances — what a depressing way to live! — you will feel enthusiastic about your battles.

Most important, this exercise forces you to notice how much you are accomplishing every day. Every small burst of effort is a major accomplishment. Each time we push against our desires is a profound *mitzvah* in itself. Our gains are impressive and abundant! This exercise will keep us focused on the major accomplishments we are racking up left and right. We will feel good about ourselves and be energized over our opportunity to accomplish.

“But is it true that every small effort is a separate accomplishment?” you might wonder. “And if I end up giving in, does it really matter how many times I tried to stop myself?”

In his introduction to *Sefer Shemiras Halashon*, the Chofetz Chaim relates that the Vilna Gaon would quote a *Midrash* that says, “For every second a person holds himself back from forbidden speech, he merits a pleasure that no creature or angel can fathom.” The Chofetz Chaim notes that the *Midrash* does not say every month, week, day, or even minute. It says every second!

That is the reward granted for withholding from doing any

aveirah when challenged. Each instant is a separate *mitzvah*! Every second we control ourselves is so precious — even if we give in to the same desire moments later — because that second of effort is a victory in itself! It's an act of listening to Hashem. Now imagine what we will accomplish once we gain control over ourselves. We will rack up accomplishments at an astounding rate!

Now, we can appreciate the incredible gift that life is. We have the most amazing opportunity ever! We are so fortunate.

Celebrate *every* victory over the *yetzer hara*. Pump your fist over and over in excitement, and tell yourself, "I just accomplished an act of greatness that I will take pride in forever! I just grew as a person — I feel stronger already! I acted like the person I want to become.

"I know Hashem is beaming with pride (if it could be), and it makes me feel so good! Hashem is telling the angels to look at what His beloved son — me — just did! He is so excited about what I just accomplished! He's thrilled because He can reward me like He wants to!"

Celebrating our victories will give us the determination we need to stand up to the *yetzer hara* the next time he challenges us. We will have the strength to pump our fist once again and confidently declare, "**I am not giving in! I want to win, and I will!**" This determination will grant us the strength to overcome challenges that would otherwise be overwhelming.

Celebrating our victories is crucial for winning the intense battles of the 21st century. It will awaken our excitement to defeat the *yetzer hara* and accomplish incredible feats. This will give us the strength to reach unprecedented heights in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- At times, Hashem even performs miracles for those who control their desires. This shows us the incredibly high regard Hashem has for victories in this battle.
- It is vital that we celebrate every victory over the *yetzer hara* and realize what an incredible accomplishment each second of effort is. This will bring us profound success and make our lives thrilling and fulfilling.

CHAPTER

Twenty Six

Making It Last

Being inspired is an amazing experience. Having the clarity to see what matters and what doesn't is so empowering. But unfortunately, those feelings don't last. Inspiration quickly fades, and it seems that we are back where we started.

When a person blows air into a balloon, the balloon expands for a short time, but then the air flies out and the balloon goes back to its original size. Similarly, our motivation seems to pump us up for just a short time, only to leave us as we were before. The clarity we had doesn't last; though we still know that spiritual accomplishment matters the most, we can't get ourselves to *feel* it. We must figure out how to make our motivation last, so we can live with the exciting perspective we seek.

Before we start, we must realize that we are not left with nothing when our motivation fades. Though it is hard to see, each time we become inspired, a little bit of the experience stays with us. Over time, our essence gradually changes, until we find that our perspective on life has changed. Our new values come alive. We begin to appreciate the significance of overcoming difficulties. This perspective gradually becomes our way of life, and even if our ability to feel it fluctuates at times, it never fades (*Ohr Yisroel*, Letter 10).

But this is not enough for us. We don't want to lose our

clarity on life. We want to always be energized about winning our battles, and we can't afford to wait for it to develop. We need it to beat the *yetzer hara*, and he is not going to wait for us.

The way to keep our inner fire strong is to read something that gets us excited *every day*. This cannot be stressed enough. If we want to live motivated, we need our daily medicine. We must devote a few minutes every day to reading and thinking about our awesome opportunity. We have to dream about becoming someone special. We have to think about how badly we want to become great, and then plan how we will win our battles and get there. We must make conquering our desires one of our highest aspirations, because winning difficult battles is the pinnacle of serving Hashem. We must frequently visualize ourselves overcoming these challenges and reaching greatness. This will make these feelings an active part of us.

In addition, **we must celebrate our victories *every time* whether they seem big or small**, as *Chovos Halevavos* (5:5) instructs. Over time, this changes our attitude toward challenges. We develop excitement about winning difficult battles, and we identify ourselves as people working hard toward that goal. Consistently celebrating our successes makes these feelings part of us.

But no matter how real this perspective has become for us, we still have to take our dose of motivation *every day*. If we don't, it will slowly weaken and no longer always be on our minds. If we leave it even longer, even though these feelings defined us, they will fade. The stronger a person is, the longer it takes, but one day he wakes up to find that his values have been overtaken by something new. **Do not let this happen. Read, think, and dream about accomplishing and attaining greatness *every day*. Don't take anything for granted.** Make this attitude more than just a fading inspiration; make it a way of life!

The best way to turn inspiration into a new perspective on life is to act on it. When we are inspired and stand up to the *yetzer hara*, the feelings of inspiration seep into our essence. In addition, our victories themselves — even if they are not fueled by inspiration — make us stronger. Over time, this turns accomplishing despite difficulty into one of our biggest goals. We become special people, warriors who look forward to fighting the *yetzer hara* in the most difficult battle known to man. We start to enjoy the sweetness of success and dream of attaining greatness. The more we accomplish with enthusiasm, the stronger these feelings get.

Of course, we are not always given the opportunity to do battle right after becoming inspired. But we can still create a deep, lasting impression by figuring out what our next challenge will probably be and using our inspiration to build a firm determination to win it. The excitement and resolve to win seeps into our essence and leaves an imprint. Building determination also makes us stronger people. It develops our willpower, a vital tool for defeating the *yetzer hara*.

Right after a victory is another great time to increase our resolve to succeed. When we win a battle, we must bask in the sweet taste of victory, and then resolve to accomplish even more, knowing that *we want more victories because winning is the best experience on Earth!* We must then verbalize our feelings of determination over and over. When said amid exhilaration about what we can achieve or in celebration of a triumph, these words cement these feelings within us. If we do this frequently, our enthusiasm will stay strong, and over time we will change dramatically.⁴⁰

40. Although there is some debate whether chanting words we don't believe in makes a gradual impact or not, there is no doubt that verbally expressing our actual feelings strengthens them

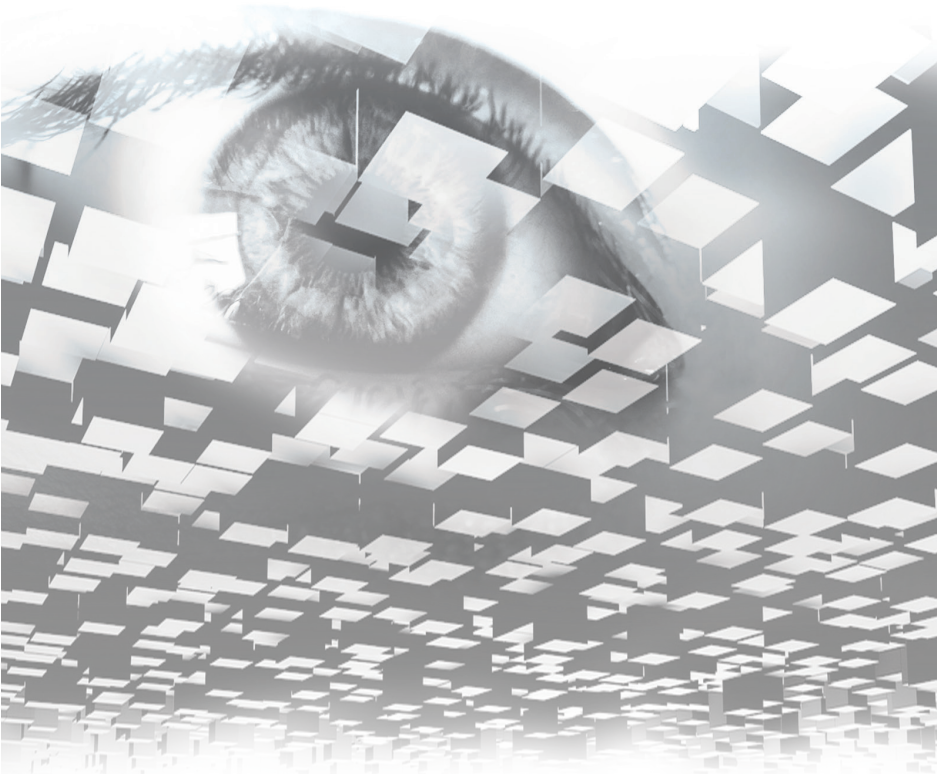
When we feel a surge of excitement to succeed, we mustn't forget this important step. We must capitalize on those feelings by exclaiming to ourselves, "I will win this battle. I am going to do something extremely rare: I will defeat the *yetzer hara* and accomplish extraordinary acts of greatness. Success is the sweetest feeling, and I will attain it! I will not give in. This is my moment of destiny! I am going to cash in on this opportunity and reach greatness! This is the moment I have been waiting for!"

Say these words with gusto. Repeat each sentence multiple times. Each time you say it, pump your fist strongly and feel the energy pulsing through your veins. This will concretize these feelings within you, giving you immense strength for your upcoming battles. Follow that up by closing your eyes and actually visualizing yourself standing strong in your next battle. This technique combines awareness, desire to win, and willpower to give you the determination to crush the *yetzer hara* with Hashem's help.

When we take what we have learned in these chapters — having excitement over our ability to reach greatness, holding ourselves high as fighters, and building firm determination — and put it into practice when we are challenged, that strengthens these feelings the most. In today's world, we have many opportunities to do so because the challenges are so frequent. If we can defeat the *yetzer hara* with excitement and determination to win, we will crystallize these feelings within ourselves, and we will become mighty warriors in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Every time we get inspired, it makes a subtle impression upon our essence. Over time, these impressions accumulate and turn us into the person we want to be.
- Inspiration fades over time, but we can keep it strong by reviewing material that gets us excited **every day**.
- Another way to make motivation last longer is to act on it to win battles with excitement.
- We can also strengthen these feelings by building determination to win.



Part 7 – Willpower

CHAPTER

Twenty Seven

The Right Attitude Towards Willpower

Note: If you are dealing with depression or emotional problems, a down period, or excessive guilt, skip to chapters 28-30 and then skip to Part 8 (Chapter 34). If you have any questions, please contact me at thebattleofthegeneration@gmail.com.

After forty years of traveling in the desert, the Jews were ready to enter *Eretz Yisrael*. But their leader, Moshe Rabbeinu, would not be joining them. Shortly before his death, Moshe informed them that after crossing into *Eretz Yisrael*, they would enter a treaty with Hashem at two mountains, *Har Gerizim* and *Har Eival*.

Moshe explained how the process would work. First, the *Leviim* would turn toward *Har Gerizim* and proclaim, "Blessed will be the man who does not make idols." The nation would answer "Amen." Then, the *Leviim* would turn toward *Har Eival* and say, "Cursed will be the man who makes idols," and the nation would answer "Amen." This process would continue with the *Leviim* mentioning certain *aveiros* in this blessing and curse format. The procedure would conclude with a blessing for those who would uphold the Torah, and a curse for those who would not.

Moshe proceeded to tell the people some of the blessings they would receive for keeping the Torah. Then, he told the nation what would befall them if they would not listen to Hashem's

commandments, listing ninety-eight of the most horrifying curses — torments that our nation has unfortunately experienced over its long history. This was the treaty between Hashem and the Jewish nation (*Devarim* Chapters 27-28).

Right before informing the nation about this treaty, Moshe Rabbeinu instructed them to build an altar upon entering *Eretz Yisrael* and to offer sacrifices to Hashem on it. Moshe related that at that point, they would be happy before Hashem. The Sforno (*Devarim* 27:7) explains that they would rejoice because of the treaty they would be entering with Hashem on *Har Gerizim* and *Har Eival*.

Rabbi Henach Leibowitz, *zt"l*, (*Chiddushei Lev Sefer Devarim*, pages 161-162) deduced that the Sforno is saying that the nation would be happy because of the portion of the treaty that would take place on *Har Gerizim* as well as the part that would be accepted on *Har Eival*. (The deduction appears to be from the Sforno's comment that the nation would be happy because of the treaty of *Har Gerizim* and *Har Eival*. Had the Sforno meant just the blessings of *Har Gerizim*, that's all he would have written.) This is perplexing. We can understand why the people would be happy upon hearing of the blessings, but why would the *Har Eival* portion bring them joy? Why would they be happy to hear that they would undergo horrific suffering if they would not keep the *mitzvos*?

Rabbi Leibowitz explained that the Jews understood life. They realized that the point of this world is to accomplish for the next world. They recognized that experiences in this world are inconsequential when compared to the pleasures of the next world. Further, acting properly was of utmost importance to them. They cared about serving Hashem far more than anything else. Thus, there was no doubt they would be ecstatic to hear the curses. They would appreciate them as an extra safeguard to

make sure they would accomplish *what they really wanted to* and not stumble into sin.

Moshe Rabbeinu knew that even hearing about torturous punishments would bring joy to the people because they would understand that this safeguard was necessary. They would realize that although accomplishment was their strongest goal, motivation eventually wears off. Excitement and perspective do not last forever, and desire can increase far beyond what is normally anticipated. They would understand that they might feel differently in the future and overlook what truly matters. Because of their desire to serve Hashem, they would surely be happy to enter a treaty that would ensure that they avoid sin and accomplish what mattered most to them. They would be overjoyed to receive this gift from Hashem that they could use to overpower their temptations even if their determination would weaken.

People who have a burning desire to accomplish are happy to hear about ramifications for not acting appropriately. They understand that at times, their desire to serve Hashem will be weaker. Thus, they are grateful that there are consequences, so they can use them to strengthen their determination to overcome their desires. They are happy that Hashem gave them an extra weapon to ensure they do the right thing.

This must be our attitude toward all prohibitions and punishments.⁴¹ By making these actions blatantly forbidden, Hashem grants us strength to say no. It's so much harder to be firm when we're not sure whether what we want to do is *really*

41. Of course, it takes time and effort for spiritual achievements to become our greatest desire. Until we reach that level, it will sometimes be difficult for us to have a positive attitude about the severity of our actions. We should work with whatever we are comfortable with. Every person must maintain a healthy balance that is right for him on his current level.

forbidden. The *yetzer hara* has his fun in the gray area, when we have only a vague feeling that the given activity is wrong but don't realize that it is a blatant prohibition or know its severity. It's much harder to see that those actions are wrong, and it's easier to rationalize following our urges.⁴² That's why Hashem made many clear-cut rules in this area. The *halachos* give us the strength to overcome the great challenge even if we lose our motivation and really want to give in. Dwelling on the fact that the action is definitely forbidden will help us stop ourselves.

This is the goal of this section of the book. We will learn how to remember what is wrong and to eliminate the gray area. This will give us the insurance we need. We will have something strong enough to stop our desires from increasing so they don't go out of control. We will increase our inner strength to stand up to our desires, and we will attain a clear state of mind for making decisions. We will train ourselves to *feel* that the given action is wrong and to appreciate its severity. We will leave ourselves no room to rationalize sin, knowing clearly that it is forbidden. This will give us the strength to control ourselves even when it's tough, so we can attain the best achievements and reach greatness.

We must have the right attitude toward the *mitzvos*. We must realize that we gain from even the tiniest *mitzvah*. This will make us eager to do *mitzvos*. At first, we must focus on our personal gain from the *mitzvos* — that they give our lives meaning and significance, and that they are our opportunity to earn eternal bliss and greatness. Eventually, we will reach the level of appreciating the *mitzvos* because they bring us close to Hashem.

Appreciating the *mitzvos* is the foundation of our entire

42. See Rashi *Sanhedrin* 19b s.v. *Kerashei*, who explains that Boaz's challenge was much harder than Yosef's because Rus was technically not forbidden to him.

service of Hashem. It brings us to serve Him in the best way: with excitement. It makes us want to win our battles and brings great joy into our lives.

Once we love the *mitzvos*, we will be eager to use willpower to control our desires. We know that overcoming the most difficult challenges yields the greatest accomplishments. But the catch is that it's so hard to win those battles — we need our strongest weapons to pull through. Thus, we are so fortunate to have this extra tactic, which will ensure that we don't miss out on our greatest accomplishments.

Willpower is vital for success against the *yetzer hara*. Let's use it with the right attitude to triumph in the greatest battle of all time, the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- By mastering the right perspective and tasting success in our battles, we will become happy to have prohibitions with consequences, because they ensure that we fulfill our dreams.

CHAPTER

Twenty Eight

Why We Need Willpower

Developing strong willpower is an important part of our battle plan. Being excited to serve Hashem is not enough. To win the battle against the *yetzer hara*, we need clear knowledge of what we cannot do and a firm commitment not to give in **no matter what**.

Undoubtedly, our most essential weapon is excitement about accomplishing and attaining greatness. If a person thinks he only prevents a loss but doesn't gain by not giving in, even if he stops himself from giving in out of obligation and fear of punishment, he is fighting a losing battle. He tries to hang on against his will while his strength weakens and his desires grow progressively stronger. This misconception is draining and depressing. The person feels forced to do what he doesn't want to without gaining anything. Eventually, his willpower cracks and he gives in. For this reason, willpower doesn't work so well when it is a person's primary "motivator." A person can only hold out against himself for so long, especially if he is unhappy.

Furthermore, Hashem gave us the *mitzvos* as opportunities. They are not burdens. Hashem loves it much more when we do appreciate them and do them happily. Obviously, a person who wishes there were no Torah so he could pursue his desires, even if he controls himself using willpower, does not do the

mitzvos happily. He doesn't really want to serve Hashem, even if he avoids such thoughts because he knows they are improper. This is another reason it is so important that we realize the great opportunity the *mitzvos* truly are.

In addition, if we are excited to do the *mitzvos*, we won't look for excuses no matter how strong our impulses are because we will want to win the battle. We will appreciate that we are acquiring eternity by overcoming our urges, which will energize us to fight. In contrast, a person who only feels obligated will look for ways to convince himself that self-control is optional or impossible in order to permit himself to succumb.

Another weakness of relying too much on willpower is that it takes tremendous exertion. When a person is challenged, his desires activate and *he* wants to give in. Fighting this with force is strenuous because the person is fighting against himself. The person quickly weakens and is drained of energy. A person in such a state is fighting a "losing battle," trying to hang on until he can't while his desires keep getting stronger. If the battle prolongs, he might eventually run out of willpower and crack. Thus, relying solely on willpower, especially for battles that last long, is dangerous, though of course willpower is vital.

Another limitation of willpower is that it is hard to use if one is struggling. It lacks effectiveness because it is undermined by the person's inconsistent behavior. It is difficult for a struggling person to say, "I don't do that!" when he knows he does.

Even worse, a struggling person will probably find willpower painful because working on it will highlight all he has been doing wrong. A struggling person rarely escapes in one shot, and doesn't feel completely removed from his mistakes. Thinking about how bad his sins are could debilitate him and make him give up. It takes great wisdom to find the right balance so he can use willpower to control himself without beating himself up over

his sins. He must proceed cautiously to ensure that he doesn't damage himself while trying to improve.

Ironically, beating oneself up does way more damage than good, both in this battle and in general. We must proceed carefully with the proper guidance as we develop willpower. As always, we must primarily focus on the exciting feats we can achieve by overcoming our challenges. A positive outlook is vital for success in every area of our lives.⁴³

However, there are some major holes in the arsenal of a person lacking willpower. Excitement to accomplish alone is not enough. Even the most motivated person has stretches when he isn't motivated to fight. Moods fluctuate and things happen that make the person unable to feel excited to reach greatness. This makes the person susceptible to the enticements of the *yetzer hara*. Without willpower to stand up against desire in these situations, it is difficult to prevail.

In addition, there will be times when we are surprised by desire. When we face challenges that we're unprepared for, the desires quickly seep through our defenses and affect our thoughts. It is unlikely that we will have strong feelings of excitement to accomplish when we didn't anticipate the challenge, and we will be in grave danger. We begin to feel differently and to *really* want it before we can react to motivate ourselves. Then it is too late,

43. Some people are prone to crushing themselves over their mistakes. They are paralyzed with guilt, even after they have regretted their choices and changed their ways. Such people must be even more cautious about being damaged by willpower. They might even need to leave this subject for a later time when they are stronger. Of course, if the person needs to limit his exposure to these ideas, that doesn't mean he should forget about improving; rather, he should focus on growing, and primarily use positive messages and techniques to reach his goals. If a person constantly feels crushed by his past mistakes, especially if it affects his ability to function properly, he should immediately seek help from a competent mental-health professional *with da'as Torah*. One should not let this situation go on, as it is dangerous physically and spiritually. Also, such a person will benefit from reading Appendix A. If you know someone who struggles with this, get him help right away. You might save his life.

because we want to give in so strongly and no longer want to do anything to hold ourselves back.

We will need to use our willpower to restrain ourselves in these situations. Even if our desires pull us in all different directions, we can still hang on and stop ourselves from doing anything wrong. Although we prefer not to lose control of our emotions because we can only last so long, we can still hold on for a significant stretch if we have strong willpower. Hopefully, we will persist long enough for the challenging situation to end or for our desires to fade. Although this is not an ideal plan, we need it for these situations because they do happen.

We don't want to miss out on success in these battles. A victory when we were caught off guard and had to really fight is remarkable because it is so difficult. Even lasting for a few seconds is amazing. Each instant and every time we push back is a separate, astounding achievement and a step on the path toward greatness!

Being infiltrated by raging desires that we couldn't shut off might cause us to feel ashamed, even though we hung on with willpower and didn't do anything wrong. Realizing that desire was pulling us instead of us controlling it can make us feel down. However, we must realize that these accomplishments are the greatest because they are so difficult! Realizing this will make us proud of what we have accomplished rather than ashamed, which will help us succeed in our subsequent battles as well.⁴⁴

The *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 81a) relates a fascinating story:

A group of young women had been taken captive by gentiles and were redeemed by the people of Nehardea.

44. Obviously, we must also work on limiting the intensity of our impulses, especially once we have seen our susceptibility. This will make our future battles much easier. We will discuss this part of our game plan in Chapters 34-35.

They put the young women in the attic of Rav Amram Chasida (the pious one), figuring they would be safe there. The people removed the ladder to ensure that no man would go up to the attic.

That night, as one of the young women passed by the hatch in the floor of the attic, her shining face radiated light through the hatch, and Rav Amram saw her. He took the ladder — a ladder so heavy that ten people couldn't move it — and moved it by himself to climb to the attic. When he got halfway up the ladder, he planted his feet [to stand firmly with strength to overcome his desires — Rashi] and screamed, "There is a fire in the house of Amram!"

The rabbis came running and were shocked to see that instead of a fire, a scandal was unfolding. The rabbis told Rav Amram, "You embarrassed us [by causing the whole town to see that you almost sinned, after we left these captives in your house assuming that you wouldn't do anything]!"

Rav Amram answered, "It is better that I brought you embarrassment in this world and not in the next world [which would have happened had I sinned]."

Rav Amram then demanded that the yetzer hara leave him. The yetzer hara emerged, appearing as a pillar of fire. Rav Amram told the yetzer hara, "See that you are fire and I am flesh, yet I am stronger than you."

This story is baffling. Rav Amram was pushed around by the *yetzer hara*. He could not shut off his desires. He seemed to have completely lost control over himself as he employed superhuman strength to move the ladder in order to sin. He could only stop

himself from sinning by embarrassing himself and all the rabbis. He should have been embarrassed about what happened, and relieved that he had somehow saved himself from sinning. Yet not only wasn't he ashamed, he even proclaimed to the *yetzer hara*, "See! I am stronger than you!" This is hard to understand.

But in reality, what Rav Amram said makes a lot of sense. There will be times when we face challenges that we are not ready for. When that happens, the *yetzer hara* penetrates and takes over our thinking before we can stop him. Things quickly change from how they were just a few minutes earlier, and we feel, "I want it!" We no longer want to do anything to make our desires go away. We feel overwhelmed. It takes tremendous exertion to refocus ourselves, and we don't even want to anyway. Getting what we desire becomes all that matters. Our desires influence every decision we make.

When this happens, the only shot we have at winning is to hang onto our willpower and attack the *yetzer hara*. We must say **NO** and mean it. This is very difficult, and the longer the battle rages on, the harder it becomes. Overcoming these desires might just be the greatest victory there is. If we can pull it off, there is nothing for us to be ashamed of. In fact, the instinct to be embarrassed or upset that we desired is just the *yetzer hara* trying to make us feel down rather than excited after such an incredible victory.

We should not be disheartened over losing our equilibrium. That is what happens in these situations, and our goal is to nonetheless emerge victorious. Though we shouldn't go around telling everyone that we faced these desires — it is nobody's business other than our own — there is nothing for us to be ashamed of.

To the contrary, we should be excited when we succeed in this fashion. Because of the difficulty, it is one of the most precious

accomplishments that exist. Even if we felt out of control, holding on makes us great.

This is why Rav Amram declared that he was stronger than the *yetzer hara*. Though it looked like the *yetzer hara* was pushing him around, in reality Rav Amram did something astounding! He defeated the *yetzer hara*, who is like a pillar of fire.

Rav Amram masterfully blended willpower with excitement to accomplish. He was so energized by his massive victory that he called out to the *yetzer hara*, "See that I am stronger than you!" This is the secret weapon of the successful: they are fired up to defeat the *yetzer hara*. Willpower alone isn't enough to conquer desire. We must feel that we gain immensely every time we win and every bit we try. We must be excited about the incredible opportunity we have to become great.

There is another lesson to take from this story. When Rav Amram broke through and regained control, he didn't just go down the ladder or even just leave his house. Rather, he did something that ended his test, even though it brought him great embarrassment. Why? Why didn't he just leave?

The answer is that Rav Amram realized that a real part of him desperately wanted to sin. He had been overwhelmed and barely managed to break free. He knew this sudden resurgence of determination would not last long. The desires raged within him, and it was only a matter of time before his willpower would crack. If the situation was not over by then, no matter how far away he would be, he would just return and sin. Realizing he would only win if his test concluded right away, Rav Amram did what it took to end it.

This is a hard lesson to put into practice. When part of us wants to give in and we are barely hanging on with our fading willpower, we don't want to end the test. We don't want to give up our "great opportunity" to get what we desire, because *we*

want it. At that point, we want to fulfill the desire; we don't want it to go away. We surely don't want to create a situation where we will long to give in but be unable to, and certainly don't want to embarrass ourselves or sacrifice something important to make it end. To pull this off, we must go against our nature. We will have to get past this discomfort — whether it is evident or subconscious — to make the right choice. It definitely isn't easy.

Sometimes, we can even stop an entire series of challenges with just one action. One such example is Internet-related challenges. As long as we haven't been sucked in too far, we can permanently end the challenge by eliminating our ability to give in.⁴⁵ And even if we have stumbled and awakened our desires, and they won't completely go away just by removing what tempts us, we still benefit greatly. We lose a major trigger for our desires as well as much of our ability to give in.

If we can muster the strength to end such challenges despite the overwhelming difficulty, the payoff is enormous. We will be rewarded for having won every battle we avoided. Removing our ability to succumb is a phenomenal achievement.

This method can help you win the most difficult challenges. First, figure out what your weak spot is. Then, determine whether there is a way to avoid the trigger or to eliminate your ability to sin. It is so hard, but gather your strength and do what needs to be done. You will bask in your incredible accomplishment forever.

We must realize that whenever we need to use willpower to stop ourselves, we can only hold on for so long. As the battle

45. Consult with the right people to figure out the best solution. It should at least include installing a strong filter and an accountability program that e-mails a list of all the websites visited to someone trustworthy. Do something that works for yourself and your family. Use your head.

If you need help, contact TAG of Flatbush: www.tagflatbush.com ; info@tagflatbush.com; 718-717-8241.

goes on, we weaken and our desires increase. We can hang on for a while — longer than we think — but it is a matter of time until we are overpowered. We will only win if the situation ends or our desires calm down. But we avoid all this when we remove our ability to sin.

Ending the challenge guarantees success. It is the only way to ensure that we won't eventually succumb. Therefore, if it is possible, *it must be done!* We might regret it right after, as our desires desperately lash out, but it will be too late — we will no longer be able to sin. Eventually, our desires will calm down and we will realize what we just accomplished. We will be so proud of what we pulled off in the face of great difficulty, and we will see that we didn't miss out on anything.

To attain self-control, we need both desire to win and strong willpower. Using both in tandem will help us reach unfathomable heights in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Although our primary motivator is our desire to succeed and reach greatness, we also need willpower to ensure victory.
- When we lose control and still hang on, **that is the greatest accomplishment.**

CHAPTER

Twenty Nine

Building Willpower

Like muscles, willpower grows stronger with repeated use. Each time we say no to our desires, our inner strength increases, leaving us stronger for the next battle. Though at that moment we have used up our strength and are weakened, in the long run we become stronger as people (*Sefer Cheshbon Hanefesh*, 56; Rabbi Shafier, Shmuz 45: “WYSIWYG/ Developing Willpower,” www.TheShmuz.com).

This is encouraging, because as *Sefer Cheshbon Hanefesh* explains, our exertion strengthens us even if we lose. Each bit of effort is like a push-up for our willpower. Straining ourselves now, even if we don’t win the battle, prepares us to win down the road. By keeping our efforts up, we are paving the way for complete dominance.

But that’s not enough for us. We don’t like losing. We don’t want to keep falling short until we finally become strong. We need a way to increase our willpower even when we are not challenged. We need a method that will give it a temporary boost as well as permanently fortify it.

Fortunately, such a method does exist. We can develop our inner muscles by building our determination to obliterate the *yetzer hara*. This will give us the strength to overpower our urges.

Building determination consists of two parts. The first

focuses on strengthening our overall selves. We do this by repeatedly telling ourselves positive messages such as how determined we are to win, as we discussed at the end of Chapter 26. It's like a workout for our willpower, and it amps up our desire to win as well. It also keeps us alert, so we're not blindsided by challenges.

The second part focuses on committing to win specific upcoming battles. We decide to stand strong *no matter what* in a challenge we anticipate, and we repeatedly stress our conviction to strengthen it. This boosts us for that battle. This method helps us overcome the hardest challenges and earn priceless achievements. Our preparation also indirectly strengthens our overall willpower. And since we grow each time we use willpower in battle, that strengthens us in the long run as well.

Start by playing out in your head hour by hour what the next couple of days are likely to bring. Think about where you will be and whom you will be with. Remember what you have been vulnerable to. Use this to figure out what challenges might arise, and pick one.

Next, determine the right way to act. Before desire pulls us, we see more clearly, and it is easier to figure out our objective. Once you know what's right, you must firmly commit to do it. Decide what you will and won't do. Specify the lines you won't cross *no matter what*. Make the decision now, before desire can sway you.

Finally, close your eyes and create a mental video in which you envision the situation unfolding. Visualize yourself being challenged and confidently saying no. See yourself winning and rejoicing over your success.

But you can go even further. You can build on your enthusiasm and etch it into your essence. First, increase your excitement to accomplish by remembering that victory brings

you your greatest wish — greatness. Next, transform that energy into determination by firmly thinking, “**I will not do that!**” Think or say this repeatedly with gusto, each time pumping your fist or doing whatever makes you feel confident. The enthusiasm and determination will give you incredible strength.

Determination must come from *you* wanting to succeed. This comes from contemplating the thrilling payoff. When you fight, you accomplish unique feats that you will take pride in forever! You will make Hashem so happy and proud! You will act with self-mastery, and you will continue to move closer to becoming the person *you* want to be.

Here are some statements to repeatedly think about and say confidently before a challenge:

“I want to succeed and reach greatness.”

“I will not do that *no matter what!*”

“I know what I need to do and I will do it! I will make myself really proud.”

“I’m going to show myself what I’m capable of!”

“Though I desire to do something and it is enjoyable, it isn’t worth it and I won’t do it. **I will choose greatness over cheap thrills!**”

Say these statements with excitement. It is best to choose one statement and repeat it over and over confidently, rather than cycling through the different statements. Use whatever phrase speaks to you best, and experiment with the others or make up your own later on.

Preparing yourself before the challenge is the key to victory. By deciding how we will act in advance, we can make clear decisions and be ready for our impulses. This strengthens us to crush the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Building determination before we are challenged strengthens us to stand up to desire.

CHAPTER

Thirty

Clarity When Making Decisions

When a person must make a decision and he strongly desires one of the options, it is difficult to choose rationally. Often, people go with what they want to do, and then use logic to defend their decision by thinking of reasons that support it.⁴⁶

This creates a tricky situation. For the same reason people support their decisions with logic — to avoid feeling they acted foolishly — we are uncomfortable questioning our rationalizations. We don't want to even consider that we might be rationalizing rather than choosing intelligently, because it makes us feel foolish. But we can't totally trick ourselves, and we do realize that our emotions are affecting us. This creates discomfort, as we notice that we care more about what we want than about what is best for us. This makes us feel confused. We are drawn both ways and have difficulty deciding. This is when the *yetzer hara* pounces. When we feel confused and ashamed, we are at our weakest.

Ironically, the antidote to this trap is to admit that we are affected by what we want, like all human beings. By accepting

46. This is a major reason we must focus so much on wanting to win our battles: **the smoothest way to make the right decision is to want to make that decision.**

that it is normal to care more about what we want than about choosing logically, we calm down and see clearly.

We must realize that it's normal to want things. Our desires might be self-serving and might even be damaging to us, but they are normal. Once we accept that Hashem created us with other drives besides for just wanting to do what is proper, we will be calm and able to make the best decision. But if we deny it, our desires will rage and overwhelm us, or at least remain hidden and affect our choices without us noticing.

We can only have clarity if we put everything on the table. We want to make decisions that are rooted in logic, while also accounting for what we want to do, what we *really* want out of life, and what is best for us. The way to do this is to consider both choices **on paper**. (You can shred the paper after if you are worried about others seeing it.) This eliminates confusion, giving us the clarity we need to make the best decision.

On a piece of paper, make a column for each option. Designate the top of each column for the positives of that choice and the bottom for the negatives. First, in the column of the option you wish you could choose, jot down in the positives section that you want it and why. Then for each choice, write all the positives and negatives. List any emotional factors that make you prefer that choice among the positives, and anything that causes discomfort with the negatives. This includes social pressure or that you will feel you missed out. Don't hide your emotions. They are normal. Don't be embarrassed. Get them out on paper. Your sole objective is to make the best decision, which you need clarity for. In fact, your desire for that choice will be factored into the decision — you will go with that choice if it's appropriate and smart. Once you have acknowledged these feelings, they will no longer hide beneath the surface, swaying your decision and making you feel overwhelmed.

Next, ask yourself: What do I expect to happen as a result of each choice? Play it out in your mind, and write it down in the appropriate section. Note all the short and long-term benefits and issues each option yields, including pleasure, happiness, feeling good about yourself, regret, or achieving your dreams of attaining unique success. Get everything out in the open.

Clarifying all this calms your desires. You will still care about getting what you want, which is fine. But you won't want to do anything foolish or damaging to get it. By having all our desires, agendas, and benefits clearly defined, and by accepting that we do desire and that indulging does provide some enjoyment, we will make a satisfying decision without feeling overwhelmed. And amazingly, we might find that what we want has changed now that our desires are no longer confusing us from beneath the surface.

Spelling out our wishes and the outcomes of each option will help us make the best choice without discomfort. We will make the best decisions even in the face of desire, and we will achieve unprecedented success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Clearly defining our options and spelling out all our desires *on paper* gives us the clarity to make the best decision.

CHAPTER

Thirty One

How Willpower Works

We need willpower to overcome temptation. Besides for making our battles easier, willpower helps us be vigilant when we are challenged.

There are many ways willpower helps us stand strong. First, knowing what we can't do *no matter what* eliminates the gray area where the *yetzer hara* has his fun. It's hard for the *yetzer hara* to get us to do something we know is wrong. It's much easier for him to sway us after making us unsure whether the action is wrong. He implants rationalizations into our thinking and at the same time makes us desperately want to indulge. This enables us to fall for the rationalizations without seeing the holes in the argument.

Here are some common rationalizations that can sway a person:

"What's the big deal? It's not so bad. If it's *asur* at all, it's probably just a *derabanan*. But anyway, it's probably technically permitted. Though it isn't the best conduct in the world, it's not really wrong, and I really want to do it, so why should I hold back?"

"Who did I hurt? Nobody! So what's the problem? There's nothing wrong with it."

"What's the big deal if I do this once? I am just trying it

out. What, am I going to live without ever experiencing this? I am just doing it this one time; I'm not a sinner. There are no serious consequences. It's no big deal."

"All my friends do a thousand times worse than this. It can't be too bad. And even if I do this one action that isn't so great, I'm still way better than them anyway."

"This *mitzvah* is only for *tzaddikim*. It is only like a *chumrah*."

"What does Hashem expect? It's impossible! How can He ask me to control myself? Hashem cannot really expect me to keep this."

"Who can hope to be clean from these sins? There's no way I will succeed, so it's pointless to deprive myself now. I'll be a failure anyway, so I might as well enjoy myself."

"This is such a great pleasure! If you get it, you won't lack anything. This is all that matters. Don't think about tomorrow. It's not real."

"You will be euphoric over experiencing this pleasure forever. After attaining this, nothing will ever bother you. You will be above everyone else who never experienced this pleasure. You will be unique."

"This is such an incredible pleasure! It feels so good, and you can't live without it. Don't even think about why you shouldn't give in. You *need* it. This pleasure is the most amazing experience that exists! It's worth going to *Gehennom* for this!"

And finally, if a person has sinned a few times: "I'm no *tzaddik*. I *do* these things. I already do much worse regularly. What would it matter if I control myself now? I already am a failure and a sinner. Even if I stop myself this time, that won't change. Will it really make a difference if I indulge one more time? I might as well enjoy myself."

These rationalizations are tricks of the *yetzer hara* to get us to give in. But if it would be clear before the challenge begins

that this activity is undoubtedly wrong and may not be done no matter how extenuating the circumstances, the desire would be unable to sway us enough to accept the rationalization. No matter how caught up a person is and how lowly he identifies himself, he won't do what he knows is wrong. Without the ability to rationalize, he is incapable of giving in.

Therefore, we must reinforce that the activity we are trying to get under control is undoubtedly *asur*. The more real this becomes to us, the less we will fall for *yetzer hara's* rationalizations, and the stronger we will be.

This is even more effective if you keep reminding yourself that you are a person who does his best to keep Hashem's will, even when it is difficult. Remind yourself that you don't do things that are *asur*, and build determination not to give in (see Chapter 29). Then, when you are challenged, you will be able to tell yourself, "It's *asur*. I don't do things that are *asur*." This protects you from the *yetzer hara's* excuses that make giving in seem okay. And if you ever are unsure whether a given activity is *asur*, ask someone with *da'as Torah*.

Another way willpower helps us stand strong is that it enables us to confidently say **no** to the *yetzer hara*. The *yetzer hara* creates doubt to weaken our commitment to stand strong. When we are uncertain that the action is wrong, even if we sense that it is inappropriate and plan not to do it, we lack the same determination. But if we remember that indulging is definitely wrong and we remain determined to do what's right, we will have the strength to defeat the *yetzer hara*. Because we will know that it's forbidden and that we don't do what's *asur* no matter what, we won't even consider succumbing. The *yetzer hara* won't be able to penetrate at all.

We must become determined not to give in to the *yetzer hara* no matter what. This will help us not be swayed by desire so

we can stand strong in the battle of the generation.

Note: For more on this topic, listen to Rabbi Shafier's Shmuz 19: "I Never Do Anything Wrong" and Shmuz 42: "Tricks of the Soton" (www.TheShmuz.com).

Quick Recap:

- Knowing what may not be done allows us to see past rationalizations and stand up to forbidden temptations with confidence.

CHAPTER

Thirty Two

Morality

It's the most important phrase for self-control. If we believe it, we won't ever give in.

"What?" you want to know. "What could be so powerful?"

All right, I'll tell you. Here it is:

"I don't do that."

That's right. *"I don't do that."*

When we hold ourselves back from sinning, it's not usually because we think about the consequences. It's not because we remember about Hashem and the Torah. Desire has a way of making us forget about the future and about what really matters. We can contemplate these ideas and strengthen them until we can use them, but even so, they're not usually what stops us. Maybe we hold back because *it's wrong*. But listen carefully, and you'll notice that most of the time, it sounds like this: *I don't do that!*

Our rabbis teach that our feelings of morality — what we won't do because it *feels* wrong — are influenced by how we identify ourselves. *I am a person who doesn't do **that**. It is wrong*. What could be stronger than that? It is real, and it doesn't disappear the second desire strikes.

Thus, the way we perceive ourselves has one of the strongest influences on what we won't allow ourselves to do. If we view ourselves as people who don't sin, we won't (Rabbi

Shafier, Shmuz 73: “Self Respect: the Basis of it All,” www.TheShmuz.com).

This is a major reason behind so many people’s spiritual struggles. Full of tricks to convince people that they are failures, the *yetzer hara* tries to make them identify as people who don’t control themselves. He causes them to think, “But I *do* commit these actions! I am a person who does these things!” This destroys their will to hold back, with devastating results.

The most extreme damage caused by this dirty tactic is when it makes the person feel hopeless. The *yetzer hara* tells him that even if he doesn’t indulge this time, his identity won’t change — he will still be a person who does these things. This crooked outlook gets the person to brand himself negatively if he notices any blemish while ignoring his successes and hard work. Knowing that he won’t think better of himself anyway convinces him that the exertion and pain of deprivation isn’t worth it. If he will still be a disgrace, what does he gain from trying? Naturally, he feels it’s not worth missing out on what he craves for nothing.

The *yetzer hara* can damage a person’s perceived identity after just one flop. If the person tends to focus on his mistakes and ignore all the times he worked so hard to hold back, any error can cause his identity to collapse, taking down his morality with it. He is in danger of thinking something along these lines: “I finally see that I have not been successful. I am a person who does these things. Anything I did right, even the months I controlled myself with great effort, makes no difference; I am still a sinner. I gained nothing from holding back, because despite it all, I’m still a failure.”

The way people perceive themselves is very important to them. If upon slipping up, a person thinks that his weeks of exertion don’t stop him from being labeled a failure, he will feel no better off for his efforts. This puts him in great danger.

But even if the *yetzer hara* can't convince him that all is lost, the person is still susceptible to the big trick. The *yetzer hara* tries to persuade him that the temptation can't be so wrong by reminding him that he has done it many times. Once the person remembers that he does this action, it does not seem so bad. It becomes harder to feel its severity and easier to make excuses.

This effect is magnified because it's so hard to live with the realization that we did something wrong. Deciding that this action isn't so bad eases the pain, so it seems like a great solution. But it leaves us vulnerable to giving in again.

Are our feelings of morality really affected by how we act? I'll prove it. Why are most people devastated if they accidentally eat non kosher food, but they barely shrug their shoulders if they inadvertently speak *lashon hara*? *Lashon hara* is just as serious, if not more so. Sometimes people look at inappropriate images, but wouldn't turn on a light on *Shabbos* to do so. How can we understand such behavior? Both are forbidden. But the way a person acts becomes "what I do," and it just doesn't feel as bad as "what I don't do," even if it is actually worse (*Kiddushin* 40a; *Tosafos Sotah* 7a s.v. *Amar*). We must fix this powerful force, so we can tell the *yetzer hara*, "I don't do that!" and defeat him.

The solution is tricky because it requires a change in perspective. We do our best when we are excited by what we can accomplish and how great we can become. But thinking about greatness can get us to think about where we are holding now. Until we learn how to properly identify ourselves, we must try not to think about our current identity. *Do not think about where you are holding*. It's not relevant right now.

Life's battles are supposed to be tough. Though we hope to ace every challenge, we cannot guarantee perfection. We can't let one mishap define and crush us. We must focus on how much we accomplish and how much greater we reach *every time we exert*

effort to control ourselves, rather than worrying about not being perfect. Focusing on our status in this twisted way is inaccurate, painful, and dangerous. (See Chapters 2, 10, and 18.) We won't be able to properly gauge our status until after we learn the correct perspective and achieve significant success as well.

But not viewing ourselves negatively is not enough. We must rebuild our identity by beginning to think of ourselves positively. Even if we have messed up many times, that doesn't make us bad people. We stumbled; we are not sinners. *And we definitely are not "people who do these things."* Everyone is susceptible to desire, and the battle is incredibly intense. Naturally, we might slip up, especially early on. We might fall many times. Nonetheless, the fact that we are trying hard despite the difficulty and deep down want to win makes us admirable. No matter how many times we lose ourselves, **we are fighters, not failures.**

We must realize the overwhelming odds that every sin we have committed in this area was done out of weakness, not rebellion. A person who in his core wants to serve Hashem but was overpowered by the most difficult challenge that exists cannot be considered a sinner. *He decided to fight back! How can he be bad?* Every attempt he makes to serve Hashem makes Him incredibly proud.

In addition, rather than allowing our sins to define us, we must commit to remove them with *teshuva* and realize that they will be gone. In fact, sincerely accepting to do *teshuva* later even brings some atonement now. And even if we don't succeed in doing a complete *teshuva*, Hashem will take care of our sins in other ways as long as we are trying. We must not let our sins hold us back, because they ultimately won't define us if we put in the effort.

If we work on fighting back and identifying ourselves as people who try to do what's right, before we know it, we will start

thinking: "I don't do these things. They are wrong. Giving in is beneath my dignity. This is just not what I do, even if my *yetzer hara* sometimes overpowered me. I fight back against forbidden desire no matter how hard it is, because I am a fighter!" Once we feel this way, we will quickly gain the upper hand.⁴⁷

Don't think that building your self-image is dishonest or inappropriate. Our sages have repeatedly emphasized the importance of believing in ourselves, and we need it to overcome our impulses. Even if you don't realize it, the *yetzer hara* definitely does. Any inability to view ourselves positively or "religious concerns" that "we really are failing religiously and should stop lying to ourselves" come from him.

Also, we must work hard to detach our morality from how we view ourselves. We must keep our values firm no matter how we have acted. This is hard, because if we know something is wrong but realize we have done it, that creates emotional unrest, and rationalizing that it's not so bad seems to be the easiest solution. We must calm this discomfort by telling ourselves that we aspire to get it right. We might stumble frequently, and we might be far right now, but we will win the war. That is our life's goal.

This will clear the way for us to remember that right and wrong is based on Hashem's decision, not on how we feel about it. We must remember what He has forbidden. This will strengthen our determination to win.

We can align our feelings with Hashem's rules even further by learning the *halachos* in depth with a *Rebbe*. This gets us to grasp that indulging is forbidden and creates an emotional imprint that our actions really matter. These strong feelings of

47. If you are having issues with low self-image or identify yourself as a sinner who cannot control himself, review Chapter 10 and Appendix A.

morality help us stop doing what is forbidden (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 4; *Iggeres HaMussar* by Rav Yisroel Salanter). Further, the *Midrash* (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:4) tells us that when we study the *halachos* in depth, Hashem minimizes or even removes the *yetzer hara* in that area. Studying the *halachos* makes it much easier for us to succeed.

We know it is improper to look at inappropriate images or do other lustful activities. But sometimes, we don't realize that these actions are actually prohibited. They are. They are not overzealous precautions; they are inherently forbidden. It doesn't matter if we would never do the "real" sin. These sins themselves are real sins (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 11).

Learning the *halachos* knocks this in. It helps us realize that these actions are inherently *asur*, which is why we don't do them. We won't need to think about whether they will lead us to worse or not (though we will see in Chapter 41 that they do). Just as we would never do an "actual sin" because it is forbidden, we don't do these sins because they too are forbidden. We must work on this until these actions feel as inappropriate as eating ham. This will give us the strength to stand firm and become great.

The best way to make these prohibitions real is to learn the *halachos* from a *sefer* with a *Rebbe* who will guide and encourage you. He will help you keep the right attitude as you learn the prohibitions, and you will grow strong. Choose the right person from all the rabbis and mentors you know, and let him guide you to success.

Hopefully, we will reach the level where we will be excited to learn the *halachos* because they empower us never to give in again. The determination this creates will help us reach unprecedented greatness. With this attitude, we can use willpower properly and reach the heights we have dreamed of.

But what if we struggle with these prohibitions? Knowing

we have done acts that are definitely forbidden can crush us. How should we react if we stumble?

We can learn the correct approach from the Ramchal's comments on the prohibitions of harboring hatred and taking revenge (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 11):

Also hatred and revenge — it is very hard for the easily swayed heart of man to escape from them, because man is very sensitive to his shame and it causes him great pain [when someone shames him], and revenge is sweeter than honey because it is his only satisfaction [meaning the only thing that settles and satisfies a person when someone else embarrasses him is revenge]. Thus, when he finds the strength to abandon what his nature urges him to do and to overcome his nature not to hate the person who awakened within him the [instinctive feelings of] hatred, not to take revenge on him when he is able to, and not to bear a grudge, instead choosing to forget everything as if it never happened, [it shows that] he is extremely strong! This is easy only for the angels who do not have these traits, not for people. But this is the King's decree, and open verses clearly delineate [these prohibitions].

Similarly, if we struggle with the prohibitions of desire, we must not attack ourselves as if being perfect is easy. If we make careless mistakes or even lose head-on battles against desire, we must not let it destroy us. And we definitely must not feel that all is lost and give up. We must keep the right perspective on this battle, because it is our greatest opportunity for astounding greatness. It's not easy, but this is what Hashem wants us to try to accomplish. We must do what we can to control ourselves, realizing that sin is wrong and that our actions really matter. This

will give us the strength to stand up to the *yetzer hara* and produce some of the best accomplishments ever!

We can motivate ourselves even further when we need it by reminding ourselves that our actions have real consequences. When we sin, we damage ourselves, and to bring us back to the state of perfection that Hashem wants us to enjoy forever, He must purify us.⁴⁸ We don't know how each person will be judged and how severe each sin will be considered — only Hashem can determine that. And of course, we must never identify ourselves as bad people because of our errors (*Pirkei Avos* 2:18). We did not mean to sin; we lost a difficult battle against our desires. But the point is still true: our actions really make a difference. Hashem created a system in which our decisions have tremendous significance. Of course, He did this only because it will bring us the most enjoyment (see the next chapter). But our actions do have ramifications, and it is vital that we choose correctly.

Sinning is never worth it. The pleasure is short, and the consequences are heavy. **But winning is always worth it.** Each bit of exertion brings us unfathomable enjoyment that never ends.

And if we ever feel overwhelmed, we must remember that Hashem just wants us to try our best. If we do, He will take care of everything, and we will rejoice forever.

Willpower is a tool that brings us to astounding success. If we use it right, we will win our most difficult challenges and reach the greatest heights in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Feeling that **“I don't do those things”** gives us the strength not to give in no matter how tempting the desire.
- Knowing what is forbidden and realizing that our actions matter strengthens us to win the most difficult battles and achieve our greatest successes.

48. Of course, these consequences are mitigated or even eliminated when we do *teshuva*.

CHAPTER

Thirty Three

The Proper Perspective On Issurim And Punishment

People often ask: If Hashem only created us to give to us and He loves us no matter what, why did He create *aveiros*, punishment, and judgment? And if Hashem only wants to give to us, why did He put us in this world and make us *earn* the great experience we will receive in the next world? Why didn't He just put us there and grant us that reward right away?⁴⁹

In *Derech Hashem* (1:2:1-2), the Ramchal writes that Hashem wanted the good that He will grant us in the next world to be complete. He didn't want to just give us a good pleasure — He wanted it to be the absolute greatest pleasure possible. The only way we could attain that is by “owning” that good. It must be a part of us, unlike possessions which are separate from us. That means we have to acquire the good for ourselves — we must truly earn it. By doing so, we are in a small way being similar to Hashem. Then, we are truly fitting to come close to Him and to

49. Before we answer this question, we must realize that because Hashem is omnipotent, we will always be limited in understanding His ways — especially when it comes to suffering. Because Hashem is not limited in any way, we can always ask why He didn't make the world in a way that seems better; even if that way seems implausible or impossible, Hashem is omnipotent and could have done it. (See *Permission to Believe*, Lawrence Kelemen, Page 94.) We cannot answer these questions completely; only Hashem knows the answers. Nevertheless, we can examine what He has informed us through His sages about how He runs the world. This will give us a glimpse into His tremendous love for us and improve our relationship with Him.

draw the ultimate pleasure from Him.⁵⁰

In his lecture “Rosh Hashana: The Joy of Judgment” (www.RabbiOrlofsky.com), Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky elaborates on this concept and explains that Hashem wants to relate to us in some small way as equals, if it could be. Hashem wants us to have a relationship with Him that transcends the relationship of a slave to a master and even of a son to a father; He wants to relate to us as much as possible with the relationship of a Creator to another creator, if it could be. He wants us to be “like Him” on some level, because that is the most pleasurable experience we can feel.

That’s why our sages compare our acceptance of the Torah at *Har Sinai* to a wedding (*Ta’anis* 26b). Hashem wants to grant us this special relationship because we will feel significant for having this role and we will be proud of our accomplishments. Thus, Hashem created this world for us to earn that state and create our *Olam Habba*. This system provides us with an opportunity to become as similar as we can be to our Creator (though that similarity is obviously limited).

We would not be able to enjoy the ultimate pleasure if we didn’t have to earn it. It would feel fake. We would be ashamed over receiving an undeserved handout.⁵¹ Further, the pleasure would be separate from us instead of being part of our essence. But if we earn our reward, we will feel great over what we have accomplished. We will feel significant, and the pleasure will be part of us because we caused it. This is the sweetest feeling we can experience. Nothing can compare to it.

Some people say that as long as they receive pleasure, it

50. This is a complex subject that goes beyond the scope of this book. I encourage you to read *Derech Hashem* 1:2:1-5 for a more complete understanding. But I will try to explain some of it on a simple level here.

51. This concept is known as *nehama dekisufa* — the bread of shame.

makes no difference to them whether they earned it or not. But when we think about it, we will realize that this isn't true. Every person is created with the desire to become great; everyone wants to be important. We know from experience that it is terrible to feel small and insignificant with nothing we can do about it. When people mock our generation and treat us like failures who should be pitied, it makes our blood boil. We especially hate it when they tell us we can never amount to anything great. We don't want to feel like losers who are given things because people feel bad for us. We want to feel that we accomplished on our own! We want to feel great about what we have done. We don't want to feel lowly; we want to be significant!

The pleasure Hashem wants to grant us can only be truly enjoyable if we feel we earned it. If we feel incapable and undeserving and know that we are just receiving good because Hashem feels bad for us, that won't cut it. This pleasure is supposed to be emotionally satisfying. We come close to Hashem and realize we have earned it. We realize we have done something amazing and are ecstatic! For all eternity, we see that we have accomplished and reached great heights. By putting us in this world first, Hashem gave us the opportunity to attain that feeling.

But for us to feel that we earned the reward and to be proud forever, we must do actions in this world that *we* will consider impressive. If success were easy, it would be cheap. If we only wanted to learn and were never challenged, we wouldn't feel that we accomplished anything. Thus, we must toil to overcome difficult challenges. That is the point of life.

If a relative would give you a lot of money, you would be ecstatic, but you wouldn't feel that you earned it. If he wanted you to think you did, would making you doodle for an hour first accomplish that? It would still feel like a gift. You would know your insignificant doodling did not earn you the money; you only

received it because you are related to your benefactor. Similarly, to *really* feel we earned our reward, we must know that our job is at least somewhat challenging and that the system of judgment is fair. The fairer it is, the more we will feel we earned it.

Rabbi Orlofsky explains that this is why, as the third Rashi in *Chumash* relates, Hashem created the world with *middas hadin* (exacting judgment), and then, after deciding the world could not survive with only *din*, tempered the judgment by combining it with *middas harachamim* (mercy). Why did Hashem want to create the world with *din*? Why would *din* have been better? And Hashem knows the future and surely understood that the world could not survive with only *din*, so why did He create it that way?

The answer is that the more *din* there is, the more man would feel he earned his reward. That's why Hashem first created the world with strict *din*. Then, Hashem tempered it with mercy and even placed *middas harachamim* first to ensure that man could handle the system of judgment. But the more *din* there is, the more impressive our accomplishments. Being deemed virtuous after exacting scrutiny is worth much more than being considered successful after a quick glance.⁵²

Now we can begin to understand why Hashem created *issurim* and punishments. By creating a system in which we can choose to do bad, Hashem enabled us to truly feel that things are fair because we can do good and gain or do bad and cause damage. That enables us to feel that we really accomplished and earned it, which makes us feel great and significant. But if we

52. This is why great *tzaddikim* who can handle it are judged with more *din* than a regular person. See *Yevamos* 121b and *Bava Kamma* 50a. And see *Sotah* 13b, which states that Moshe Rabbeinu was punished for a minuscule infraction because "according to the camel is its load." Rashi explains that just as a stronger camel is given a heavier load because it can handle it, a great *tzaddik* is judged with extra scrutiny because he can handle it. This is because succeeding despite more *din* is better for him.

could only earn and nothing we would do would be considered bad, we would feel that we were receiving charity in disguise.

Life in this world must be at least somewhat fair.⁵³ Thus, Hashem made it possible for us to sin and arranged that painful atonement is needed to remove the damage our sins do to us. This makes it fair when we are rewarded. There has to be a potential for suffering as the last resort to get rid of our sins (if we don't remove them with repentance) for it to feel fair when we are rewarded. Then, when we have settled our balance of *aveiros* and emerged pristine and full of our accomplishments, we can bask in delight forever knowing we have truly earned our reward and status. Rather than feeling like nuisances receiving handouts, we feel significant and amazing forever!

This point is conveyed by the Ramchal in *Mesillas Yescharim* (Chapter 4): "Just as Hashem does not hold back from rewarding for any good deed, no matter how small it is, so too He doesn't withhold from judging and admonishing for any bad deed, no matter how small." Hashem judges our deeds with exactness so that it feels fair when He rewards us for each good deed and every positive element of any action we do. Now when He rewards us for deeds that seem minuscule or insignificant to us, we won't feel that He found a loophole to give us a handout we didn't deserve; rather, we will feel that it is just and we will be proud of what we have done. This is the essence of Hashem's system of judgment. Because of this system, we will feel great for even the "minor" deeds we have done and we will receive phenomenal reward for them. And we can't fathom how we will feel about great deeds done despite difficulty and how incredible the reward will be.

⁵³ Though we do know that the reward for good is five hundred times the punishment for bad. See *Tosafos Sotah* 11a s.v. *Miriam*.

Now we can realize that if Hashem sends us suffering, He is not doing it out of anger. Maybe He is reminding us to accomplish more and to stop harming ourselves, or to repent and remove our sins without pain. Perhaps He is cleaning our sins with suffering so we emerge pristine and full of accomplishments forever. Maybe He is challenging us to enable us to truly accomplish. Or maybe He has another reason. But Hashem is doing it out of love. When we sin, we do something foolish that has consequences and must be cleaned up. But Hashem does not view us as bad. He doesn't hate us or get angry with us, even if He must bring us pain because of what we did.

Hashem wishes He didn't have to administer suffering. It pains Him to do it, and He feels our pain.⁵⁴ But He does it anyway because He knows that we need it and that it is best for us. One day we will see the complete picture, agree with everything He has done, and even thank Him for it. Though it is so hard for us to appreciate now, when we move on Upstairs, we will see all the answers and they will be emotionally satisfying. We won't wish Hashem acted differently even once. We will appreciate that every aspect and outcome of everything Hashem did to us was good.

We must never forget that Hashem loves us, wants good and enjoyment for us, and always has our best interests in mind. We must never make a mistake to think Hashem is out to get anyone, *chas veshalom*. Everything, even the concepts of punishment and

54. As the *Mishna Sanhedrin* 46a relates:

Rabbi Meir says, "When a person is in pain [when he is being punished for his sins — Rashi], what does the *Shechina* say? 'I am burdened by my head! I am burdened by my arm!'"

Even though the person brought his suffering upon himself by sinning, Hashem cries out in pain, if it could be. He says, "My head and arm are hurting," even though Hashem doesn't have a head or an arm — because He is in so much pain because the sinner is suffering. Hashem feels our exact pain. Look how much Hashem loves us, even if we have sinned!

accountability, was given out of love; **there is nothing Hashem does that's not out of love for us.** Any explanation of why Hashem created or does *anything*, even why Hashem set up *aveiros* and punishments, must start with the words, "because He loves us, so . . ." The answer never is, "because you should act better and you deserve it for rebelling," even if we acted horribly and seem to deserve severe retribution. Hashem loves us unconditionally, and that is His agenda every time He interacts with us.

The whole system of *aveiros* and punishment was created out of love for us and for our best, even if we don't understand how. Hashem doesn't hate us for sinning or punish us angrily because He lost His cool, *chas veshalom*. It would be perverse and insane (and heretical) to claim Hashem really lost control and became enraged.⁵⁵ Rather, whenever He relates to us in a way that resembles anger, He does so only because He loves us and relating to us that way is best for us at that moment. He has not left us, even though He is making it hard for us to see Him for whatever reason. When we understand that Hashem still yearns for us, we won't feel repelled and will continue to try to connect with Him.

Hashem does not settle for second best when He wants to give to us. He is our greatest ally and biggest fan. He is on our side and is rooting for us to succeed so that we can attain the most enjoyable experience ever. He set up this system because He knows we can make it and reach greatness!

Hashem's message is that **WE CAN BECOME GREAT!** Greatness is not only for the great *tzaddikim* of old. Hashem wants us to become great too — even if we are nowhere close in spiritual level to the *tzaddikim* — through overcoming the

55. See *Sefer Hamaspik Le'ovdei Hashem*, by Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam, end of Chapter 6.

overwhelming challenges He gave us. We can achieve greatness forever by standing up to our *yetzer hara* when he tries to get us to sin. Toiling and straining ourselves in the battle of life is true greatness, and we can attain it!

In addition, *issurim* and consequences give us the strength to stand up to desire and reach greatness.⁵⁶ Hashem created us to give us the greatest experience ever, and He wants us to be close to Him. By giving us laws we must follow, He gives us the strength to overpower our urges and attain eternity.

If Hashem made everything optional, we would indulge anytime we find ourselves overcome with passion. Because of the way desire grips us, we are unable to appreciate what we stand to miss out on by not accomplishing. We want to indulge too much. But by being required to hold back, we can muster the strength to listen to Hashem and do what is best for us. Hashem doesn't want us to miss out on everything. By overcoming these overwhelming challenges, we will achieve the most incredible accomplishments and rejoice with Hashem forever.

But even though our actions must have consequences, the rewards we can attain far outweigh the painful penalties of sin. The Gemara (*Chagiga* 15a-b) relates that there was a great *Tanna* named Elisha ben Avuya. After many years of accomplishment, he committed a severe sin. After that, he completely changed his ways. He became a terrible sinner and caused others to sin. He collaborated with the Romans, murdered Torah scholars, and even persuaded Torah scholars to leave the study halls rather than "waste their time" studying Torah. He was no longer referred to by his name; he became known as Acher ("someone else").

When Acher died, they did not allow him into *Gan Eden* because he had sinned, but they did not want to put him in

56. See *Devarim Rabbah* 4:1.

Gehenom because he had studied Torah, which protects from *Gehenom*. His student Rabbi Meir said, "It is better for him to be punished in *Gehenom* to be able to enjoy in *Gan Eden* afterward. When I die, I will cause smoke to rise from his grave (which would show that Rabbi Meir had gotten Acher into *Gehenom*)." When Rabbi Meir died, smoke began rising from Acher's grave.

Many years later, Rabbi Yochanan said, "Is it really such an act of strength for Rabbi Meir to get his *rebbe* burned? Only one of us went off. Between all of us, can't we save him? If I grab him and bring him to *Olam Habba*, who will stop me? When I die, I will stop the smoke that has been rising from Acher's grave (which would show that Rabbi Yochanan had taken Acher from *Gehenom* and put him in *Gan Eden*)." When Rabbi Yochanan died, smoke stopped rising from Acher's grave.

The *Kochvei Ohr* (Chapter 1) calculates that about 150 years passed from when Rabbi Meir died until Rabbi Yochanan died. That means for 150 years, Acher was tortured with the most horrific punishments. And Acher was released from *Gehenom* only because Rabbi Yochanan dragged him out. Had Rabbi Yochanan not done so, who knows how much longer Acher would have remained in *Gehenom*? He was one of the worst sinners ever. He might have still been in *Gehenom* today! Yet Rabbi Meir, knowing all this, brought Acher into *Gehenom* to enable him to eventually be allowed into *Gan Eden*! Why?

The *Kochvei Ohr* explains that this story demonstrates Hashem's amazing kindness. He set up the next world with the most incredible pleasure that exists, and He only put us in this world first to earn it so we can experience it to the greatest extent possible. Usually, people would forfeit pleasure to avoid pain. But this pleasure is so amazing, even though we can't relate to it now, that it's not worth giving up even an iota to avoid the most

terrible tortures.⁵⁷ It is so good that it's even worth suffering the worst tortures for thousands of years to get into *Gan Eden*. This exhilarating experience is waiting for every Jew. The depressing outlook we sometimes feel about what is waiting for us is a myth created by the *yetzer hara*.

Additionally, we must remember that Hashem Himself made our challenges so difficult. He knows how hard they are. He understands that people mess up, and though of course He doesn't ignore what we do, He still loves us just as much when we fall into the trap of the *yetzer hara*. Hashem loves us even if we are swayed by desire and act foolishly. He loves us no matter how far we fall.

Hashem loves us as His creations. He created us to give to us, before we could even do anything to deserve it. Everything He gives us is a gift. Even when He rewards us in the next world for our good deeds as He has promised, that is only because He created this system, which He did because we will enjoy it the most. Ultimately, everything is a gift, from the free gifts He grants us to the reward He enables us to earn, and He gives it all because He loves us.

Don't let the *yetzer hara* convince you otherwise. Any suggestion that Hashem doesn't love you or has rejected you is a lie. It doesn't matter how convincing it is because of your sins — it is wrong. Hashem still loves you as much as before. Even when you fall flat on your face, Hashem sees every bit that you tried and says, "How wonderful! Look how my children are trying to serve me despite great difficulty!" Hashem holds highly of you and He loves you so much. And even if you never exert yourself, Hashem still loves you as His creation. But you don't need to go there, because if you are honest with yourself, you will remember

57. See *Sefer Tomer Devorah*, Chapter 1, Middah 8.

the many times you tried hard to serve Hashem. You will see that you really want to do good, even if you get lost in a sea of desire. Deep down, you want to do the right thing. Every Jew has this trait; it's just hidden sometimes. Discovering this part of you will lift you up.

We see the extent of Hashem's love for us from His reaction when the Egyptians were drowning. As we saw in Chapter 5, Hashem was saddened and would not let the angels sing *shira* to Him over the salvation of the Jewish nation. Hashem loves all his creations no matter how far they have fallen. Surely, He has unbounded love for each member of His nation. This is especially so for those who want to do good and try to control themselves, even if they often fall.

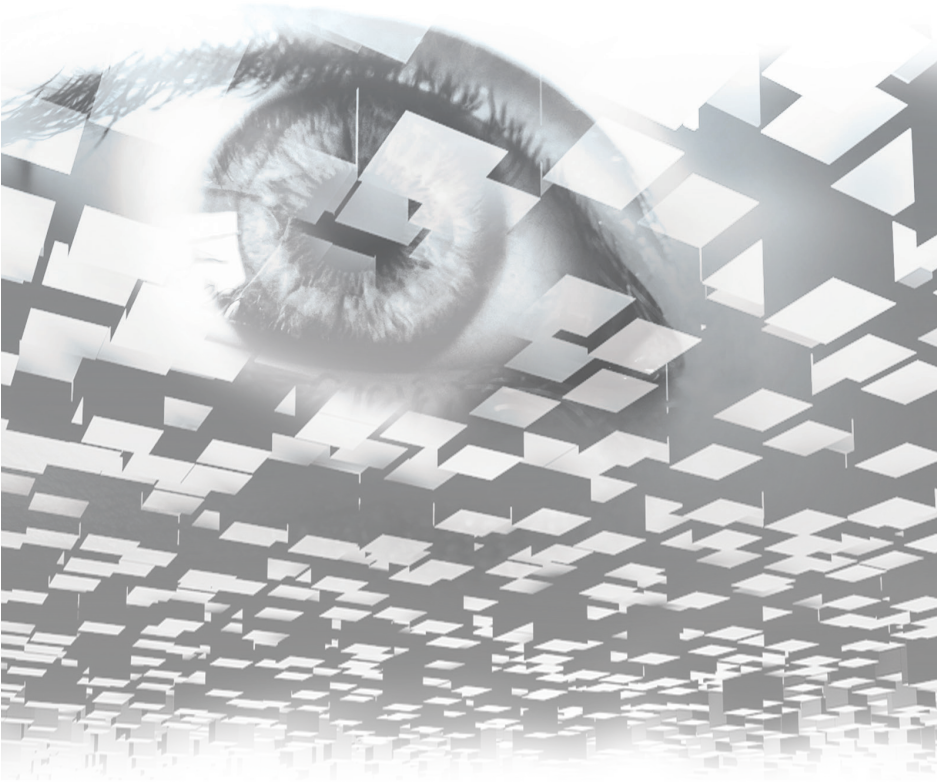
The battle against desire is an enormous challenge. It feels so overwhelming. Yet we can succeed. We can change ourselves to the point that it will be easy for us to control ourselves. We will be excited to clobber the *yetzer hara*. We will live on such a high.

But no matter how strong we become, there will be times when we will need determination and willpower. Sometimes we will have to rely on our feelings that sin is wrong and that *we don't do that*. Even if our desires seem to have weakened, we never know what unexpected challenge we will need these weapons for. To stay on top, we must develop each strategy and use it when necessary.

Willpower is an essential tool for standing up to the *yetzer hara*. Hopefully, we will reach the level where the prohibitions will make us happy because they help us crush the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Every system Hashem created — including the concepts of sins and consequences — and everything He does is out of love for us and for our ultimate enjoyment. That never changes, no matter what we do.



Part 8 – Calming Desires

CHAPTER

Thirty Four

Calming Desires

Yosef Hatzaddik was one of the mightiest warriors to ever live. He won one of the most difficult battles of desire in history. This was no one-time event with a crazy woman coming after him, like they taught us in third grade. His victory was so astounding that Yosef is one of only two people to be called a *tzaddik* by the Torah.

At the young age of seventeen, Yosef was sold into slavery by his brothers. He ended up in Egypt, where he was purchased as a slave by Potifar, Pharaoh's royal butcher. For an entire year, Potifar's wife tried nonstop to get him to sin. She was a very attractive woman and Yosef was a teenager at the height of his desires. Because Yosef would not look at her, she forced him to wear a spiked chain around his neck to stop him from looking down. She changed her clothing twice a day, and she left scarves sprayed with her perfume around the house to get him to constantly think about her.

Don't think Yosef wasn't affected. He was pulled so strongly, and a part of him longed to give in. He had to fight himself, and it was incredibly challenging. There even is an argument in the *Gemara* (*Sotah* 36b) whether he intended to sin when he entered the house on that final, fateful day described in the Torah. Either way, Potifar's wife made sure no one was home that day, and she

came after Yosef again. Yosef had exhausted most of his willpower and was in danger of succumbing. Hashem saw Yosef's strength fading and sent him a special message, showing him an image of his father in the window. That awakened him to remember the severity of what he was about to do. With his last strength, he ran from the house, emerging victorious from his yearlong battle.

Yosef demonstrated superhuman strength and self-control in winning this difficult battle. But we must ask how Yosef was able to overcome such raging desires for so long. The hardest battles are the ones that prolong. The desires grow stronger and stronger, and the person's willpower stretches and weakens until it snaps. How did Yosef stave off the *yetzer hara* for an entire year? What was his secret?

We can deduce Yosef's technique from the *Gemara* (*Sotah* 43a). The *Gemara* calls Yosef "the one who belittled ('*Pitpet*') his *yetzer hara*." Rashi explains that '*Pitpet*' means Yosef ridiculed his *yetzer hara* and conquered it, not considering it (its claims) to be anything of significance. Rabbi Henach Leibowitz, *zt"l*, (*Chiddushei Lev Bereishis* pages 225-226) explains that Rashi is telling us that Yosef did not primarily battle the *yetzer hara* with willpower, by straining and forcing himself not to sin. Rather, he belittled and disproved the arguments of the *yetzer hara*. This limited his desires and prevented his urges from growing stronger.

The *yetzer hara* sparks feelings of desire. He tells us we want something and really need it. But all his claims are lies. The *yetzer hara* tries to make us think we can't be happy without his wares, and he tells us that if we get it, our lives will be amazing. He peddles cheap pleasure and empty thrills as the greatest experience based on the faulty logic that it must be incredible if we want it so badly. But as we know, the strength of the desire does not correlate with the pleasure or its lasting effects.

This is what Yosef thought about to prevent his desires

from increasing. Whenever the *yetzer hara* tried to convince him that sinning would be so amazing, he thwarted the *yetzer hara* by thinking about how physical pleasure is overrated. He observed the *yetzer hara's* lies and dwelled on the falsehood. He proved the *yetzer hara* wrong and stopped his desires from increasing. That's how he defeated the *yetzer hara* in such a lengthy, overwhelming challenge.

It takes being on a certain level to develop this perspective. Obviously, someone being pulled by his urges won't want to even think about the folly of desire. And he wouldn't believe that physical pleasures are overrated anyway, at least not before giving in and feeling empty, duped, and regretful. But even if we are not in the midst of a challenge, desire can still affect us in some way, and if it does, we probably won't want to think about how desire doesn't deliver. Desire can make us feel that these pleasures are the greatest, even if they aren't available right now. Thus, it takes having some equanimity and freedom from desire — and a wish to defeat the *yetzer hara* — to think about these matters and see the truth.

The time to begin thinking about the folly of desire is when it is weak. We know that we can reduce our desire for a certain food by thinking that although it tastes great, eating it lasts for only a few seconds, and it is not “the most amazing experience ever that we can't live without.” When the food is sizzling before us and our mouths are watering, we probably won't want to think about this. But if we contemplate it beforehand, we can stay calm and not be blown away. Similarly, we can do this for any desire. It might be more difficult for the desires we are battling because they are always somewhat active, and when we are affected, it is difficult to think about this. Nevertheless, we can find the right time and contemplate the emptiness of pleasure.

The best time to start is when we are calm and able to see

clearly. If we think about the low payoff of desire and remember that pleasure is not amazing enough to be treated like the pinnacle of life, we will create three lasting changes. First, we will lessen how much we naturally desire. When we are challenged, the pull of our desires will automatically be weaker and it will be easier to stay in control.

Second, during the challenge, we will be able to stop the *yetzer hara* from increasing our desires with his sales pitch that he repeats over and over. Like Yosef Hatzaddik, we can respond that these claims are lies. We can tell him that what he's selling is not the greatest thing ever or the only thing that matters. Some of these truths might even surface automatically in our heads when we face a challenge.

Third, we might be able to pull ourselves back even if the *yetzer hara* grabs us and clouds our thoughts. Even if we will want to give in, we might have the strength to remind ourselves of the folly of desire and regain clarity. Though it seems unlikely, we can do it.

The more we think about these ideas when we are not being tested, the more we will feel these truths when we are challenged. Although it is difficult, we might be able to power through and regain our clarity if these ideas are already in place. We will see through the blinders and knock the *yetzer hara* back! We will stop him in his tracks and secure a valuable victory.⁵⁸

To boost ourselves, we must spend time thinking. First, we must contemplate that desire doesn't make us happy. By nature,

58. When people feel themselves slipping, they sometimes try to read something in a desperate attempt to catch themselves. The reason it rarely works is that their desires are active, while what they are reading is not yet part of them. But if we ingrain these concepts within ourselves by contemplating them frequently, our emotions will spark when we read the material. Though it takes much strength to change directions when we yearn to indulge, our odds increase when we work when calm to internalize these concepts.

we assume that the stronger the pull, the greater the pleasure and happiness it brings. But this is false. Think about it. Play out what happens when you give in. Does it make you happy? Think about how you feel afterward. Contemplate that the pleasure doesn't live up to the hype, and realize the *yetzer hara* is lying to you once again. Master these ideas and write an essay for yourself about why giving in is not worth it. Then, read Chapters 3 and 9 over, and spend a few minutes thinking about this every night.

If you ever err and give in, compare how you felt with what you expected to feel. Show yourself that it wasn't worth it and that you don't want to engage in this behavior. Then, set aside a time every night when you will think about this for a few minutes. In this manner, you can capitalize on your mistakes to attain a higher understanding and strength.

When under the influence of desire, we lose touch with reality and accept irrational feelings as fact. What we desire becomes the most incredible thing in our eyes. But contemplating how desire never delivers on its promise stops this from happening. We know that no physical pleasure can live up to the *yetzer hara's* sales pitch. Though it might feel good, it doesn't make us happy. Attaining the pleasure doesn't make us feel good about ourselves. It doesn't make us feel significant. Indulging in pleasure when we have lost control just makes us feel empty and leaves us with nothing. Clearly, desire is nothing to get excited about. We didn't need it until the *yetzer hara* made us want it, and we don't need it to be happy or to get ahead.

Another point to ponder is that things will change. Time will pass and the future will come. When the *yetzer hara* gets us excited about sin, he often sells us by making us focus only on the moment of pleasure as if it's all that exists. But we can preempt this by remembering that the future will come. We will have to deal with the consequences of our decision very soon. Deciding

to indulge won't make us happy forever, and we definitely won't experience the pleasure forever. It ends quickly, and we are left with nothing except regret and erosion of our self-respect.

Though this is obvious, we must think about it frequently to internalize it and really feel it. Our emotions don't follow common sense. We tend to feel that life will always be the way it is now, even though we know logically that it won't. In addition, as part of his sales pitch, the *yetzer hara* makes us feel that the time of pleasure is the only moment that matters. It takes work for us to change the way we feel and match it with the truth.

One of the elements of maturity is being able to anticipate the future. A person starts maturing when he discovers that the future will come, and the more this realization becomes part of him, the more he matures (Rabbi Shafier, *Two Worlds One Chance*, pages 162-165). When we make decisions, we must factor for the future and calculate the likely outcomes of each choice. The first step is to wait a second and remember that the future will come. Then, we can determine which option will leave us best off.

Desire makes us feel that the future will never come. This is how when we face a challenge, we don't think about the obvious fact that the moment of pleasure is short, while the rest of our lives will hopefully be long. "Don't think about tomorrow. You need this right now!" the *yetzer hara* tells us. "Now is all that matters. This is the greatest thing in life! You've just *got* to get it! It will raise you above everything. You will feel so lucky to experience it and you will be happy."

Of course, the *yetzer hara* lies. Tomorrow does come, and it comes quickly. The pleasure lasts for but a short time, and then the rest of our lives comes. We then have to live with the letdown and emptiness that comes from realizing that physical pleasure

couldn't make us happy.⁵⁹

Pleasure is not what we really long for. Growing up, we long for something but struggle to put a finger on what it is. The *yetzer hara* hijacks these feelings, telling us that what we seek is physical pleasure. Then, after we indulge and enjoy for a short time, we realize that physical pleasure wasn't what we sought. We feel a painful emptiness, and doubt that we will ever find what we seek.⁶⁰

This is because we really seek a different type of pleasure. We feel lacking because we long for meaning. We seek the emotional pleasure of knowing we are doing something significant. We want to make a difference. We want to do something that we will think highly of. We want to become great.

It is important to focus on these desires rather than

59. A good way to make intelligent decisions is to envision yourself at a point in the future and consider what you will think about your decision then. Play out both ways of choosing and see what you will think when you look back in two weeks.

Also, envision yourself viewing it from a hundred years in the future, as Rabbi Zelig Pliskin recommends. At that point, you will (probably) be dead. When life is over and all the unimportant things lose their significance, we will know what matters. We will live forever with what we made ourselves into and acquired through our decisions during our life. Will we care then whether we "missed out" on a pleasure? Will we regret not indulging, or will we be so excited about the amazing strength we displayed?

Forever is a long time. It's what really matters. We must consider what we will think then before we make decisions. But we will only do this if we think about this perspective when free from desire until it becomes part of us. Then, we will have the strength to put it into practice.

60. Of course, we might react by thinking we are unsatisfied because we didn't experience enough pleasure. As a result, we might set our sights on attaining a more advanced form of physical pleasure.

Ultimately, however, experiencing that won't make us happy either. Ironically, the desires and desperation grow so strong that we are convinced pleasure is the way to get what we seek, while in reality, the more we give in, the worse we feel and the more desperate we get. It takes intellectual honesty to realize that what we crave can't be attained through physical pleasures. We can accomplish this by noticing where pleasure is taking us and that it has made us unhappy rather than happy. This will help us realize that more pleasure is not the solution.

denying them. Wanting to become special and important is good. We just must not assume that after five minutes we have arrived there, which will cause us to grow complacent. And we must not become arrogant, looking down on others or relating to Hashem as if He needs us instead of us needing Him.

Achieving in a meaningful way and feeling that we matter is that “something missing.” We want to become significant and reach greatness. We want to feel that we are making a difference. This is what we long for. This voice is the one we must follow, because it will lead us to happiness and greatness. That is how we can walk around feeling that life is amazing! The thrill of living such a life far surpasses the cheap enjoyment of physical pleasures. Nothing can compare to it.

Obviously, this voice won't be satisfied by cheap thrills. But ironically, it plays a part in every desire we feel. This voice latches onto any urge we experience and makes us hope that receiving the given pleasure will also quench our longing. Nevertheless, the only way to satisfy this voice is to accomplish and then to contemplate the significance of our accomplishment. This yields an electricity that cannot be matched by any pleasure or possession.

On the other hand, giving in yields but a short thrill that we know is cheap even while experiencing it. Then, after it quickly concludes, it leaves us feeling empty and low. We don't feel special and proud, which is what we really wanted. Instead, we feel empty and disappointed in ourselves, which hurts so much.

The Ramchal (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 1) cites *Midrash Koheles* (6:7), which illustrates this point with a parable: If a princess would marry an ordinary villager, anything her husband would bring her would be insignificant to her because she is a princess. Any trinkets and wooden “jewelry” that he would toil for weeks to make for her are worthless compared to what she

had when living as a princess. It would not impress or satisfy her at all.

The *Midrash* explains that this is the meaning of the *posuk* in *Koheles* (6:7): “the soul won’t be satisfied.” Even if a person would bring his soul every pleasure in this world, it would be meaningless to it. The pleasures would not provide his soul with what it seeks because it is from the upper worlds. It seeks much loftier experiences than the cheap physical pleasures of this world.

This is why physical pleasures won’t satisfy us. We will always long for more, because that voice within us wants something more and this isn’t it. The voice is our essence and is impossible to ignore. It will just continue longing for something, which means *we* will continue longing because *we are that voice*. We won’t be happy no matter what possessions and physical pleasures we bring ourselves because these things do nothing to fulfill this drive.

To satisfy ourselves, we must achieve meaningful accomplishments that we will have forever. This is the way to live a thrilling life. Forget the great experiences that await us in the next world; **this is the best life in this world!** By giving us the opportunity to live such a sweet life, Hashem gave us the greatest gift of all time! He even created us with this voice, the compass that ensures we live the most meaningful life! If we listen to the voice and spend time thinking to spark this excitement, our lives will be incredible!

Ask yourself: “What will I have? If I run after this pleasure, what will I be left with? I will have nothing. But if I win, I will have something valuable forever and my life will be exciting!” We need proper perspective to feel this, and it takes a lot of thought. But your time and effort will be worth it. Who wouldn’t want to live a thrilling life and to satisfy their longing? Who doesn’t want to feel great about their accomplishments and be happy?

We must think about the cheapness of pleasure for a few minutes **every day**. Think about how short it lasts and remember that the future will come. You know that fulfilling this pleasure won't satisfy you tomorrow. It won't matter at all then. You realize that pleasure won't even provide you with what you really want today! Thinking about this before we are challenged will radically transform our battles. Rather than feeling forced to act against our will and feeling we are missing out, we will win happily.

Though it is an advanced technique, calming down desires works wonders. It weakens our challenges and makes it easier to say no to the *yetzer hara*. Let's use this weapon to ensure enduring success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Physical pleasures don't live up to the hype. They leave us feeling empty and regretful, and are not what we really long for.
- Contemplating this weakens desire in general and even stops the *yetzer hara's* sales pitch when he challenges us.

CHAPTER

Thirty Five

Putting What We Have Contemplated Into Practice

Thinking about the cheapness of pleasure automatically weakens our desires in our next battle. Further, some of those ideas might pop into our heads during the challenge and strengthen us. These are automatic benefits of contemplation.

But to take full advantage of our efforts, we must take what we have contemplated and consciously apply it during battle. We must do this right when the *yetzer hara* starts up, and also when the battle is in full force and we are pulled by strong desires.

Sometimes, the *yetzer hara* starts by nudging us with weak pulls that we view more as an annoyance than as a real challenge. But if we are not careful, he can maneuver his way in by increasing the desire until we are affected. A major tactic the *yetzer hara* uses, both by desires that start small and by desires that make us feel as if we got run over by a truck unexpectedly, is repeating the desire over and over. We feel the pull over and over, and each time it gets stronger while a bit more of our willpower burns out.

Often, it is best to ignore these thoughts, and we should definitely not be disturbed by them. Thinking “Whatever. Who cares?” and moving on to something else is far more effective

than getting worked up, which usually causes worse problems.⁶¹ But sometimes, you might notice that the *yetzer hara* is not letting up and is gaining on you. If this happens, you will feel yourself starting to want it. You must do something so you don't eventually cave in.

This is the time to whip out what you have been contemplating. Start by taking a slow, deep breath and entering a calm state. Feel yourself calming down and becoming serene. Then, each time the *yetzer hara* hits you with a desire, calmly remind him that following these desires will make you unhappy and that it just isn't worth it. Gently cause yourself to think about how physical pleasures can't give you emotional satisfaction and that they are not what you ultimately seek. And don't forget to get excited about your opportunity to accomplish. Because the desire is in an early stage and isn't so strong, this will be easier to do.

These thoughts to limit desire must be done carefully. The wrong thoughts after our desires have activated can strengthen them. When our desires have awakened, we should avoid trying to figure things out — such as contemplating for the first time whether attaining our desires will make us happy. When we try to play out what will result, our thoughts might be swayed by our feelings of desire. Instead, we should think about truths we already established when we were free from desire. It is best to think a guided thought such as, "I know that what I desire won't make me happy even though I want it, so I won't do it." If we have contemplated that this desire is not what we really long for, we can remind ourselves that it won't make us happy. We can remember that the desire's promises are inaccurate. We can regain clarity and refuse to give in because it's not worth it.

61. See Chapter 43 for more on how to handle stray thoughts.

Sometimes, the *yetzer hara* catches us off guard and quickly convinces us that what we want is the greatest thing ever. He tells us we need this pleasure and can't be happy without it. Usually, we don't question our feelings to see whether they are consistent with the truth. But when we do question our impulses and assumptions — after taking a long, slow, deep breath to calm down so we can think clearly — we can see that they are just more lies from the *yetzer hara*.

One way to question our feelings is to ask ourselves the important question: "and then what?" "Okay, it sounds great, but then what?" Soon, we see that the *yetzer hara's* whole charade was built on lies, as usual. The *yetzer hara* gets us to focus on the pleasure as if it is all that exists. He makes us think everything will be wonderful if we just get what we want. Asking ourselves, "but then what?" helps us focus on the big picture so we don't chase appealing fantasies that don't provide what they promise. This question is powerful enough to help when a person is blinded by desire; surely, we will gain immensely if we use it to think about life when we are not being tested. Then when the *yetzer hara's* lies start, we won't be fooled.

The best time for contemplating the downside of desire is before the challenge. During the battle, it is time to swiftly review the truths you have already set in place. Even if you are slipping and your desires are taking over, these thoughts can help you break free if you have put in the work before the test.

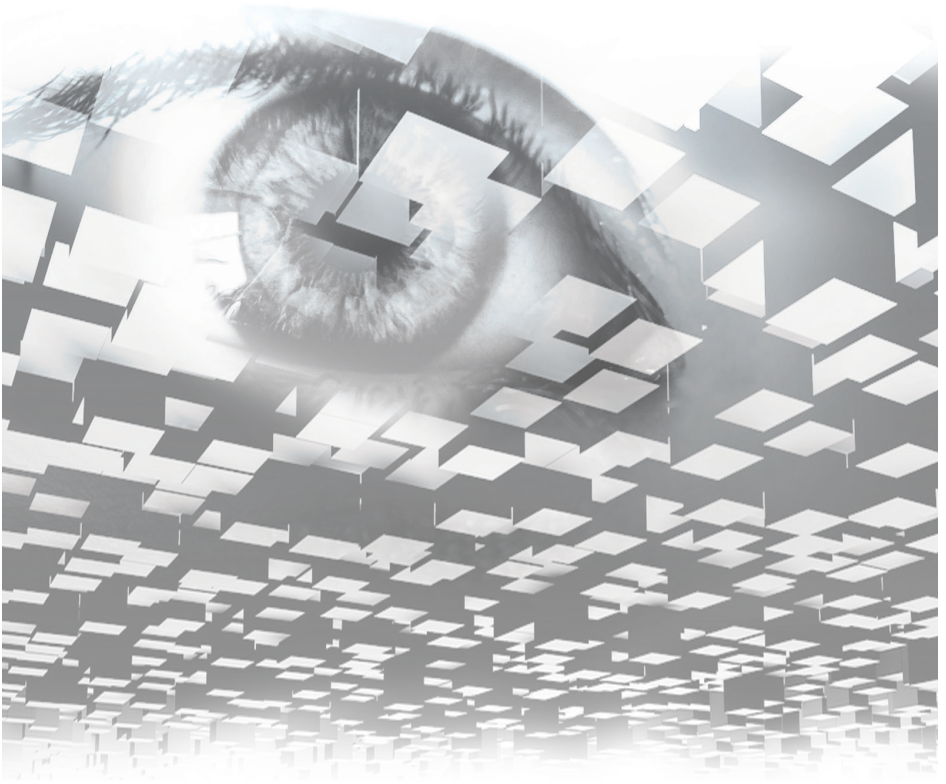
The clearer these truths are to you when you are calm, the easier it will be to snap out of the grasp of the *yetzer hara*. You will naturally think about the right things and regain your focus. Hopefully, you will even be able to calm yourself down and think about your options rationally. You will realize that though a part of you wants it, another part of you — the smarter part — knows that succumbing would be damaging and wrong. Choosing

correctly will be easy because you will see how it's best for you. And it will be easier to use the techniques discussed in Chapters 16-17 because you will be more receptive to those truths.

We gain so much from thinking about the futility of desire and applying it when we are challenged. This makes it much easier to defeat the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- After contemplating and showing ourselves that desires don't live up to the hype, we will be able to recall this when we are challenged to calm down our desires.



Part 9 – Other Elements of the Battle

CHAPTER

Thirty Six

Staying Away: A Rational Approach

Our generation faces the most difficult battle ever. Our challenges are way more frequent and intense than they were just a few years ago. It is harder to control ourselves now than at any other point in history.

Our impulses pester us all day, and no one is immune. We hear stories all the time of diligent students and respected people giving up everything to chase their passions. Rarely do we go too long without hearing another horrible story.

There are two prime causes for the rapid decadence of our world. The first is society's message that licentiousness is exciting. Lust is hyped up as the point of existence. This message is everywhere. It is all over the billboards, television, and Internet. It has even pervaded into our schools and social circles, where our friends share their opinions on "the greatest thing on Earth." We no longer have to be careless to encounter immorality. It finds us and tries to grab us.

Often, society sells us in the most innocuous ways. For example, a person might watch a seemingly innocent show, not looking for any trouble. But of course, the producers just have to stick in an inappropriate scene or two — in a "clean" way without showing anything blatant. Nevertheless, the message of what we should chase seeps in and strengthens our desires. Our

desires bubble over waiting to erupt, and even if they calm down without us giving in, they remain a bit stronger than they used to be. This unexpected exposure is especially dangerous, as we are not on guard and these sick ideas infiltrate our defenses. Even the strongest person with the clearest perspective is affected; he is injected with new urges and excitement.

The battle against desire was hard enough when it was “all-natural.” Now that the world is bombarded with these constant messages, it’s not surprising that it has gone out of control. The attitude that lust is the greatest is all over the music and the news. It’s in the movies, the shows, and the commercials. It’s in the books and on the streets. It’s everywhere. Wherever we go and whatever we do, people are trying to sell and ensnare us in the trap of temptation. And that is without discussing what’s happening online. Although this lustful outlook does not seep into the Jewish community so fast, it eventually penetrates and catches on. We end up with wacky values and awakened desires, and inappropriate behavior becomes increasingly common.

Thesecondcauseforthebreakdownofsocietyisimmorality’s instant availability. If a person wants to indulge, it is so easy. He no longer needs to run out on an errand; he can sin in seconds before he has a chance to stop himself. With lust so highly regarded and readily available, the world is quite different than it was just a few years ago.

We must face reality. A staggering percentage of our youths are struggling. The numbers are much higher than people think. The sickening stories don’t do it justice. They seem atypical, and we don’t imagine that this painful addiction is so common. But it is. The odds are overwhelming that each kid — including our children and friends — will face a vicious battle that threatens to destroy his life . . . if we don’t do something about it.

Our decisions about what we expose ourselves to will

determine whether we and our families will have to battle ourselves our entire lives — or worse, be drowning in addiction. We are choosing whether we will feel trapped, powerless, and inferior, or whether we will spare ourselves from misery. We must view these choices as cause-and-effect decisions with automatic outcomes, rather than moral dilemmas that require us to figure out how religious we are. We must be responsible and choose wisely.

Giving up television, the Internet, or non-Jewish music is an immense sacrifice. Even carefully limiting our exposure is not easy. Of course we don't want to give them up — it is a huge change. But as we know, our decisions will have real consequences. We value education, convenience, and leisure — as we should — and it's hard to give these things up. But if the exposure gets someone in our family into a painful mess, we won't think it was worth it. Getting rid of what might be dangerous hurts so much, but it hurts even more if we don't stop it and it ruins our lives.

Even if we don't completely cut off, we must at least figure out a way to protect ourselves from harmful messages. Children and teenagers especially must be protected from these messages, because they are more easily swayed. Because we are responsible people, thinking about the direct ramifications will help us muster the strength to choose greatness by leaving them behind — whether in one shot or gradually by getting rid of the most harmful offenders first.

We don't want our families to see things that will trigger desires, and we don't want it to be easy to fulfill them. No matter how much we value culture and are against locking ourselves away from society, we wouldn't expose ourselves at that price. It's just as we wouldn't send someone recovering from drug addiction to an elite college notorious for rampant drug use. Obviously, all the "success" in the world isn't worth relapsing

back into an addiction that will wreck his life. It's the same here — no amount of culture or leisure is worth it if it comes with an addiction that causes such pain and shame.

Because of these concerns, many communities cut off completely from society, under the guidance of their rabbis. If they can handle it, they are much less exposed to harmful messages and material.⁶² But many communities don't usually take such extreme measures, and their people are uncomfortable with cutting off from society.⁶³ If we were brought up this way, we will probably feel uncomfortable whenever this topic comes up, and that should be expected. Nevertheless, we must remember that protecting ourselves does not have to mean completely cutting off from society. Our goal is just to avoid the world's message about desire so it doesn't change our values or make us want what's bad for us.

There is nothing wrong with this attitude. Giving things up is not a *mitzvah* in itself. But we must remember that although we seek a solution that does not require us to give up too much, we are sometimes forced to make a choice. Our attitude must be that no matter what, we can't let these dangerous messages near us unchecked. It will affect us and we don't want to be affected. The consequences are too steep.

There usually is resistance to giving away what we enjoy, and that is normal. Sometimes, people make believe that getting rid of television and the Internet is easy and that they won't be missed. This attitude just alienates others. It makes them feel that those who preach this message never watched television or used the Internet in their lives and don't understand their situation.

62. If you from such a community and follow the guidelines, you can skip to the next chapter.

63. Obviously, each community should follow their rabbi's guidance.

In reality, it is difficult for a person who has the Internet and television to get rid of or even limit them. They provide many benefits and enjoyment. If a person usually relaxes by the television for a couple of hours each night or occasionally watches a movie with his friends, it won't be easy for him to give it up. Nonetheless, doing so gives us a much greater chance to succeed because we avoid many difficult battles. Therefore, we must try to somehow eliminate or at least limit what is harmful.⁶⁴

Being careful with what we expose ourselves to isn't easy. Nevertheless, we must carefully and responsibly do our best so we will achieve incredible success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- The far-reaching sales pitch and instant accessibility of desire has made the battle much more difficult than ever.
- Considering the costs of exposing ourselves and our families to dangerous material will help us make a responsible decision of what to avoid.
- This one decision will alter our destiny. It will make us succeed against desire and will change where our families end up as people.

64. If you don't control what happens in your house, try discussing the situation with your parents. (It will probably be better to discuss these matters with your father than with your mother.) If it is hard to start a discussion, write them a letter. Make sure to address them respectfully; don't accuse or blame them. Write that constantly having to overcome your desires is draining you. Describe the pain and confusion you go through, and how you are barely hanging on. But don't discuss your failures unless you have a strong bond of trust with them. Try to arouse their sympathy for what you are going through — your tone should be that you need their help, not that you are blaming them. Offer to discuss the situation with them in a calm, rational manner if they want. Ultimately, your parents care about your pain and concerns, and they will at least consider making changes if you use a respectful approach. Finally, don't forget that if you do what you can and are unsuccessful, that means Hashem wants you to face this challenge, and you should place your focus on preparing for and winning the battle.

CHAPTER

Thirty Seven

Misconceptions About Staying Away

All responsible people agree that we must be careful with what we expose ourselves to. But ironically, the recent focus on this important concept has also caused devastating damage. We must be careful to avoid these ill effects.

First, repeated emphasis on staying away from things that enable us to sin sometimes causes a spike in desire. Talking frequently about the bad things people do with computers — especially with detailed description — causes innocent people to think about it when they see one. It can even reach a point that their desires activate each time they see the harmful objects. We have enough going on; we don't need these thoughts.

In addition, when we make a big deal about something, we give ourselves a subtle message that it has significance, and we create resistance against fighting it. Thus, too much focus on shielding ourselves convinces us that lust is amazing and creates displeasure about fighting it. Even worse, overemphasis on not being exposed to temptation convinces people that they will surely fail if challenged, which leads to disaster. Thus, too much focus on staying away ironically might cause people to give in more often.

We must understand why we are being careful. People won't want to avoid dangerous activities if they don't know why.

But we must not make it a frequent focus. We must take on a policy to steer clear of harmful material, and then keep to it without thinking about what these things cause. We should remember the potential dangers occasionally to stay sharp, but even then avoid getting worked up about it. And when we encounter desires, we must defuse them calmly, which will prevent them from growing.⁶⁵

Even without overemphasis, the increased focus on staying away has caused some harmful misconceptions. Attaining the right attitude is tricky, and some of what we hear is misleading. It is especially difficult to reconcile these ideas with other important *hashkafos* and use them in the right balance. It's easy to misunderstand and misapply. We must clarify these concepts and debunk the myths to have the healthy attitude we need to succeed.⁶⁶

Perhaps the greatest of these misconceptions comes from the message that we must not trust ourselves. Though of course we must not needlessly expose ourselves to the sales pitch of desire or to objects that enable us to sin, that doesn't mean we should believe we will fail when challenged. Rather, we must be determined to win any challenges we face and yet do our best to limit them.

If we are ever told that we are incapable of controlling ourselves, we must not listen. If people call us immoral people

65. This will be discussed further in Chapter 43.

66. Some readers will feel that these misconceptions are ludicrous and that nobody would make these mistakes. If you feel this way, you should feel fortunate not to have to deal with these misconceptions, which have harmed many promising people. But keep in mind that not everyone is as smart as you. Some people do make these mistakes and suffer dreadful consequences. Even if such people comprise a minuscule minority — which they do not — it would be tragic if they had to live with these harmful ideas. Thus, these points must be clarified, and we must be cautious with our words when we discuss this topic to make sure everyone understands.

who cannot be trusted, we must stay away from them. This is not what our sages meant when they advised us not to trust ourselves.

Rather, “not trusting ourselves” means something entirely different. When desire activates, it changes the way we feel. What we want changes — we experience urges we never dreamed we would have. We can’t realize how we will feel when our passions activate and our perspective evaporates. Thus, we must be cautious not to spark our desires or to make it easy to succumb if our lusts come aflame.

We don’t want to ignite lustful urges and enter such a state even if we would be guaranteed to win. Surely, we don’t want to do so when we risk failure. We can’t guarantee we will succeed when *everything* changes. It’s just too dangerous.

“Not trusting ourselves” means being cautious because we know the way we feel can change. It does not mean having the destructive belief that we will lose when challenged. We *do* trust ourselves — without being complacent or irresponsible — to make mature decisions and fight strong in all challenges Hashem brings us, especially because He is helping us.

If we don’t trust our decision-making and our ability to cope with difficulty, we will be a mess. If we are convinced that we will fail, we will lose every battle. We must feel capable of winning and yet not take foolish chances that our desires will activate. Suggesting that all people can’t control themselves is untrue and damaging. We can control ourselves, and thus we must prepare and strengthen ourselves to win.

Emphasis on avoiding temptation can also cause the mistaken attitude that challenges are bad. The world’s focus is usually on how bad messing up is, rather than on our incredible opportunity. We forget that overcoming desire brings us to greatness, and we have no excitement to fight. Staying away is expressed as a basic obligation, while there is little mention of

what we accomplish when we forgo benefits to avoid harmful exposure. Many people don't even realize there is a reward for avoiding temptations — forget about comprehending that it is an elite achievement. And if they are challenged, they view it as an unfortunate situation rather than an opportunity.

How will we overcome our raging urges without excitement for something way better — our opportunity to accomplish unprecedented achievements? If we're not thrilled about what we can become, how will we survive? Without enthusiasm, we are fighting a nuclear war with a pocketknife. Even worse, focusing on the damage if we lose but not on the gains of victory is depressing. It weakens us and destroys our quality of life.

We must learn to balance all of these concepts together. We must view challenges as opportunities to achieve greatness, rather than situations that cause us to mess up. Nevertheless, when we can limit or avoid an upcoming challenge, it is upon us not to take risks, even ones that seem small.

When we avoid a challenge, we don't just prevent ourselves from falling. We don't give up everything with no gain. Rather, we achieve one of the ultimate successes.

Staying away from desire is a lot harder than people make it out to be. At times it is mentioned nonchalantly, as if it takes no effort. But in reality, it takes such a fight to get rid of things that might awaken desire and to avoid places where we might be tempted. By nature, we don't want to sacrifice benefits or entertainment just to be extra cautious. We also have difficulty accepting that our outlook and impulses will change when we are tempted. It takes great commitment to avoid challenges, and it is an incredible accomplishment.

Another common mistake is the idea that closing off from desire is the entire solution to today's *nisyonos*. People influenced

by this myth preach and do nothing other than avoiding harmful influences. They don't have a plan to attain self-control. They don't prepare for challenges, because they never thought about the importance of doing so. In extreme cases, they don't even try to fight temptation because they are convinced that avoiding it is all that helps. They think it's hopeless once they have been tempted, so why should they bother trying?

This error causes people who mess up to blame everything on not being more careful to avoid desire. Instead of accepting that they tried to shield themselves and that Hashem wanted them to fight this challenge, and instead of preparing so they don't enter the toughest battle of all time unarmed, they berate themselves for not averting the challenge. As a result, they get frustrated and try to close themselves off even more. But this approach only helps marginally at best, because they have already limited much of their exposure to desire. And even if they improve, they won't completely solve the problem because it's almost impossible to avoid all challenges. They would gain more if they worked on everything else instead.

In addition, this attitude can be quite dangerous. It is usually built on pressure, which often leads to more failures and creates unhealthy attitudes toward *mitzvos* and *aveiros*. We will be more successful if we develop an enjoyable, healthy perspective on the battle against desire, and then use every effective technique — including protection from harmful influences — with that attitude. This approach sparks rapid growth that lasts.

Even if we have the right attitude on avoiding desire, we must not think it is the cure-all. Of course, staying away is a great first step, and it is vital. We cannot expose ourselves to harmful ideas or objects. But we must not think there is nothing more to do after safeguarding ourselves.

Sheltering others from lust — while crucial — leaves even

more gaps that we must account for. First, there are still many ways our youths can be sold on the excitement of desire. Though we must try to ensure that our children have the right friends, we can't guarantee that their friends won't teach them what our society preaches. And in today's world, our children will be repeatedly exposed to temptation even without bad friends. The challenges are all over. Even walking in the street can be tough. If we don't gear them up to battle desire in addition to limiting their exposure to licentiousness, they will face raging urges unprepared.

Additionally, many children — even some who seem naive — have begun to chase their passions. They believe that what they lust for is the greatest experience ever, and they face intense impulses. No doubt, they will do anything to get what they want — they will somehow beat the system. If we assume that everything will be fine because we keep our house kosher, we risk getting a nasty surprise. We must try to protect our children, of course. But we must also motivate them to win their battles.

Furthermore, preaching for people to solve their problems only by distancing themselves from desire often doesn't work, because they don't want to stay away. Many people are already dabbling in desire or are even caught in its web. They don't want to give up their opportunity to get what they want. And those who aren't involved doubt they will have any problems with desire, and don't want to forgo the benefits and entertainment they would have to sacrifice.

Further, if a person doesn't realize how much he gains by controlling himself, he won't be willing to give up what he enjoys. If victory isn't important to him, he won't feel like sacrificing anything. Only once a person understands the value of success and wants to fight will he happily forgo things to make his battle easier. Limiting exposure to desire works best after one

aspires to win.

Finally, as much as we try to shield ourselves, we will be exposed at some point to something that will challenge us. Can any man say he was never challenged? Is there anyone who never felt an urge? If we don't prepare, it will be tougher when we are challenged.

Our challenges come from Hashem. The point of life is to be challenged, and Hashem set things up that basically everyone in this generation gets some sort of challenge of desire because it is the challenge He wants us to face.⁶⁷ We will be challenged no matter how much we shield ourselves — which of course we should nonetheless try to do — and it is our job to win. If we are lazy and think that because we got rid of our Internet access everything will be fine and we don't have to work on ourselves, we might end up flat on the floor. But if we also work to become masters of ourselves, we will hopefully ace every test.

Of course, we must protect our families as much as possible. We must not say that since taking a precaution doesn't guarantee immunity from desire, it is pointless. Safeguarding our families makes a huge difference. And we must pray and rely on Hashem to protect us from harmful exposure. But we must also strengthen our children so they're not destroyed by desire. We must especially cultivate within them a positive outlook toward *mitzvos*, which will help them overcome the challenges they will inevitably face.

67. If we would look at life entirely from a spiritual perspective, we would never want to put ourselves into challenging situations. We would be too afraid that we might mess up. That's why it's Hashem's job to figure out the best challenges for us. He must ensure that we are challenged despite the risk of failure because our challenges are opportunities for greatness! Challenges are great opportunities, though of course it is not our job to cause them. That's not what Hashem wants from us. Rather, Hashem wants us to do our best, and He challenges us Himself so we can become great.

In *Pirkei Avos* (2:5), Hillel teaches, “*Al ta’amin be’atzmecha ad yom moscha*” — “don’t believe in yourself until the day you die.” Unfortunately, some have misinterpreted this *mishna* to mean that a person should never feel capable of beating the *yetzer hara*. The results of this misinformation are devastating. When a person is convinced that defeating the *yetzer hara* is impossible, he becomes depressed because he feels incapable and trapped. Things get worse as these beliefs become a self-fulfilling prophecy — the person gives in again and again because he knows he can’t win. Most tragically, a person who believes he can’t succeed won’t do anything to improve his situation because it seems hopeless. He doesn’t do the one thing that will strengthen him. As a result, this message causes the opposite of what Hillel intended!

To understand what the *mishna* really means, we must read Rabbeinu Yonah’s commentary.⁶⁸ He writes that a person should not say to himself, “Look how many days it has been since I last sinned! I have won! I have overpowered my *yetzer hara* and am immune to desire. The *yetzer hara* can’t get me to sin. I no longer need to look out for his tricks. I don’t need to be on guard or to put in effort to make sure I don’t sin.”

Rabbeinu Yonah explains that this attitude is reckless because the *yetzer hara* is our enemy. He lies in hiding, waiting for the right moment when the person is not suspecting it and is not thinking about Hashem. Then, he ambushes the person and catches him off guard. If this happens, the *yetzer hara* might be able to penetrate and convince the person to sin.

Therefore, continues Rabbeinu Yonah, each person must take every precaution and never think he is immune to the *yetzer hara*’s lures. Every person must give full attention and effort to

68. In general, it is dangerous to read vague statements, whether from the Torah or our sages, and interpret them without the guidance of the *pirushim* that explain them.

acting appropriately. If a person is on guard and wary of the *yetzer hara*, it won't be able to approach him.

Hillel's lesson is to never grow complacent. We must not stop working on ourselves, thinking everything will be all right. We should expect to be challenged, even if it seems unlikely right now. Challenges are the point of life. We will be challenged at some point, and it will be a dogfight. Our thoughts will quickly change and we will want to give in. We will have to struggle to pull through.

Therefore, we should tell ourselves, "I expect to be challenged, and it will be *really* difficult. But I know I can handle it with Hashem's help, especially because I am putting in the work now to prepare and strengthen myself."

Knowing that this is the reality of life, we will act responsibly. We will always do everything in our power to be less susceptible to desire and to be stronger and more alert. We will instill within ourselves a strong drive to accomplish through defeating the *yetzer hara*. We won't let a day go by without contemplating and reading about our tremendous opportunity. Because we want to succeed and know we will be challenged, we will prepare ourselves for battle.

Instead of thinking we will always feel as we do now, we must continue strengthening ourselves. Because we will be challenged and will want to give in, we work now to stop those urges from happening and to be ready to overcome them if they start. We can't be complacent or lazy. We cannot think that because we shield ourselves and because we got rid of our Internet access, we are done. We can't think that because we don't feel any desires now and haven't for a while, that means we won't be challenged. Rather, we must constantly review and strengthen what we have worked on. This will help us win our

battles and achieve greatness.⁶⁹

We must make sure that our focus on protecting ourselves from desire doesn't harm us or sway us to be lazy. By clarifying these concepts, we will shield ourselves from harmful influences as part of a balanced battle plan for success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Review:

- Heightened focus on staying away can lead people to believe that certain harmful ideas are true. We must be careful not to make this mistake.
- We must never believe that we are incapable of self-control. Rather, we can control ourselves and win any battle with the strength Hashem constantly gives us.
- Protecting ourselves from harmful influences, while vital, is just one part of a successful plan to defeat desire.
- We must constantly strengthen and motivate ourselves about what we can accomplish. This is the only way to succeed.

69. Other dangerous misconceptions and depressing thought patterns are dealt with in Appendix A.

CHAPTER

Thirty Eight

Guidance and Proper Balance in Protecting Ourselves from Desire

Taking the concept of limiting our exposure to desire too far can be quite dangerous. If a person takes staying away from desire to levels that are unhealthy *for him*, he can seriously damage himself.

One example of this is if a person would become paranoid that everything he does somehow increases his ability to sin. He might beat himself up for every desire and challenge he faces, saying his urges are all his fault because he somehow should have expected the challenge and acted differently. Obviously, taking such an attitude would cause a person to be quite down. He would be at risk of falling into a dangerous cycle of failure and depression. Rather than having unreasonable expectations of himself, one should just try his best and not beat himself up if he didn't anticipate that his decision would lead to a *nisayon*. He should learn from what happened for future reference and do his best to win the challenges that Hashem gives him.⁷⁰

In addition, if a person takes shielding himself from desire too far for himself, he might cut himself off from too many activities he enjoys. This can cause various consequences that are mostly beyond the scope of this book.

70. This is addressed further in Appendix A.

A person needs some activities he can do to enjoy himself when he needs it. Unless he has reached the level that he is thrilled with learning all day and not doing anything else even during *bein hazmanim*, there will be times when he needs to do something fun. Most people need to have some fun on a consistent basis to function their best.

To make the right decisions, we desperately need a *Rebbe* who understands us and will guide us *based on what we need* (rather than with answers that were formed without factoring for our situation and needs). Different people and different communities need varying levels of protection from desire — there is no one-size-fits-all system — and there is a big risk that we will be either too tough or too lax when we make these decisions. Therefore, we need to find a *Rebbe* with whom we will be comfortable and with whom we can discuss things openly. He will guide us to find the proper measure.

We must shield ourselves from desire in the correct measure and in a healthy manner. This will ensure that our commitment to maintaining this protection will last and that we will be in optimal form to fight our *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Review:

- We must approach the vital concept of avoiding desire with a healthy approach and the proper balance for us.
- We must find a *Rebbe* who can give the proper guidance *for us* in this delicate matter.

CHAPTER

Thirty Nine

A Little Bad Spoils The Good

Often, we want to do something enjoyable or educational that contains some inappropriate content on the side. Many books and most movies and shows have this problem because lust sells. Giving these things up is annoying and frustrating. Our primary intent isn't the inappropriate material; we just want to have fun. Avoiding this activity doesn't seem so important. It doesn't feel as significant as holding back from purposely seeing something improper. Because we are not interested in the bad part, it doesn't feel so wrong. How can we motivate ourselves to avoid these activities without feeling that we sacrificed for no gain?⁷¹

Someone once shared the following with me: A journalist related that he wanted to explain to his children why they could not watch a popular movie that contained inappropriate content. His children argued that because the inappropriate content was brief, they should be allowed to watch it. This journalist had a secret recipe for a delicious chocolate cake. One day, he baked the cake. When his children asked for some cake, he told them he had added a tiny amount of a new secret ingredient: excrement.

71. Of course, this is assuming our *Rebbe* has guided us to avoid this activity, as we discussed in the previous chapter.

Needless to say, they did not sample the cake despite its delicious aroma. The father then explained that a thrilling movie containing just a couple of minutes of bad should be viewed like this cake: the little bad can spoil the whole entity.

Ultimately, when it is one entity, it's not always possible to take the good without the bad. If it's possible to take the good without being exposed to the bad, great! But if it's not, there is a strong chance it just won't be worth taking the entire package. It's just not worth taking the good if our desires will also increase, with all the unpleasant consequences that brings. Of course, it is frustrating and difficult to give the benefits up. But we must remember that if we don't, we will probably end up wishing we had chosen differently. We must play out the full outcomes of both choices and decide which set of consequences we really prefer.

We must also remember the untold greatness of giving up an enjoyable activity to protect ourselves from desire. Hashem makes sure **we never lose out from doing the right thing**, not in this world and not in the next. We will bask in pride over this decision for all eternity. It's not true that we just avoided painful consequences but did not gain. We have made a decision whose greatness can't be fathomed!

This is an important lesson. If we remember it, we will be motivated not to expose ourselves to any bad and to overcome the feelings that the "minuscule" bad is harmless. This will fortify us to win the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- It's hard to give up benefits just to avoid exposing ourselves to desire. We can motivate ourselves by remembering that there are real consequences that result from our decisions, and that a "minor" negative consequence might just not be worth it.
- We can avoid feeling that we missed out on fun for nothing by remembering the unfathomable greatness of our decision.

CHAPTER

Forty

Avoiding Triggers

An effective plan of avoiding challenges must include limiting our exposure to triggers. By being careful to avoid anything that might spark our feelings of desire, we will dramatically limit the number of challenges we face.

Every person has his own list of triggers that awaken his desires. These triggers can include people, objects, words, or situations that remind him of times when he yearned to give in. For example, Rabbi Shafier relates (Shmuz 145: “Stages of Change Part III: Taking Action”) that a drug addiction counselor told him that he advises his clients to stay out of Manhattan because the top of the Empire State Building reminds them of a hypodermic needle! It activates their addictive feelings and triggers their cravings for drugs.

A trigger can be something small that reminds us of something we desire, even if others would never react that way. When we encounter our triggers and are reminded of something we find exciting, our dormant feelings of desire might awaken and put us in a real challenge. Though of course we hope to control ourselves, we cannot guarantee what will happen when our desires awaken.

Thus, if we want to maintain control, we must avoid situations that might trigger our feelings of desire. Even if we

won't for sure see something forbidden and it therefore seems technically permitted, we must not expose ourselves. The point is not whether it is actually forbidden to enter the situations that might trigger our desire. Rather, our goal is to live with complete control, and the way to do so is to avoid feeling desire whenever possible. The more time that passes between cravings, the weaker they become. Thus, by not only avoiding actual temptation or ability to sin but also avoiding personal triggers, we will spend far less time feeling desire. Because we will face fewer challenges, we will be less likely to sin. And even when we are challenged, we won't be affected as strongly because our desires will be weaker. It will be easier to overcome our desires and maintain self-control.

Further, by limiting the times we are exposed to desire and distancing our urges from each other, we will have time when we are completely free from desire. We will be free from the unhappiness that comes from unfulfilled desires. This break from needing what we can't get will allow us to enjoy some tranquility and happiness. And even more important, it will give us the clarity to think about what we want out of life.

To limit your exposure to triggers, you must first figure out what *your* triggers are. The best way to do this is to use the notebook technique from Chapter 15. If you have not used this technique, at least think back to your last few battles with desire. Try to understand the pattern of what caused desire to flare up. Also, remember that many triggers are sights or situations that remind the person of prior temptations. Therefore, look out for anything that might remind you of a past situation in which you felt strong desire.

Once you have figured out some things that trigger your desires, you want to avoid them if possible. If they cannot be avoided or it would be a huge inconvenience to avoid them, you

can prepare yourself for desire so it does not catch you off guard, as we discussed in Chapters 14-15.

Protecting ourselves from situations that might awaken our desires is a vital technique. If we do what we can with the proper guidance, we can take away a significant chunk of the *yetzer hara's* ammunition in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- If we want to limit our challenges, we must avoid the situations that trigger our desires.

CHAPTER

Forty One

Abstaining From Actions That Increase Desires

If we want to attain mastery over our desires, we must try to limit the strength of our desires. Therefore, we must do our best to follow the *halachos* that relate to desire.

Our sages teach (*Shemos Rabbah* 16:2, as elaborated in *Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 11) that certain actions should be avoided because they increase a man's desires (aside from being forbidden in themselves — see Chapter 32). These actions include physical contact with women (other than one's wife), gazing at women for pleasure, and talking too much with women. Though we might not notice it, these actions activate and strengthen our desires, at least subconsciously.

We want our desires to become weaker so we can master them. Thus, we want to try to have stretches of time when we don't experience desire. This must include following these laws, which will keep our urges from activating even subconsciously. We will have a real break from desire, and it will lose some of its edge.

Thus, we must try our best to avoid unnecessary friendly conversation with women. We must be firm with ourselves not to gaze at women purposely for pleasure, and especially to avoid physical contact. This will make it much easier to succeed in our battle against desire.

We must be careful to avoid the actions that increase desire. This will weaken our desires and move us closer to victory in battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- We must do our best to avoid actions that increase desire. This will weaken our desires over time and make it easier to maintain self-control.

CHAPTER

Forty Two

Watching What We Say

If we want to attain self-control, we must be guarded with our speech. We must avoid allusions or jokes about desire and try not to speak about it in a direct manner.

When these sensitive matters must be discussed, we should try to use roundabout and indirect language whenever possible. This is because certain words and phrases can trigger feelings and desires. It has been proven scientifically that our words affect our emotions and impulses — even if the effect is subconscious and we don't feel it. We might experience only a small, barely noticeable urge, or we might not feel anything at all. We probably won't think it could lead us to sin in any way. Nevertheless, our speech awakens our dormant desires a little, and any increase in desire, even a slight one, increases our susceptibility. Then when a trigger hits, we feel stronger cravings than we would have, and we are more likely to give in.

And even if we won't act on our desires when challenged, why would we want to increase them anyway? It just brings us pain. We would be making it hurt more when we hold back from giving in. Why would we do that to ourselves?

Unfortunately, many people use perverse language rampantly. They are constantly increasing their desires, albeit unconsciously. This is one reason their challenges are so intense.

Improper speech strengthens their urges, and they erupt at the hint of a challenge.

Additionally, the more time that passes without us giving in to desire, the less powerful desire is over us (*Sukkah* 52b). And if we don't even experience stirrings of desire in the first place, our desires diminish dramatically. The longer we can pull this off, the weaker they become. But by speaking lustfully or using words that we associate with desire, we don't get that complete break from desire because somewhere in our heads, we are subtly experiencing it. Our impulses are stronger when we are challenged, and it is harder to overcome temptation.

The common denominator in people who control their eyes is that they also control their mouths. Avoiding inappropriate speech is vital for self-mastery. It is also a great first step to change. Being careful about what comes out of our mouths requires us to be alert, which stops us from all types of bad behavior.

Another reason avoiding improper speech is so important is that the Torah is very serious about it. The Torah forbids making lewd comments or jokes irrespective of whether they increase our desires. We must be very sensitive to this.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* (Chapter 11) says that people often feel that speaking or listening to inappropriate speech is no big deal. They say to themselves, "What did I do? It's not like I did a serious sin!" They think vulgar speech is forbidden only because it can lead extremely impulsive individuals to lewd thoughts and actions. Thus, they believe mild-mannered people like themselves can say whatever they want because "it's just words" and won't lead to anything.

The *Mesillas Yesharim* says that these rationalizations are really a trick from the *yetzer hara*. Besides for that lewd speech does affect people — whether they notice it or not — it is forbidden in its own right. Just as we would never do the sins that we consider

more serious because we know they are wrong, we also cannot use vulgar speech because it is forbidden as well, regardless of where it will or won't lead. The *Mesillas Yesharim* quotes the *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 33a) that if a person has a decree of seventy years of good, it can be changed to bad because of inappropriate speech. Avoiding lewd speech is vital. It really does matter how we speak.

If a person is accustomed to speaking inappropriately, it can be hard to stop. Improper speech doesn't seem serious or wrong. But even if the person realizes it's wrong and wants to stop, breaking habits is hard. And speech-related habits are the hardest to break, as the words often leave the person's mouth before he can consider whether he should say them or not.

The solution is to acknowledge that we might sometimes slip and to try anyway. Hashem only asked us to do our best. When we mess up, we shouldn't get frustrated, beat ourselves up, or give up. Rather, we should encourage ourselves for taking up this challenge and for mostly succeeding. We made an error that we will get rid of with *teshuva*, and we will learn from it not to mess up in similar situations. We can only try our best. That's all Hashem wants from us.

We must also try to avoid hearing improper comments and jokes. If others are talking lustfully, we should stop them, or if we can't, we should get up and leave. At the very least, we must not pay attention to the discussion. And we must not expose ourselves to music or anything else that has lustful messages.

By watching what we say and hear, we will become refined and feel like changed people. As a result, we will improve greatly and see much success in the battle of the generation.

Note: For advice on dealing with social pressure, which can be quite impactful on what we speak about, see Appendix B.

Quick Recap:

- Besides for being important in its own right, avoiding inappropriate speech diminishes our desires in the long run, making it easier to attain self-control.
- The same applies to not listening to lustful comments and songs.

CHAPTER

Forty Three

Mastering Our Thoughts

One of the most misunderstood aspects of the battle against desire is the challenge of keeping our minds clear of inappropriate thoughts. The wrong approach is common and destructive. By learning the right way to control our thoughts, we can attain mastery in the battle against desire.

Before anything else, we must understand that *having inappropriate desires and thoughts pop up in our heads is normal*, no matter how weird or improper they are. We should not be frustrated. We have these impulses naturally and so does everyone else, even though we don't see it. As it is, all people have random thoughts on a wide range of topics constantly, and they don't mean anything. We shouldn't give too much significance to our stray thoughts and desires either.

Our rabbis teach that we are not responsible for thoughts that we don't consciously choose to think about.⁷² Such thoughts are not sins; they are challenges from the *yetzer hara*. Our job is to address these thoughts effectively when we notice them instead of continuing to think about them.

These thoughts don't show anything bad about us. It's

72. See *Sefer Chiddushei Lev*, *Sefer Bamidbar* pages 22-24, especially the quote from Rav Yisrael Salanter on page 24.

just the opposite: they are our opportunity to reach great heights! Because they can occur frequently, it gives us the chance to achieve countless victories. This challenge is a huge gift.

Properly addressing our thoughts and impulses when they start is important for another reason. One of the *yetzer hara's* favorite strategies is to keep repeating his sales pitch for desire. He makes us feel one surge after another of how much we want the desirable activity. Sometimes, even small stray thoughts that seem crazy — thoughts that don't cause us to experience *real* desire — add up and ignite into something real. But if we get worked up about them, it just makes things worse. We need to address these thoughts, but we must do so effectively.

Our rabbis teach that getting frustrated with ourselves for having these thoughts is ineffective and damaging. Angrily demanding, "Don't think about that!" or "I shouldn't be having these thoughts!" makes them stronger. This attitude also hurts us by making us feel weird or bad, which saps our strength. Rather, the secret to dealing with stray thoughts and most budding desires is to think about something else without getting worked up. These thoughts shouldn't bother us, because they come from the *yetzer hara*. They are not our fault and we have no reason to be dissatisfied with ourselves for having them.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Even Ha'ezer* 23:3) rules that when inappropriate thoughts pop into our minds, we should change the topic by thinking about Torah. But if we can't or don't want to, we should think about activities we enjoy or topics we like talking about. Most important, we must not become upset with ourselves. The more agitated we become, the more these desires affect us, and the worse we do.

Most of the time, the best response to stray thoughts is indifference. If consciously thinking about something else will add emphasis to whatever crossed our mind, we should respond

with even less effort. We should just think to ourselves “whatever” or “oh, well” or “next” and move on. By not giving these thoughts any significance, we show ourselves that we are not responsible and don’t care about them. We effortlessly disregard them and aren’t affected.

But sometimes, we must do more to get rid of unwanted thoughts. When we are bombarded with a barrage of annoying inappropriate thoughts that are similar, perhaps relating to something we experienced, we need to flush out our subconscious mind. This will stop the thoughts from recurring.

One way to do this is to close your eyes and view a short prepared mental video. For example, envision yourself hitting a game-winning shot in a big game of basketball. Pick something pleasant. Try to use an event that actually happened, because this will help you see the mental video with real details. The more details that occupy your mind, the more it is cleared from everything else.

These methods neutralize random annoying thoughts and even some minor temptations. But when you experience real desire, the *yetzer hara* keeps repeating his sales pitch, making you feel “I want it!” again and again. You will need to calmly address the urge so he doesn’t overpower you. Before your impulses erupt, use your favorite material from Chapters 3, 9, 34, and 35 to recall without fighting yourself that what you desire is not as great as it seems.

This will remind you that although you want this pleasure, you don’t *need* it. You will remember that physical pleasures can’t give you what you seek emotionally — that they promise happiness and give you misery. It will stop your desires’ growth.

When we are surprised by desire, it is hard to do this. We don’t get the chance to calmly execute our plan; we can only hang in there and fight. But for a desire that starts small, we can stop it

in its tracks by remembering that it is overrated and isn't worth it.

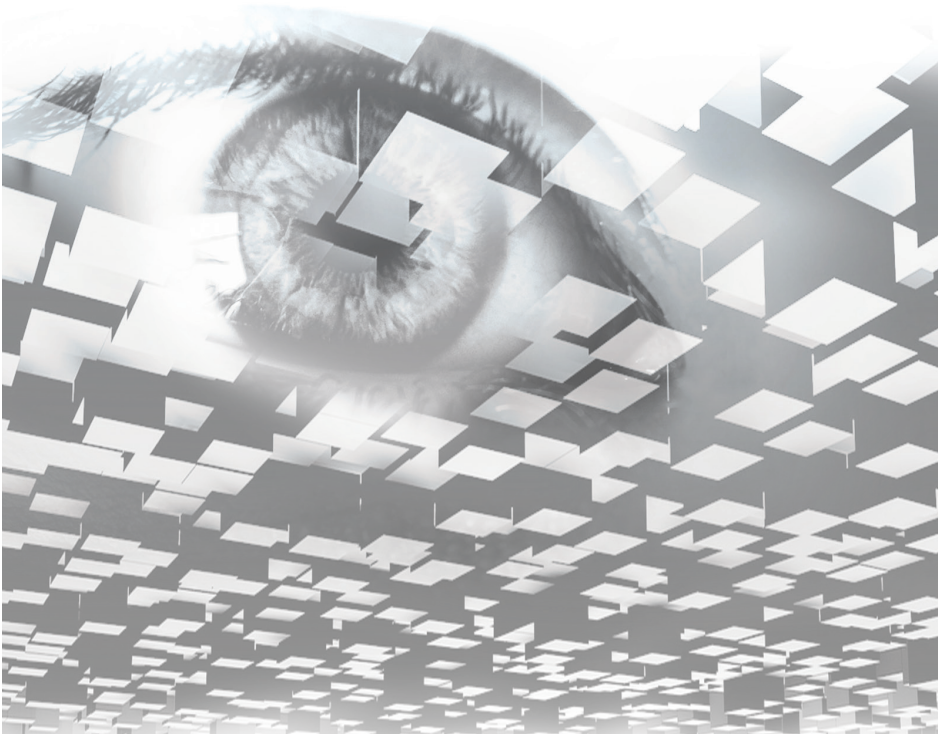
Of course, we must also revive our excitement to accomplish through conquering our desires. That enthusiasm is the key to success. Every time we fight, we come closer to fulfilling our dreams of greatness. And we also must have our willpower on call in case our desires do increase and we need it.

The more we grow, the fewer desires and unwanted thoughts we will have. Nevertheless, they will still happen from time to time. These thoughts don't come from us or show anything bad about us. They are a part of life, and they still come even after we reach phenomenal levels. Knowing this will stop us from getting worked up. We will handle them properly and show how much we have grown in the battle against desire.

Mastering our thoughts is the crowning achievement in our battle against desire. May we merit to reach this level and achieve the pinnacle of self-mastery in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- We are not responsible for thoughts that we didn't choose to think about.
- The best way to handle these thoughts is to deal with them calmly. We should not give them significance or get frustrated.



Part 10 –
Other Important
Techniques for
Success

CHAPTER

Forty Four

Toiling in Torah

There are other crucial techniques that indirectly increase our success against desire. These methods strengthen us and help us win our battles.

The first of these techniques is toiling in Torah study. Engaging in diligent Torah study **every day** is vital for success against the *yetzer hara*, especially in the battle against desire. Without Torah, we won't have the strength to fight the *yetzer hara*, and we will weaken in other areas as well.

Torah study is the spiritual fuel we need to fulfill our potential. Just as food strengthens a famished person, Torah study strengthens us spiritually, providing us with the determination we need to stand up to the *yetzer hara*. It automatically strengthens us in many areas of our observance, and it reinforces the levels we have toiled to acquire so we don't lose what we worked so hard for. These are some benefits of Torah study.

In *Mesillas Yesharim* (Chapter 5), the Ramchal elaborates on the importance of Torah study for fighting the *yetzer hara*:

Hashem, Who created the *yetzer hara* in man, is the One Who created Torah as its antidote, as our sages said (*Kiddushin* 30b), “[Hashem says,] ‘I created the *yetzer hara* and I created its antidote, Torah.’” Now, it is obvious that if the Creator did not create any cure

for this wound [the *yetzer hara*] other than this antidote [Torah], it is impossible for man to be healed from this wound in any manner other than with this cure. Any person who thinks he will be saved without Torah is making a mistake, and he will eventually realize his mistake when he dies with his sins. This is because the *yetzer hara* really is very strong within man, and without the person realizing it, the *yetzer hara* increases his strength over the person and rules over him. And if a person uses all the tactics in the world but does not take the medicine that was created for the *yetzer hara*, which is Torah as I wrote, he will not notice or realize as his illness [the *yetzer hara's* manipulation] increases and overpowers him, [and he will not realize what is happening] until he dies in his sins and his soul is lost. What can this be compared to? To a sick person diagnosed by doctors and told to take a certain medicine. This man, knowing nothing about medicine, did not take that medicine and instead took whatever medicines he decided. Of course this man will die! The same applies here, because there is nobody who knows the illness known as the *yetzer hara* and the strength embedded within it other than the Creator Who created it, and He warned us that its antidote is Torah. Who can disregard Torah and take something else instead and live? Surely, the darkness of physicality will progressively overpower him, and he won't even realize it until he discovers that he is so entrenched in evil and so far from the truth that it doesn't enter his mind to seek the truth.

But if he toils in Torah, when he sees its ways, its positive commandments, and its prohibitions, it will

eventually automatically renew within him motivation that will bring him to the right path. This is what our sages said (*Eichah Rabbah, Pesichta 2*), “[Hashem said,] ‘If only they had left Me [but] kept my Torah, because the light within it would bring them back to good.’”

Hashem is practically begging us to learn Torah, because He knows it is vital for success. He wants us to use this weapon because He wants us to win, and He knows that if we don’t use it, the odds of us defeating the *yetzer hara* are slim.

Any manner of Torah study provides us with spiritual fuel to fight the *yetzer hara*. Studying Torah automatically strengthens us and makes us want to serve Hashem properly. But there are also specific benefits that come from certain kinds of Torah study.

As we discussed in Chapter 32, when we study *halachos* in depth, Hashem minimizes the *yetzer hara* in that area. Thus, learning the *halachos* of desire is quite helpful. Studying the *halachos* of a sin also impresses upon us that it really is forbidden, and creates a commitment not to do it. It no longer feels like theoretical knowledge that this is something we shouldn’t do. It feels real. This gives us the strength to stand up to our *yetzer hara* and confidently tell him no.⁷³

The most potent form of Torah study is in-depth learning that requires us to work hard and push our limits in learning. This includes toiling to figure out what the *Gemara* or its commentators really mean, working out complicated calculations in learning, questioning how this material fits with other sources, and thinking of answers to questions and contradictions.⁷⁴ Breaking

73. See the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Mesillas Yesharim*.

74. When we feel, “It’s too hard and I just can’t figure it out,” that should be our cue to push on a little further because that provides the strongest benefits. Pushing on also lets us taste the real sweetness of learning — even if we don’t succeed in grasping the material, and especially if we

our heads in learning is the strongest performance enhancer in our battle against the *yetzer hara*. It's the secret weapon that helps us defeat him again and again.

Because the *yetzer hara* knows learning is so important, he makes it hard for many people to learn. He makes them not feel comfortable with learning. They struggle to get themselves to learn, and even when they do learn, they just don't feel connected. They don't enjoy learning, and it feels like a chore. Although they know learning is important and they desperately want to succeed in it, it's so difficult for them to learn and they don't feel they are getting anywhere.

If you face this challenge, you must know that your learning is incredibly precious. The difficulty and discomfort makes your Torah study hundreds of times more valuable than it would have been had it been easy. Hashem is immensely proud of whatever learning you can muster. **It's worth much more than learning all day without difficulty.**

Still, it is so frustrating to learn and get no excitement from it. If you struggle with this, you would do well to try some ideas that have helped others get into learning and taste its sweetness.

First, **set up a program that makes it easier for you to succeed in learning.** It is so hard for a person to get himself to learn if he doesn't have a *shiur* or *chavrusa* and a set time for learning. For most people, learning under such circumstances is very difficult, and each minute feels like eternity. You must find

do. When we are learning and notice that something just doesn't feel right or seem to add up, we shouldn't run through it saying it must somehow make sense. Nor should we feel confused and overwhelmed and give up. This discomfort is a sign that we need to review the points over again to figure out what is bothering us subconsciously and break through. We will figure out the question that has been disturbing us and be happy for coming up with this good question. We will no longer be confused because we will clearly understand what is bothering us. And we might even get an answer as well.

the system that works best for you, be it a *chavrusa* or a *shiur* that you can actively follow and participate in. The right schedule and program makes learning much easier and more enjoyable than learning alone without a schedule (Rabbi Shafier, Shmuz 90: "Torah Lishmah," www.TheShmuz.com).⁷⁵

Finding the right *chavrusa* is often the difference between success and failure. Do whatever it takes to get the right person to learn with you. Don't worry about being pushy, and don't be afraid to pester your *Rebbe* every day until it is handled. And if anyone tells you that you don't deserve a good *chavrusa*, he's wrong. Don't let him stop you.

Second, remember that **learning is much sweeter when you feel successful.** You must do whatever you can to feel that you are accomplishing and succeeding with your learning.

Getting stuck too often is frustrating and destroys your enjoyment. Improving your *Gemara* reading skills will help you immensely. Good reading skills come from experience. If yours are weak, find someone to learn with who will let you read and can help you when you need it. Depending on your background in learning, you might also need someone to teach you some basics to get you started.⁷⁶ Additionally, you should try punctuating your *Gemara* and especially the *Tosafos* because it will help you see where each step starts and ends and what

75. Yeshiva students need to keep this in mind when vacation is approaching. Most people face their strongest challenges during vacation, and we don't want to face those challenges without the strength that comes from learning. The best way to ensure that we learn during vacation is to set up a schedule with a *chavrusa*. This will make it much easier to learn.

76. If you are a beginner, read *Therefore What?* by David Samech, distributed by Feldheim Publishers. I also recommend *Talmudo Beyado*, a book that lists translation words on each *daf*.

words generally signify new steps.⁷⁷ Punctuating your *Gemara* will help your reading rapidly improve.

You also need to find ways to make yourself feel successful through your learning. You might consider setting a realistic goal to accomplish something impressive, such as finishing a *masechta* or a number of *perakim*. Doing well in *shiur* will also help you feel successful. If you understand and become involved in the action by asking good questions, you will taste success and learning will be fun. If this is difficult, find someone to learn with you and help you get there. No matter what happens, you must set yourself up for success in learning because the more you succeed, the more you will enjoy it.

Finally, the most important factor for enjoying learning is being actively involved in the learning process. You must exert yourself and “push your brain” in learning. You must feel active. Being taught interesting material is not fun if you don’t put in effort to work it out. Though you might hear brilliant ideas, if you are not exerting yourself to understand and your brain is asleep, it will probably be boring. The more you involve yourself, the more enjoyable it will be.

Despite all this, some people just don’t enjoy learning, and while these ideas do help them, learning still lacks pizzazz. Many factors can cause this. For example, if a person is suffering, the pain makes it difficult to enjoy learning. But a person who doesn’t enjoy learning for any reason must know that if he doesn’t give up, the time will come when he will enjoy learning and taste its sweetness. It might take some time — in extreme cases, it might even take a couple of years — but he will eventually succeed.

77. Punctuating *Tosafos* can be difficult because the steps are not always clearly defined and separated. I suggest underlining the first word of every new step instead of using actual punctuation. And read *Tools for Tosafos* by Haim Perlmutter, Targum Press/Feldheim Publishers. You will notice a strong improvement in your grasp of *Tosafos*.

When he breaks through, it will be extra meaningful because he will know that he really earned it. His appreciation and love for learning will be special. He will be so proud that he made it against all odds and attained the ultimate success. Though it is so hard now, Hashem is begging him not to give up because he will eventually succeed and reach greatness.

The Ramchal writes further (*Mesillas Yesharim*, beginning of Chapters 4 and 5) that studying *Mussar* and trying to improve is not only part of studying Torah — it's actually the most potent form of Torah for defeating the *yetzer hara*. This means when the *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 30b) related that "Torah" is the antidote to the *yetzer hara*, it meant that a person must learn all forms of Torah — but the most powerful one is *Mussar* study. The Ramchal elaborates (*ibid*, beginning of Chapter 4) that all forms of Torah study strengthen us overall, but *Mussar* helps us more directly in the area we are learning about because it specifically targets that area. Torah study is like a general medicine, while *Mussar* study is like a balm applied directly on the wound.

This is a vital message. When our sages taught that Torah is vital for defeating the *yetzer hara*, though that includes all forms of Torah study, they were primarily referring to *Mussar* study. This is our most potent weapon. The Ramchal's parable of the sick person applies most to a person who doesn't try to motivate himself to fight the *yetzer hara*. Without working on ourselves and learning this potent form of Torah, we are disregarding the true antidote to the *yetzer hara*. We must study *Mussar* about our battle every day so we will prevail.

This is not limited to studying books of motivation and *Mussar*. The Ramchal relates (*ibid*, Chapter 5) that setting times to assess our actions and contemplate how to improve them is also part of this potent form of Torah study. Working on ourselves outside the battle and using a versatile plan is vital for success.

Torah study is the spiritual fuel we need to stand up to the *yetzer hara*. If we toil in Torah and *Mussar*, with Hashem's help we will have the strength to defeat the *yetzer hara* in the most difficult battle of all time, the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Consistent Torah study is vital for success in battling the *yetzer hara*.
- This antidote includes learning of *halachos*, in-depth Torah study, and daily study of *Mussar*.
- To succeed in learning, we must:
 - ✓ Find a program that is right for us.
 - ✓ Feel that we are succeeding and accomplishing.
 - ✓ Be ready to exert ourselves.
 - ✓ Commit to keep trying no matter what.

CHAPTER

Forty Five

Prayer

Prayer helps us in the battle against desire in two ways. First, because our strength to fight the *yetzer hara* comes from Hashem, we must ask Him to grant it to us. Second, it helps us develop a relationship with Hashem. This does wonders in all areas of our religious observance, and is especially helpful in the battle against desire.

Hashem designed the world in a way that man must always depend on Him. This is for our good. Relying on Hashem cultivates a relationship with Him, which sparks the greatest spiritual growth (Rabbi Shafier, Shmuz 39: “I Need Needs” and Shmuz 63: “Prayer Part 1,” www.TheShmuz.com).

Further, having a relationship with Hashem is the most pleasurable experience possible. Hashem doesn’t just want us to experience this pleasure in the next world. He wants us to experience glimpses of a relationship with Him in this world too. Without a relationship with Him, life lacks meaning and is void of the greatest experience it has to offer. Hashem doesn’t want us to miss out on this even during the short time we are in this world. Also, the more we try to develop a relationship with Hashem in this world, the more we will feel we earned it when we come close to Him in the next world.

Hashem didn’t make us reliant on Him just for physical

matters. He made us depend on Him for spiritual strength as well, as the *Gemara (Sukkah 52b)* tells us: “Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish says, ‘A man’s *yetzer hara* gains strength over him every day and seeks to destroy him . . . and if not for Hashem Who is helping him, he could not defeat him. . . .’” By relying on Hashem in our lifelong battle against the *yetzer hara*, our accomplishments become much greater. We defeat the *yetzer hara* through a relationship with Hashem instead of without Him.

In addition, our achievements are magnified because anything we receive through prayer is credited to us. Thus, if Hashem limits the difficulty or gives us extra strength because of our prayers, we will be rewarded as if we overcame the original challenge without extra help. Further, relying on Hashem for spiritual strength brings meaning to our efforts. We are accomplishing “together with Hashem” so to speak. Feeling Hashem at our side as we conquer the *yetzer hara* is so sweet. It brings us so close to Hashem, even more than reliance upon Him for our physical needs does.

We must pray to Hashem constantly. We must ask Him for the strength to stand up to our desires, and for Him to weaken their intensity. We must request that He always put us in a mood conducive to feeling excitement about accomplishing, and we must pray that He doesn’t let us be caught off guard by desire. Most important, we must beg Hashem not to let us succumb no matter what. This is a vital part of our plan to attain self-control.

Obviously, for someone caught in the net of desire, the need to pray for Hashem’s help is much clearer, and prayer brings him phenomenal benefits. There is something special about crying out to Hashem, saying, “Hashem! I can’t do it myself! Please help me! Please help me escape the clutches of desire and once again control myself!” Amazingly, through reaching out to Hashem and relying on His help, we find the strength to regain control.

Pleading to Hashem helps us psychologically — we realize that though we can't do it alone, Hashem is helping us and we can succeed. And we benefit spiritually, through the extra help Hashem gives us.

But prayer's vital role in the battle against desire goes far beyond just asking Hashem to help us. As mentioned, Hashem wants us to rely on His help because that fosters a relationship with Him. Besides for a relationship with Hashem being so enjoyable and sparking spiritual growth, it helps us fight better against impulses. A deep relationship with Hashem can be strong enough to stop us from giving in to our desires. It can even help us turn our lives around, even when nothing else affects us. And our acts of self-control will be much greater because we will control ourselves out of love. Thus, we want to use prayer to build a relationship with Hashem, as He intended when He created it and asked us to rely on Him.

Hashem empathizes with any pain we experience. He understands the confusion we feel when we are pulled in opposite directions by desire and morality. Hashem cares about us and about what we want. As our loving Father Whose sole desire is to give us the greatest experience possible, He considers us the most important matter in existence. It is with this understanding that we come to pray to Him. Remembering Hashem's unconditional love unleashes a real relationship with Him. When we pray to Hashem with the knowledge that He really cares, these feelings ignite. We experience the sweetest feeling ever — a glimpse of Hashem's love. **Hashem really loves us!** We are important in His eyes and He cares for us like a benevolent Father!

A great way to build your relationship with Hashem is to pray to Hashem **in English** at the end of the *Shemoneh Esrei* before you step back. Ask Him for whatever you want with the knowledge that He longs to give it to you because you want it,

and that because He loves you, He will grant it if He deems it best for you. Talk to Him about everything in your life, because **He cares about anything you care about.** You can even talk openly about your struggles because He understands everything you struggle with. Hashem is empathetic and supportive. He never becomes fed up with you. He is your best friend and He is rooting for you to win! Teach yourself that Hashem loves you and your relationship with Him will take off.

Hashem values our prayers because we are significant in His eyes. Hashem cares about us, and He listens to our prayers because He wants to give to us. Our prayers work! They really make a difference.⁷⁸

In *Mesillas Yescharim* (Chapter 19), the Ramchal, discussing praying for the redemption, writes:

And if a person will say, “Who am I and what am I worth that I should pray about [ending] the exile and about Jerusalem?” The answer is obvious, as the sages taught us (*Sanhedrin* 37a), “The reason man was created alone [meaning the reason Hashem started the world with just one man, Adam, rather than with an entire nation] is that each person should say to himself, “The entire world was created just for me.” It gives Hashem pleasure when His children request and pray for [the redemption]. And even if He will not fulfill their request because the time has not yet come or for any other reason, they have done their job and Hashem is happy with this.

In *Shmuz* 192: “Hashem Really Cares,” Rabbi Shafier quotes his *Rebbe*, Rabbi Henach Leibowitz, *zt”l*, who explains that the Ramchal is teaching us a profound lesson: A regular Jew

78. Read Rabbi David Ashear’s *Living Emunah* for *chizuk* in this area. It is an incredible book.

should pray to Hashem knowing that his prayer has the power to cause Hashem to grant what he asks for, even if he is praying for something as significant as the redemption! If Hashem would create the whole world for just one person, surely one person is significant enough for Hashem to impact the world to grant him his request, even if it is something major. Although Hashem might not grant his wish, perhaps because it's not best now or for another reason, the person must realize that his prayers were important enough to attain it. Hashem didn't grant it only because in His infinite wisdom, He knew it wasn't best.

The Ramchal is saying that if a person thinks Hashem won't listen to his prayers because he is insignificant, he is mistaken. Every person is so valuable that Hashem would have made the entire world just for him, as Hashem taught us by starting the world with just one man. We don't come in prayer because we deserve to be answered. We ask our Father for a free gift because He loves us so much. Thus, it shouldn't seem strange or surprising if Hashem grants us our request. And even if He doesn't, we shouldn't assume that we're not important enough for Hashem to care, but rather that it wasn't best for reasons that Hashem understands. We are significant in Hashem's eyes, and our prayers are so valuable to Him. He is always listening because He cares so much about us. This is why prayer works.

Since you are so important to Hashem that He would have created the entire world just for you, in a sense you must act as if He did. Realize that the fact that there are other people in the world doesn't detract from the individual attention Hashem has for you. Hashem loves and cares about you as if you were His only child. Think about how you would view Hashem's relationship with you if you were the only person on planet Earth, and realize that this is exactly how He relates to you. Hashem loves you as if you were the only person in existence. That is how important you

are to Him.

Now you can understand how Hashem relates to you when you turn to Him. No matter what you pray for, Hashem listens to your prayers and really cares because you want it. He is especially excited that you are growing, which means He will be able to give you the greatest pleasure ever. After all, that's why He created you.

Hashem cares about whatever you care about. Although He might decide that it's not best for you due to calculations that are beyond us, you must not interpret it as indifference or anger at you for asking for something bad. Rather, you must realize that Hashem really cares, is ecstatic that you reached out to Him, and longs to grant it to you, but didn't because it wasn't best at this time. And keep praying, because at some point Hashem might grant your wishes.⁷⁹

Remembering how Hashem relates to us is especially important when we pray to Him. When we pray, we must make believe we are the only person in the world. We must realize how much Hashem cares about our prayers. We're not demanding things because we deserve them or because we prayed with concentration.⁸⁰ Rather, we have hope that Hashem will answer us because we are so important to Him. He is listening and of course He cares. We are hopeful that He will grant us our wishes if they are good for us. If we have this attitude, praying will

79. The *Gemara Berachos* 32b writes that if a person's prayers weren't answered, he should pray again (and again and again). Perhaps Hashem just wants him to pray more. Prayer is like money. Each prayer adds more until it's finally enough and we are answered. The more emotion, the more valuable the prayer, and the closer it brings us to our goal. The bigger the request, the more we might have to pray, but Hashem is listening to every prayer.

80. The *Gemara Berachos* 32b writes that expecting our prayers to be answered because we prayed with intense concentration prevents them from being answered.

be so sweet.

The Ramchal teaches us (*Derech Hashem* 4:5:1) that Hashem only created *tefillah* to enable Himself to shower us with good. Hashem desperately wants to give us good in this world, but of course it is better for us that we earn it in some way. The way we “earn” Hashem’s gifts is through prayer. Hashem longs for us to call out to Him so He will be able to give to us, as He wants so badly.

Realizing that Hashem values us so much and approves of us makes a dramatic difference in our lives. It makes us feel that we matter, which is one of the keys to serving Hashem better. This is what we gain from understanding Hashem’s relationship with us and connecting with Him.

We must constantly strengthen our understanding of Hashem’s love for us. You might find it helpful to review Chapters 5 and 7. Consider reading *GPS: Navigation for Your Soul* by Yaakov Shain and Avi Fishoff, especially Parts 1-3. I also recommend that you listen to some *Shmuzin* from Rabbi Shafier on this topic, such as Shmuz 8: “Power of Prayer,” Shmuz 102: “Learning to Love Hashem,” Shmuz 173: “Children of Hashem,” and Shmuz 192: “Hashem Really Cares” (all available for free on www.TheShmuz.com). By reading some material **every day** about Hashem’s great love for us, we will begin to really *feel* Hashem’s love, and we will develop a relationship with Him.

Praying to Hashem causes Him to grant us the strength to fight the *yetzer hara* and cultivates a relationship with Him. These benefits enable us to reach great heights in Hashem’s service, especially in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- We must pray to Hashem for the strength to defeat the *yetzer hara*.
- Developing a relationship with Hashem through prayer helps us win the battle against desire.

CHAPTER

Forty Six

Guidance

Though it is always important to have a *Rebbe* to help you grow and to guide you to make the right decisions, it has never been as vital as it is now. Because of the intense desires we experience, and especially because we often are at least somewhat affected by desire, we need a mentor to ensure that we are progressing and avoiding mistakes.

In *Mesillas Yesharim* (Chapter 3), the Ramchal writes that when a person battles his desires, he might make two mistakes. The first is not anticipating being challenged until he is caught off guard. This mistake is harmful enough. But there is a second mistake that is more deadly than the first. Desire can blind the person to think that what really is good is bad and what really is bad is good. He can even back it up with convincing, albeit faulty, logic. The person doesn't realize he is making a mistake and continues to follow the wrong path, which results in disaster. Though it's true that a person who wants to be honest with himself and uses certain methods can see through his biases,⁸¹ there is an easy way for a person to ensure that he is not making a mistake — by discussing it with someone who can guide him.

81. *Mesillas Yesharim*, end of Chapter 4. And see *ibid*, Chapter 3, which discusses *cheshbon hanefesh*, a key technique for seeing through the veil of desire.

The Ramchal (*ibid*, Chapter 3) alludes to two advantages that a person who won his battle has over someone who is still engaged in the struggle. These advantages enable the one who has prevailed to guide people who are still fighting their desires.

The first advantage is that one who has emerged from his battle against desire is no longer being influenced by desire. It doesn't sway his logic. Because he sees clearly, he can appreciate what matters in life and make correct decisions.

The second advantage is that a person who won has already fought the challenge and tried different tactics to succeed. He has learned from experience which ones work and which don't. Thus, any person not currently under the influence of desire — even one who has never experienced what we are battling against — can help us see right from wrong. But we also need someone who has experienced our specific challenges. Only such a person can guide us with what to do and what to avoid in our battle.

When it comes to the battle against desire, this is tricky. Many of the best candidates to guide us in life have had only limited exposure to this challenge. Though they can help us see straight and offer us advice for our battle from their experience in life, they might be somewhat limited in how much they can advise us about overcoming our desires. Therefore, we must also look for someone with the requisite experience to guide us in this area. We might have to settle for someone not much older than us. Nevertheless, if he has dealt with these challenges, he might have some ideas for us or even be able to guide us. Although it might be difficult to find such a person, it will be quite helpful if we can.

For guidance in any area of life to be effective, we must find the right mentor. We must choose someone we will feel comfortable speaking openly with. He must be someone who will try to understand us and will be empathetic to what we are going through. We must be confident that he won't look down

on us for our struggles, and that he will make us feel that he's our ally rather than someone who's above us. If we are afraid of him or uncomfortable talking openly with him, we won't go to him for guidance, and we won't properly express the issue even if we do. We also probably won't feel satisfied with his guidance, which happens when we don't feel understood and empathized with. Guidance from such a person won't provide us with what we seek from a mentor, no matter how brilliant he is. We aim to receive effective advice that relates personally to our lives. That won't happen unless we can have a relationship with our mentor.

If we find a mentor we can connect with who has experienced the battle, we will have an ally as we fight our battles. This itself will make the task less daunting. We will no longer feel that we are fighting an overwhelming battle alone. The emotional support and encouragement will be so helpful. It will give us the emotional strength and determination to stand up to our desires.⁸²

Having someone to converse with about life provides yet another benefit. Discussing matters with someone whose opinion we trust grants us confidence in our decisions. Discussing the dilemma and spelling out our concerns gives us clarity and eliminates doubt. Surely, if this person supports our choice after we explain the situation, we will be comfortable with our decision. We won't be held back by painful feelings of doubt. And our mentor might have some interesting points or ideas that can help us advance our decision.

Guidance brings us major benefits in all areas of life, and is especially helpful with challenging and confusing matters such

82. Of course, we hope to attain this feeling from our relationship with Hashem when we pray to Him. We aim to feel that Hashem is with us and is helping us. But even if we have a close relationship with Hashem, a mentor's support definitely helps.

as desire. Discussing our progress with the right person might just be the key to our success in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Try to find someone to guide you in life, and especially in your battle against desire.
- If possible, find someone who you will feel is on your side and has experience battling desire.
- Finding a mentor will gain you:
 1. Emotional support and encouragement.
 2. Clarity to choose right and confidence in your decisions.
 3. Tips and techniques for overcoming desire.

CHAPTER

Forty Seven

Mentoring

Many people have related that helping others conquer desire dramatically boosted their own self-control. This makes a lot of sense. Being a mentor helps the person in many ways.

First, the best way to master a concept is to teach it to someone else. Teaching the ideas that promote self-control makes them clear and helps the mentor internalize them. This strengthens him tremendously.

Second, acting like a teacher makes the person expect to control himself. Being respected as a mentor for desire-related challenges makes it feel normal for him to overcome temptation. People usually act consistently with how they view themselves. Because mentoring helps him identify as a person of self-control, he is more likely to control himself. Further, people feel funny going against what they preach. Feeling that he should live up to what he teaches helps the person muster the strength to control himself.

Third, providing guidance in any area helps the mentor taste success. Obviously, a person who helps others — especially if they succeed and become happier — will feel great about himself. The less a person thinks about himself and instead focuses on making a difference in the lives of others, the better

he will feel.⁸³ In addition, being looked up to will automatically make him feel better about himself. And when a person is looked to for guidance, this increases his respect for his own opinion and makes him feel knowledgeable about life. He feels capable and smart. Feeling respectable and capable is vital for success. By improving the mentor's sense of self, the mentoring relationship does wonders in his battle with desire.

Finally, a person who tries to help others receives special assistance from Hashem to fight his own battles (see *Pirkei Avos* 5:21). Seeing that this person is trying to help His children, Hashem feels a special appreciation and love for him (*Mesillas Yesharim*, end of Chapter 19). Hashem grants him special help and guides him to success.

A person who mentors someone battling desire must do it correctly. He should try to provide support and encouragement like an older brother. He must empathize with the struggles of his friend and avoid looking down on him for his mistakes. This will encourage the person to open up to him. The mentor must encourage the person and infuse him with the belief that he can attain self-control. He must believe in the person and respect him for his efforts to fight temptation. He must be careful not to talk down to him in any way, which could jeopardize the relationship.

You might wonder whether you are qualified to be a mentor. After all, you might not have the utmost clarity, and you might even struggle yourself. This might make you feel incapable of being effective as a mentor.

This is a mistake. Nobody asked that you become an angel before mentoring someone. All you need is the ability to empathize with someone who is connecting with you because he is struggling and wants to improve. Most people want to be good,

83. Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, page 176

but sometimes it's hard, and the battle against desire is the best example of this. All you have to do is find the person's desire to be good and focus on it until it becomes his identity. Then, by studying with him, maintaining a connection, and discussing his progress and struggles with encouragement, you will help him succeed. Your only objective is to make a difference, and you definitely can. You don't need to understand everything about desire to help. Just do the best you can. If you choose not to help the person, maybe no one will.

You don't need to attain self-mastery to help others. In fact, making believe you are never challenged makes it difficult for people to relate to you, while sharing your vulnerability creates a bond and fosters openness. Nevertheless, you are probably better off not discussing specific mistakes you've made. Just admit that you face your own challenges and that it can be difficult, even for you. This will bring the person to see you as an empathetic ally. He will open up to you, which will further your relationship, and you will guide him even better. Share with him whatever has worked for you. Tell him that though you are no expert, these ideas and techniques helped you and might help him. You don't have to be a guru or to make believe you are. Just care about him and try your best, and you will make a huge difference in his life.

Set up a *seder* with any people you can help. Learn with them the pieces of *Gemara* and *Mussar* quoted in this book. Learn these sources inside and work on the lessons together. Ask questions. Ask them what they think and why things happened. Get them to figure out the answers themselves, so the lesson will penetrate without resistance and the impact will be stronger. Through these *Gemaras*, inspire them to reach for greatness through success against desire. Over time, this *seder* will make a major impact on both of you.

There is nothing as rewarding as knowing you changed

someone's life. Nothing is sweeter than seeing people you helped thriving and smiling. Knowing you have made a difference in the lives of others is priceless. There is nothing more fulfilling.

Even better, by helping others, you obtain a share in all the good they ever do as a result, as *Chovos Halevavos* states (10:6):

The merits of the believer — even if he would reach the loftiest goals in perfecting himself to serve Hashem, and even if he would become close [in level] to the prophets in their good character traits, their praiseworthy conduct, their effort in serving Hashem, and in their pure love for Him — are not as much as the merits of one who guides people to the good path and directs the wicked to the service of Hashem, because his merits are multiplied because of the merits [accumulated by those he has guided] every day and at all times. . . .

One who perfects only his own soul will have limited merits. But one who rectifies his soul and many other souls will have his merits multiplied in accordance with the merits of all those he has rectified [to serve] Hashem.

Chovos Halevavos gives a parable: Two merchants came to town. The first earned ten times what he invested, while the second merely doubled his investment. But because the second merchant invested much more money, he profited astronomically, while the first merchant, with all his business acumen, made just a small profit because of his modest investment.

The lesson is clear: The more people we help, the more reward we will receive and the higher we will reach. We will receive at least some credit for every good act we cause. The ripple effect of our efforts will live on and compile more into our accounts even after we are long gone! We cannot know how much of an impact we can make, both directly, through those we affect personally,

and indirectly, as those we have helped go on to affect others. Our ability to rake it in spiritually is endless!⁸⁴

Being an ally to others will help them succeed and change their lives. But ultimately, the ones who gain the most are ourselves. By helping others, we accomplish profoundly, experience the most rewarding feeling in existence, and receive phenomenal strength to crush the *yetzer hara* in the battle of the generation.

Quick Recap:

- Taking others under our wing improves our performance in the battle against desire.

84. Please take advantage of this opportunity by helping me spread this book. Buy some for your friends. Lend someone yours. Tell your friends about it, and use whatever means you have to let people know about it. Spread it as far as you can. You will gain unending merits from all the good you cause and the ripple effects that result.

Postscript

Though you have reached the end of this book, your journey is just beginning. Each challenge you will face is an opportunity to achieve unprecedented accomplishments. Don't ever forget that. Keep growing from level to level and never stop striving for greatness.

Rabbi Shafier's Shmuzes made a huge impact in my life. They guided me and helped me strive to reach higher. If you are looking to grow as a person, you will find them quite helpful. They can be downloaded for free at www.TheShmuz.com. (Ask someone to download them for you if you don't use the Internet.) Start with some of my favorites: Shmuz 16: "Olam Habba: The Greatest Motivator," Shmuz 24: "Understanding Life-Settings," Shmuz 30: "Anger Management" (a great introduction to working on *Middos* in general), Shmuz 42: "Tricks of the Soton," Shmuz 61: "Heroes," Shmuz 73: "Self-Respect: The Basis of it All," and Shmuz 80: "It's Never Too Late." Rabbi Shafier has Shmuzes on a wide range of topics, and his messages are enjoyable and easy to understand. Try them! They might change your life.

If you want to grow and reach greatness, you need to read the guidebook to life, *Mesillas Yesharim*. This *mussar sefer* teaches the proper path of growth so you can reach higher and higher. Even if you learned it in school, read it again and focus on the

author's words and message. (Try to focus on the Ramchal's point, rather than on what others are doing wrong. Always ask yourself: What is the author trying to say? What is he trying to tell me? How can I use his message to become greater?) Get an English translation if you need one.

Also, Rabbi Avigdor Miller's books are a must for people growing up today. Make sure to check out *Rejoice O Youth!*, *Sing You Righteous*, and *Awake My Glory*. From *mussar* to *hashkafa* to science, everything is in them. Read them! You won't regret it.

We must always review the concepts we have worked on. If we stop reading and thinking about them, they will slip our attention and we will fall back a little. But if we review these ideas, we will keep our perspective and excitement to accomplish. And each time we read about these concepts again, we will gain further insight in them and *feel* them more than ever before.

We **must** take our "medication" against the Yetzer Hara *every single day*. We can't let a day go by that we don't strive for greatness. We should focus on the areas that need strengthening and review the material as many times as needed. We must always be working on one part of our battle plan, and we must review all the aspects of the plan every so often. This will condition us to be ready for all challenges.

To live with excitement and inspiration at all times, we must go beyond just reviewing the material. We must make excitement our way of life by celebrating our victories (see Chapter 25). Each time we're thrilled about a triumph, our excitement to accomplish increases and this perspective becomes a part of us. If we keep up our excitement for accomplishment, we will win more easily and soar to great heights.

The Torah (*Shemos* 22:25-26) discusses the laws of returning

collateral given for a loan when the borrower needs it. The Torah seems to be saying that if the lender doesn't return the collateral, the borrower will cry out and Hashem will punish the lender. However, *Da'as Zekenim* (ibid 22:26) explains differently, that when the lender returns the collateral, the borrower will be so grateful. He will pray to Hashem to grant all good to the lender because of his kindness. And Hashem says He will listen to that prayer because He is merciful. Just as the lender was merciful and kind to the borrower, Hashem will be merciful to him and bless him.

In this vein, I ask for a favor: If you benefited from this book, please pray for me and my family, that Hashem should bless us with all good, and that He should give me the strength and ability to do more good for *Klal Yisrael*. Thank you.

When I was fine-tuning this book, I went through it with a grammar checker. Every time the software noticed I had used the word "forever," it flagged it as "a wild exaggeration" and asked whether I wanted to remove it. This made me smile because it's no exaggeration — **we really will rejoice with Hashem in the ultimate bliss forever!** Amazing!

One last thing: Never forget that Hashem didn't create you to be a nobody. He created you to become great for your benefit. Hashem just wants you to accomplish so that you will receive the ultimate pleasure in both worlds!

Hashem does not want you to sell yourself short. He doesn't want you to miss out on your destiny. Overcome your challenges and become great! That's the point of life.

APPENDIX A

The Yetzer Hara In Our Brain (Addendum to Chapter 10)

To overcome desire, we must be eager to succeed. That won't happen if we hold ourselves back with debilitating guilt. Although Chapter 10 will be enough for most people to gain the proper perspective, those who struggle with excessive guilt will need more. This Appendix will help them get the *yetzer hara* off their backs so they can unleash their excitement to accomplish.

The *yetzer hara* does not use every attack on every person. Therefore, some of the following might seem foreign to you. But some of it might be familiar. If you struggle with this problem, you will find this appendix helpful.

The *yetzer hara's* most devastating attacks take place within our minds. He speaks to us in our own voice and convinces us that we are incapable and inferior. Thinking it is ourselves talking, we accept what he tells us as truth. This gets us depressed and holds us back from accomplishing.

Often, we don't realize how debilitating this attack is. Not realizing its dramatic impact on our struggle against desire, we direct our attention elsewhere. We focus on fighting harder and we ignore what happens when things seem quiet. But though we don't realize it, many of our struggles originate from the verbal abuse that the *yetzer hara* hurls upon us using our inner voice. For our efforts to be effective, we must first defuse this dirty tactic so it does not stop us.

Self-deprecating thoughts damage us in many ways. These thoughts get us down. They sap our motivation to fight. We lose our ability to feel that **we have the greatest opportunity there ever was when we are challenged**. Without this enthusiasm, we are in bad shape. Controlling ourselves becomes a chore. We feel that we are missing out on what we want, which is deadly. Our challenges turn into losing battles, as we try to hang on while our composure slips away. Without excitement to reach great heights, we are in grave danger.

As we continue to beat ourselves up, we become even more depressed. Life becomes so painful. When we are down, we lose even more of our capabilities. Our strength is sapped and we feel helpless. There seems to be no hope that we will ever escape the mess we are in. We are convinced that we will be knocked around by desire for the rest of our lives.

Inevitably, these feelings become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A person who is sure he cannot control himself — with pain and frustration thrown in for good measure — will lose every battle. No matter how hard he beats himself up to improve, he won't change if he believes he can't. Even if he is motivated to change, his limiting beliefs will take over when he is challenged — he will remember that he can't control himself. Because he faces a brick wall that he cannot penetrate, he won't succeed. The greatest techniques won't work even if he tries because he sabotages himself with his limiting beliefs. He won't be able to shake the instinct that he is going to fail, and he will ultimately cave in. But most likely, such a person won't even try because he has given up.

Further, a person who feels incapable of self-control won't prepare for battle. To succeed, a person must strengthen himself and change his perspective. He must also figure out what challenges might lurk and be alert so they don't catch him off guard. If a person doesn't prepare himself for battle because he is

sure that nothing will help, he will be at a major disadvantage.

Perhaps most dangerous is that because the person looks down on himself, his commitment to religion suffers. In some cases, the person faces a struggle not to give up entirely. No matter how badly a person sins, that alone doesn't stop him from being religious. Even the most gripping addictions won't push him off. But something does threaten to do him in — the depression and shame from thinking of himself as a horrible failure.

When a person succumbs to temptation, the *yetzer hara* makes him feel worthless. All the good he has done seems meaningless. A person who hears his own inner voice saying, "I'm a spiritual failure! I can't even be considered *frum*" will be in agony. He probably won't realize that the *yetzer hara* is behind this voice, nor will he know how to respond to it — after all, he did sin quite badly. He thinks everyone would look down on him if they knew what he was doing. Convinced that Hashem is fed up with him, he thinks Hashem no longer wants him, *chas veshalom*. Identifying himself as a sinner, he acts consistent with that label. Finally, when he can no longer handle the pain of being someone who does wrong, he feels forced to defend himself by belittling the importance of self-control, or even by questioning the Torah's authenticity.

Unfortunately, this happens more often than we care to admit. A person tends to act in accordance with how he views himself. If a person feels less religious than those around him, even if it doesn't bother him, his spiritual performance will suffer. And if it does pain him, it compounds the problem, crushing him and his spiritual performance. Feeling like a worthless failure is torture, and it can break a person.

According to the Maharsha, this is what caused the *Tanna* Elisha ben Avuya to give everything up. The *Gemara* (*Chagiga* 15a) relates that Elisha ben Avuya was an exceedingly righteous

person. One day, a certain event took place in which he committed a grave sin. He was informed that his merits had been wiped out, and he heard a heavenly voice proclaim that Hashem longed for the return of all sinners except him.

When Elisha heard this, he interpreted it to mean that Hashem did not want him back and would never accept his repentance. He told himself that since he had been banished from the World to Come, there was no reason not to live it up in this world. Elisha proceeded to commit the most horrific sins. He even murdered Torah scholars. He became the infamous sinner known as "Acher" (someone else). His student Rabbi Meir repeatedly urged him to repent, and each time he responded that it was too late. He died as one of the worst sinners ever, having been close to Hashem and rebelling nonetheless.

The Maharsha (*Chiddushei Agados*, s.v. *Yotza Bas Kol*) comments that Acher's big mistake was accepting the heavenly voice's message. He should have realized that although it would have been difficult, repentance was still possible because **nothing can stand in the way of teshuva**. The heavenly voice was just making it hard for him to repent (it seems that because his sin was so severe, the only way to atone for it would be to repent despite feeling rejected), but in reality, Hashem would have accepted him. Not only did Hashem want him back, He set up the only situation in which Acher could fully repent. Unfortunately, Acher did not realize this. Once he felt rejected by Hashem and banished from the World to Come, he believed there was no reason for him not to go off. This fueled his wicked actions and stopped him from repenting.

Believing the self-deprecating thoughts that the *yetzer hara* puts in our heads is so dangerous. If we don't learn how to handle them, we won't be able to succeed. Our attempts to improve will be ineffective and surely won't last. Even the greatest techniques

won't work if we believe the voice and sabotage ourselves. To get anywhere, we must deal with this sinister trick. Overcoming these thoughts enables our efforts to be effective.

It is natural to believe what our inner voice tells us. Because it is our own voice, we don't realize that it really is the *yetzer hara* speaking. His arguments seem logical; after all, isn't this how someone who sinned should feel? We think attacking ourselves will make us improve and ensure that we don't give in again. But ironically, rather than helping us, it stops us from improving and even makes us fall into more severe sins.

If we want to succeed, we must first fight off these mistaken critical thoughts. Then, we can create a plan that will help us regain control. We can strengthen ourselves and set ourselves up for success, but only after we stop debilitating ourselves with these critical thoughts.

If you have been attacking yourself and feel inferior or worthless, that's not your fault. The *yetzer hara* has pulled out his deadliest weapons in the battle of the generation, and this reaction to failure has become common. And if you are suffering, nobody can force you to stop accepting the *yetzer hara's* arguments. Nobody can demand that you ignore them as if it's no big deal — anybody who does so hasn't experienced this attack of the *yetzer hara*. It's so painful because it's natural to believe your inner thoughts, and that leads to the paralyzing feeling that you are a failure. It's not easy to recognize that these thoughts are false. Nevertheless, it's in your best interest to examine these thoughts before accepting them and experiencing so much pain.

First, we must figure out who is responsible for these thoughts. If we could prove that it is the *yetzer hara* speaking within us, we wouldn't accept his ideas so easily. We would be skeptical, knowing that he is our enemy whose only goal is to hurt us, and that he is willing to lie and do anything necessary to accomplish his

goal. His track record is filled with dishonesty — he even created an image of Moshe Rabbeinu lying dead in the sky to convince the Jews to despair and build the golden calf!⁸⁵ Once we establish that these claims come from him, it won't be too hard for us to demonstrate that they were built on falsehood, like everything else he tells us.

Rav Dovid Leibowitz, *zt"l*, (quoted by Rabbi Shafier in Shmuz 42: "Tricks of the Soton," www.TheShmuz.com) taught how to figure out whether our inner voice is being manipulated by the *yetzer hara*. The secret is to determine whether our feelings cause us to serve Hashem better or worse. Does this voice get you to act and learn with zeal, or does it get you depressed? After the speech is over, do you feel motivated to succeed, or are you uninterested in doing anything? Do you feel capable of becoming the person you want to be, or do you feel worthless?⁸⁶

Ridiculing thoughts make you feel like a helpless loser. Clearly, they come from the *yetzer hara*. Who else wants to drag you down? Who doesn't want you to accomplish? Who is sick enough to tell you that you are horrible and can never escape it? It is all from him! He is trying to make you despondent so he can crush you.

The challenges you failed are small compared to the challenge you now face — the challenge of overcoming your inner thoughts and feelings. The only way to win is to realize

85. See Rashi on *Shemos* 32:1.

86. This is similar to the Ramchal's message in Chapter 20 of *Mesillas Yesharim*, that when deciding whether to do something that's not obligatory, such as *chumros*, we must calculate all the outcomes of our options and decide what's best based on that. Sometimes certain choices seem admirable right now but ultimately damage the person's *avodas Hashem*, harm others, or cause Hashem's honor to be diminished, *chas veshalom*. See the aforementioned chapter for more elaboration of this vital concept.

that it is coming from the *yetzer hara*, who is trying to hurt you a thousand times worse than he already has! He is going for the kill! This is his goal from the outset when he challenges us with desire — to get us to give in so he can then obliterate us with these sinister tactics. You must acknowledge that he is the source of these tricks, and you must know why his claims are wrong.

When you sin, the *yetzer hara* might cause some of the following thoughts:

“I am a failure. The sin I just did makes me worthless. I am off the *derech*, exactly like those who have rejected everything. I am just as bad. I am a sinner.

“I should have controlled myself. I could have done better. If I had just pushed myself harder, I would have won the battle. It would have been so simple for me to control myself had I tried harder, but I blew it again! I should have much more control over myself.

“I am so ashamed. I’m embarrassed to even go near anybody. Anyone who would know what I did would look down on me. Nobody would empathize with me about my struggles, not that there is much to empathize with anyway. Everybody does much better than me. I am probably the only person who does these things. No one else sins in this area, and I give in left and right. I am messed up.

“All the good I ever did is meaningless because I did this huge sin. I am horrible. How hard I fought and my effort to change myself is irrelevant; my sin is all that matters.

“Even though I labored and managed to control myself for the past two days, two weeks, or two months, that is worthless. I am the same out of control person I always was. All my effort was a waste; I’m just as horrible as I was before.

“Besides, any good I did doesn’t count because I was obligated to do it anyway. All that matters is falling short —

which I just did when I violated my obligations.

“I bet Hashem is furious with me. He hates me and has rejected me. It is hopeless! He will always look down on me. Even if I do *teshuva*, Hashem won’t accept it. It’s impossible to undo something this severe. I did it; how can I get rid of it?”

“Further, what happened is all my fault. I brought everything upon myself when I befriended those people and experimented with these sins. Had I controlled myself then, things would be so easy. If I didn’t watch those movies and hang out with those friends, I would still be pure. I activated my desires.

“And now that I have awakened my temptations, it is too late. I can’t stop myself. I am incapable, as I just proved. I *do* these things. I am an addict and I will never regain control, no matter what I do. I can’t even improve the situation. I’m doomed.”

These thoughts intensify the more severe the sin is. They are especially tough when it is something you haven’t done before. You feel so guilty, worthless, and helpless that it keeps you stuck in the muck. The first step is to realize that these thoughts come from the *yetzer hara*. They destroy your drive to serve Hashem and stop you from improving. That automatically shows it’s one of his tricks, no matter how convincing these arguments seem. Then, we can think about the situation rationally and figure out how these thoughts are incorrect.

The *yetzer hara*’s first argument is that your sin makes you worthless and it is as if you are completely irreligious. This is a dirty lie. First, Hashem loves you no matter how badly you have sinned. His love for each of His children is unconditional, as He taught us when He didn’t allow the angels to sing *shira* after the wicked Egyptians drowned (see Chapter 5). Hashem values you no matter what you have done. He still cherishes you just as much. He does not reject you or angrily demand revenge.

Of course, our actions matter a lot. Our sins have consequences, as most unintelligent decisions do. But these repercussions don't come from real anger. Hashem still cares about us just as much. He only wants us not to sin because it is bad for us.⁸⁷

Further, you must remember that true greatness does not depend on how religious you look. It is not even determined by your actual level. The greatness of your deeds is determined by the effort you exerted and the difficulty the situation presented, due to its specific circumstances and your overall life-setting.⁸⁸ No failure can take away from your toil.

You must not think badly of yourself because of your mistakes. Hashem realizes how hard your challenges are. He views everything fairly. He doesn't fall for the *yetzer hara's* distorted perspective. Hashem knows you are a good person who deep down wants to do what's right, even if you are often overpowered by desire. He knows that you wish you had acted differently. Hashem sees the goodness within you and thinks so highly of you, even if you don't. Hashem believes in you! He knows you can overpower the *yetzer hara* and regain control.

Could it be that the One Who created desire and gave us our challenges doesn't know how hard they are? Of course not. Hashem knows how difficult each of our challenges is. He doesn't look down on any person who struggles with his desires, no matter how badly the person has fallen.

Hashem is so proud of every bit of effort, even if we haven't attained mastery. He takes pride in any person who puts in *any* effort not to go down without a fight, because He knows

87. For more on this, see Chapter 33.

88. For more on this, see Chapter 23.

how difficult the battle is. Hashem values these accomplishments far more than achievements that seem huge but lack the same difficulty. He knows that we are accomplishing and becoming great people even if our actions don't look the part of a great individual, because it is the effort that counts. And if He is proud of us, that means we are people to be proud of, no matter what we look like.

If we face the added challenge of feeling down about ourselves and our religious observance, Hashem takes even more pride in us. This is perhaps the most difficult challenge and it affects everything we do. If we overcome it, every good deed we do is magnified immensely. If we don't give up, we will be blown away when we discover our great position in the next world and how highly Hashem holds of us.

Further, if you think about it rationally, you will see many differences between you and someone who has rejected religion. You do so many things differently every minute. Wrong actions don't make you worthless, no matter how serious they are. Being overpowered by your desires does not make you irreligious, even if it happens many times. Though you made a mistake and did something you now realize was foolish, that doesn't make you bad. You are doing the most important thing: You are trying! That is incredible, and it is all Hashem wants from you. Mistakes happen, but they don't define you. All the things you do right show that you care. Focus on them and you will see that you are not nearly as bad as you think.

Don't fall for the *yetzer hara's* accusations. You are not evil. You didn't sin out of rebellion; you sinned out of weakness. None of us really want to go against what Hashem told us. Deep down, we want to do what is right. We want to be good. What happens is that we face desires that overpower us and change our interests, and this lasts until the desires deactivate. But that

is not our essence; it is not *us*. We really want to do good.

Of course, we cannot and do not disregard our sins. We hope to grow into people who are in control, and we plan on rectifying our mistakes through *teshuva*. But our sins don't make us bad people, no matter how severe they are. A sin is an action we did wrong, but it does not define us. It's not too late! We can get off the floor and fight back, which will bring us to greatness! We can stop doing the sin and do *teshuva*, which will completely undo everything.

The next argument of the *yetzer hara* is that you should have done better because if you had just pushed yourself a little harder, you would have controlled yourself. This seems true — after all, you sinned. But though it might be true, sometimes it's just a trick from the *yetzer hara* to destroy your motivation. You must consider this message's impact. Does it cause you to serve Hashem better, or to fall apart?

Also, you must remember that self-control goes far beyond pushing yourself. It requires a diverse plan. You have to transform your attitude — you must be excited to win your battles. You also need to become alert and prepare for upcoming battles so you are not caught off guard. Not pushing hard enough wasn't the real reason you succumbed. It's unlikely that when you were challenged, you wanted to control yourself but just weren't strong enough. You probably felt uninterested in controlling yourself in the first place because you wanted to give in. That is the most important matter to address. Though willpower plays a role in self-control, it is only one piece of the puzzle and unless used properly, it is not even that. Until you progress in awareness and motivation, it will be difficult to push harder because when your desires awaken, you won't want to go against them. This will not change until you work on everything else.

There is a dirty secret behind the *yetzer hara's* words. He

derides you for not trying harder because it makes it easier to get you down. Feeling guilty for not pulling through and pressuring yourself to push harder, especially with no plan or preparation for temptations, won't help you improve and can even harm you. Rather, the best approach is to decide what you want to change, implement an effective plan, and mostly deal with guilt and regret when you are ready to do a complete *teshuva* —which is after you have achieved some success.⁸⁹

The *yetzer hard's* next move is to make you feel ashamed of yourself. He convinces you that everyone would look down on you if they knew what you did. He tells you that you are the only one who struggles with these challenges, or at least that nobody who counts ever succumbs. This makes you feel like an embarrassment.

This cannot be further from the truth. First, how do you know that nobody else struggles with this issue? Every person who faces desire is susceptible, no matter how religious he is. This is the most intense battle, especially in our generation. Many people struggle. Just because they don't air out their dirty laundry in public, that does not mean it doesn't exist.

When a person is challenged, it is difficult to maintain control. All his interests suddenly change and he only cares about getting what he wants. It takes great effort to pull through. He is fighting against himself because *he* wants so badly to give in. Unfortunately, the success rate for serious challenges is low.

Rare is the person who conquers his desires. Our sages liken such a person to a mighty warrior (*Avos* 4:1). Going against our nature is tough stuff. A person who consistently overcomes his desires is on a lofty level. We are working toward becoming that person, but when we err, we must remember that warriors

89. See *Chiddushei Lev Sefer Devarim* page 194 for more on this.

in this battle are rare. Most people who seem invulnerable either haven't faced major challenges or succumb behind closed doors. Mastery in this battle is difficult; it doesn't come without much planning and effort. Victory takes great strength and sometimes it's a struggle.

Most people who you believe would look down on you either have never faced real temptation or struggle with it. Those who struggle would never look down on you, and those who haven't been challenged cannot fathom its difficulty. Just because they think self-mastery is easy, that doesn't mean it is. Their opinion is irrelevant.

A person who makes light of today's challenges obviously knows nothing about their intensity. It would be foolish for us to take his criticism seriously. We are not going to view ourselves based on the opinions of people who don't know what we fight against. Most people would understand and empathize with you, and those who would belittle you are foolish. Let them face the challenges they mock others for struggling with and let's see how they do.

Never forget that without challenges, even perfection would be no feat. True greatness comes from overcoming our nature, which is what you are going to do. Life is supposed to be full of challenges, because overcoming difficulty comprises greatness. It's tough so that we can become great.

Of course, this does not mean we can't gain the upper hand over our desires. Despite the difficulty, we can regain control and proceed with confidence rather than thinking we will lose.

The *yetzer hara's* next trick is to get you to focus entirely on your sin. He makes all the good you ever did slip your mind or seem irrelevant. Feeling worthless, you ignore your exertion to hang on until now and all your attempts to improve. You are convinced that all that matters is the bottom line — that you failed.

Even if you succeeded for a long time and felt like a different person, the *yetzer hara* uses this sin to “prove” that you are just the same. He mocks you for thinking you had changed and for attempting “what can’t be done.” You feel no better than before, and your hard work seems wasted.

This is another myth that is busted when we understand true greatness. Only feats accomplished despite difficulty are exceptional. Being born on a high level and accomplishing without exertion sounds so appealing. But though it would be easier if by nature we wanted to do only good, none of our achievements would be impressive. Instead of thinking about where we are holding or what level we are on, which is just the *yetzer hara* trying to convince us that we are unsuccessful and deficient, we have to recall our frequent acts of accomplishment. Every time we try to prepare ourselves for battle — and every page we read — is a moment of destiny! **Each instant** of exertion is a separate act of greatness! Every attempt to hold ourselves back a little longer is priceless, and we will bask in it forever! No effort is wasted, no matter what we did afterward — even if we caved in to the same desire a minute later. Rather than dwelling on our imperfections, let’s realize our opportunity to become great and run with it!

We must identify ourselves as people who stand up to the *yetzer hara*’s fiercest challenge, the battle of the generation. We strive to win every battle, and if we fall, we get back up and continue fighting. We are accomplishing one act of greatness after another. As people who aspire to win the most difficult battle ever, we are on the road to astounding success. We are shooting for the stars! This is our identity!

Our focus must always be on what we can accomplish. Though we don’t want to sin and we hope to rectify our mistakes with *teshuvah*, our mindset must always be on success. Our life’s

goal is to capitalize on our incredible opportunity. Concentrating only on what we did wrong and ignoring our victories takes us away from that goal.

The *yetzer hara* continues to try to make you ignore your accomplishments by belittling them. He tells you that your efforts are not impressive because it was required. By implying that self-control just prevents damage but brings no positive gains, he convinces you that the moment you gave in is all that matters. If our exertion doesn't count, our failure is all that does.

Again, we must not let the *yetzer hara* skew our perspective on life. Because Hashem wants our successes to be remarkable, life must be challenging. You know how difficult it is to control your desires, and that makes your toil so impressive.

We can no longer get by with just *knowing* this is true. We have to *feel* this perspective and live life with it. If you aren't there yet, read Chapters 1 and 2 again. Read them every day for a few weeks if you have to. Repeated exposure to the correct attitude on life will eventually grant you this outlook.

Don't give up if you don't feel a change right away. Don't despair even if it takes a month or longer. Even though the inspiration is weaker after the first time, read it anyway, because a small change is happening within you. Though it is imperceptible at first, what you read and contemplate will transform you over time, and you will become enthusiastic about life.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar Movement, stressed this message in a letter to his students (*Ohr Yisroel*, Letter 10):

A person should not be disheartened when he learns *mussar* and it does not seem to be working. If he cannot see a tangible imprint upon himself and he has not changed his ways, [he must still press on]. He must know that even if the impression is imperceptible to

his physical eyes, the eyes of the intellect see [the small change]. With an abundance of time and *Mussar* study, all the hidden impressions will accumulate and he will become a different person. . . . Experience testifies [to this].

Having the proper perspective on life is crucial, and this is how to attain it. Constantly read and think about your opportunity in life. Eventually, your efforts will penetrate, and you will live with enthusiasm about what you can accomplish. Read about it until you internalize it and *feel* it to be true. Then review it daily because this perspective slips away so easily. Top it off by celebrating every victory (see Chapter 25), which will cause your thrill for life to explode! Do this and you will live with unmatched excitement.⁹⁰

The *yetzer hard's* next trick is really nasty. He tells you that Hashem hates you because of your sins. Convinced that Hashem is furious and can't wait to punish you, you feel permanently rejected. You are sure that Hashem doesn't want you back, and that there is nothing you can do to make Him accept you again. It seems that there is no way to remove your stains. This makes you feel hopeless and worthless, and it makes you want to give up.

This is the *yetzer hard's* biggest lie. **There is NOTHING we can do to Hashem to make Him hate us or become angry with us.** Hashem is infinite. He does not need us, and we cannot hurt Him no matter how badly we sin.

Hashem created us for only one reason: to give us the greatest pleasure ever, which we earn in this world and bask in forever in the next. All He wants is that we act properly and earn that enjoyment. He wants us to control ourselves for our own good so we don't miss out on everything: on the incredible

90. For more on this, see Part 6.

reward, on a close relationship with Him, and on greatness!

Hashem does not hate us no matter how hard we fall. He never becomes actually angry with us.⁹¹ Would it make sense for Him to be angry? He is not insecure. We cannot hurt Him and He has nothing to fear. Rather, it pains Him when we don't do what is in our best interest because He wants us to receive only the best. His greatest wish is to give to us, and He is saddened when He cannot do so because of our actions. He wants us not to mess up only because these actions hurt us, make us miserable, and cause us to miss out on everything.

Hashem created all our challenges, and He understands how tough they are. He does not make it hard hoping we will fail so He can blast us, *chas veshalom*. He challenges us hoping we will win so we can reach greatness and receive the most amazing reward — and really feel we earned it!

Hashem has not rejected us and He never will, no matter what we do. He still cares about us as much as he did before we sinned, and He looks upon us only with love. He still wants us to succeed, and He is proud of every bit of effort.

Further, there is something you can do to undo your mistake. You can come close to Hashem by doing *teshuva*, which always works! *Teshuva* makes it as if you never did the sin! You can start right now by deciding to put in the effort to change. The situation is far from hopeless.

Never think you can't do *teshuva*, no matter how far you have fallen. As long as we are alive, Hashem eagerly awaits our *teshuva*. Hashem's dream is to grant us the greatest good, and He longs to give to us even if we have fallen. Our sins cannot damage Him and He never gets angry with us.

91. *Sefer Hamaspik Le'ovdei Hashem* by Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam, end of Chapter 6. For more on this, listen to Shmuz 8: "The Power of Prayer," Rabbi Shafier, www.TheShmuz.com

A person might wonder how *teshuva* can help, especially for grievous sins. If a person killed someone but then feels bad, does that bring the victim back to life? What's done is done! How can *teshuva* change anything?

Nevuzaradan was the general who led the Babylonian conquest of Israel, which culminated with the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash. He brought about the deaths of more than three million Jews. The *Gemara* (*Gittin* 57b) relates that when Nevuzaradan penetrated Yerushalayim and entered the Beis Hamikdash, he noticed a pool of blood bubbling on the floor. He asked the Kohanim what the blood was. At first, they told him it was blood of sacrifices that had spilled. Nevuzaradan killed some animals and demonstrated that the bubbling blood did not match. After Nevuzaradan threatened them, the Kohanim admitted that it was the blood of the prophet Zecharya, who had been murdered by the people many years earlier after he had delivered a scathing rebuke. His blood had spilled onto the floor, where it had been bubbling ever since.

Nevuzaradan decided to appease Zecharya. He rounded up the Rabbis and had them killed on the spot, but that did not stop the blood from bubbling. He gathered the unmarried young men and women and killed them, but the blood continued to bubble. Next, he captured the young schoolchildren and killed them there, bringing the number of people he killed during this episode to 940,000. Nevertheless, the blood continued to bubble.

Finally, he called out, "Zecharya! Zecharya! I killed the best of them. Do you want me to kill them all?"

When Nevuzaradan uttered these words, the blood stopped bubbling.

At that point, a thought of *teshuva* entered Nevuzaradan's mind. He said to himself, "If these are the consequences of one murder, what will happen to me for killing so many people?"

Nevuzaradan ran away, sent a last will and testament to his house, and converted. The *Gemara* teaches us that he is considered a righteous convert.

This story seems to make no sense! How could a man so horrible become a righteous convert? How could he just say, “I’m sorry!” and be forgiven? The damage was already done! He killed three million Jews, and he even killed the great sages! Saying sorry didn’t bring them back to life! How could he be forgiven after doing so much damage?

Rabbi Shafier (Shmuz 80: “It’s Never too Late,” www.TheShmuz.com) explains that a basic rule of *emunah* is that no person can harm another person if Hashem does not want the victim to be damaged.⁹² Hashem runs every detail of each person’s life, not leaving anything up to another’s decisions or to chance. When a person hurts his friend, Hashem wanted the victim to suffer. Yet, the tormentor did not have to do so — Hashem is unlimited and has infinite ways of inflicting that exact pain upon this person. Therefore, the act of causing pain is attributed to the person who performed it — it’s considered as if he made it happen.

The Ramchal (*Mesillas Yesharim*, end of Chapter 4) teaches us that when a person completes the process of *teshuva*, his regret over his mistake uproots the action from being attributed to him. Uprooting his will to have done this action retroactively uproots the person’s action itself. The results are still there, because that is what Hashem wanted to happen for whatever reason; otherwise, it would not have happened. Nevertheless, the action is no longer associated with the perpetrator — it’s as if he never did it. It’s as if the action happened on its own through Hashem’s guidance.

This is how Nevuzaradan attained forgiveness despite

92. See *Chovos Halevavos* 4:2, requirement 6.

murdering three million people. For whatever reason, Hashem wanted those three million people to die. Though it is painful and difficult to understand, that is the truth. Nobody dies unless Hashem decides they should. Nevertheless, Nevuzaradan was responsible for the deaths of the three million people because he committed the act of killing them. When he regretted his actions and repented, they were taken off his ledger, and it was wiped clean.

Nothing can stand in the way of *teshuva*. It really works. No matter how bad the *yetzer hara* tells you that you are, you probably have not killed three million people. This story proves that you can do *teshuva* and get rid of your sins.

In fact, Hashem waits for your *teshuva*. He hopes you will repent because He loves you and doesn't want you to bear your sins. That's why He created *teshuva*. **The fact that you are still alive proves that Hashem still believes in you and has not given up hope on you.** He longs for you to return to Him so He will be able to give you the great gifts He yearns to grant you.

Once you do *teshuva*, it becomes as if you never did the deed. You don't need to still feel bad or think to yourself, "At the end of the day, I did that. I can never say I didn't." Your sins are completely wiped out **for real**. You bear no more scars. It's considered as if it never happened!

This point is emphasized by the Rambam in *Hilchos Teshuva* (7:4):

A person who did *teshuva* should not think he is far from the level of the *tzaddikim* because of the sins he committed. This is not so. Rather, he is beloved before Hashem as if he had never sinned. Not only that, his reward is exceedingly great because he tasted the taste of sin and separated from it and conquered his nature. The sages said that the place where those who

did *teshuva* stand cannot be reached by the completely righteous who have never sinned. This means that the greatness of those who have repented is more than the greatness of those who never sinned, because those who have sinned and repented must conquer their nature much more than those who never sinned.

No matter how far we fall, Hashem **always** wants us back. No matter how much we err, Hashem just wants us to cry out to Him and express our wish to be closer to Him. He wants to wipe off our sins. He is waiting for us to want to come back, and He will accept us with open arms.

No matter what we have done, let us do *teshuva*. This consists of:

1. Admitting to Hashem what we have done,
2. Regretting our decision and wishing we had decided differently now that we know better, and
3. Resolving not to commit the sin again. (Verbalize all three steps.)

Then, knowing that Hashem has removed our sins as if we never did them, we can feel clean and distant from the mistakes we once made.

Even if we have been struggling with our desires and are unable to say to Hashem that we won't sin again, we must not become disheartened. Hashem knows our struggle, and if we reach out to Him and tell Him that we wish we were acting differently, that is worth a lot. It's much better than giving up and doing nothing because "I can never escape my desires anyway so it is pointless," or not caring at all about doing the right thing.

When we show that we wish we were doing better, that is so precious. It atones significantly for our *aveiros* even if we

have not yet escaped our desires.⁹³ And we are trying to improve, which is even more precious. We should never give up hope on *teshuva*, even if we are struggling and don't expect to escape our desires anytime soon.

In addition, we should never give up hope of gaining the upper hand over our desires. Hashem is helping us, and with effort, there is a great chance that we will regain control. The work we put in eventually pays off, even if we do not see it at first.

And even if we don't see a way out of our desires now, we must not despair of ever escaping them and attaining a complete *teshuva*. Life changes rapidly. Though we are struggling now, maybe we will get over it in five years. Maybe we will change when we enter a different stage of life. Maybe it will take until we get married, and maybe it will take even longer, but how can we know that we won't gain the upper hand at some point, even if it takes thirty years? We see things differently and become different people at new stages of our lives. Eventually, we will escape our desires and undo all the damage. We must never give up on ourselves.

The *yetzer hara's* next trick is to convince you that you are on your own because you caused this challenging situation to happen. He tells you that Hashem never intended for you to face these challenges, and that you made yourself into the person you are. Therefore, when the struggle is difficult, there can be no sympathy for you — after all, you made it hard for yourself.

With this argument, the *yetzer hara* again tries to make you

93. For more on this, see *Kiddushin* 49b: If a person marries a woman on condition that he is a *tzaddik*, even if he had been completely wicked, he is married because maybe he thought to do *teshuva*. This is true even though he did not engage in all the steps of *teshuva*, especially because one condition is verbally admitting the sins he committed. See *Chelkas Mechokeik* 38:44.

For more on this, see *Sefer Chiddushei Lev Bereishis* pages 222-223.

feel horrible. He places more blame upon you than you deserve in an attempt to crush you. He tries to make you feel undeserving of any understanding. Trying to paralyze you into inaction, he tells you that no consideration can be given to how challenging it was because it is all your fault.

It's true that we need to realize that our actions ultimately have far-reaching consequences, and that we must consider those potential ramifications before making decisions. Nevertheless, you must remember that you did not intend to get yourself into your current situation. You didn't realize what would result, and you didn't plan on making things so hard. You did not bring this upon yourself on purpose. Therefore, you should not feel too bad for getting yourself into this situation.

Most of the decisions that led to our desires awakening were subtle ones. The bad consequences of the choices we made were not evident. Even if we faintly suspected that this option could strengthen our desires down the road, giving something up solely because it could lead to problems is quite difficult. We struggle to see the future as a reality and we don't see trouble coming. It takes a lot of work to comprehend that our seemingly innocent decision will bring about real issues. It takes even more work to make these feelings strong enough for us to overpower our desires. If we did not reach that elite level, of course we didn't want to give up what we wanted to do for "no gain." And while that doesn't make it right, it is the reason we made those choices that make it so tough now.

In addition, though they were not as strong as our desires now are, we were nonetheless pulled by strong desires when we gave in earlier. Our desires swayed us to make those choices. We did not make those wrong decisions without challenge, and we must not make believe otherwise.

Now that we realize the ramifications of our earlier

actions, we should just wish we had chosen differently, accept that we didn't, and move forward. The situation we are in is the reality, and that is not changing. Rather than feeling hopeless and giving up, we must prepare ourselves to fight this difficult battle that we are so fortunate to have. Let's forget the past and stop worrying about any accountability that we might or might not have for those choices, especially when we didn't intend for their outcome. Those choices are in the past and are no longer relevant, especially now that we have repented for them.

Anyway, any culpability we have for increasing our desires is part of our previous actions. It is not a new claim against us for the challenging situations that have arisen. Now that we have regretted and repented for those previous mistakes, our *teshuva* has not only erased the sins themselves, but has also wiped away any blame for causing our current situation. Thus, it is considered as if Hashem brought our challenges upon us without our involvement.

Finally, now that we are where we are and face the extreme challenges that we must overcome, we should realize the tremendous opportunity we have. Our challenges are now much harder than they were before, and thus we have an unprecedented opportunity for greatness! The fact that we caused the difficulty does not take away one bit from the incredible accomplishments we will attain if we stand strong. (See Chapter 21.)

The *yetzer hara's* next blow is to convince us that our sin proves that we can't control ourselves. This is one of the *yetzer hara's* most important tricks. He tries to convince us that we cannot control ourselves, knowing that this will lead us to succumb more than anything else. The *yetzer hara* does this every day, not just when we slip up. He tries to repeatedly pound in this message until we believe it. But this ploy is most powerful after we have sinned. The *yetzer hara* goes for the kill because this is

when his arguments are the most potent. It becomes much easier for him to convince us now that he has “evidence” to support his claim.

The *yetzer hara* tells us that now that we have gotten into this mess, we will never break free. Convinced that there is no way out, we feel damaged beyond repair. We *know* it is impossible for us to control ourselves. We wish we could go back to being our old selves, but it is too late. We feel stuck this way forever.

If we constantly tell ourselves that we can't control ourselves and we identify ourselves as people who give in, what will happen when we are challenged? Most likely, we will remember that we are the kind of people who give in, and we will do just that. Even if we try to fight, in the back of our minds we will be waiting for ourselves to cave in, and it will eventually happen. Knowing that we are going to fail impedes our ability to succeed even if we would try. And if we think the situation is hopeless, we probably won't even try to fight or prepare for the battle.

We have a tough decision. If we want, we can believe the *yetzer hara* who says that now that we have become caught up with temptation, there's no way we can escape. We can even try to assuage our guilt a bit by thinking sadly that there's nothing we can do. Ultimately, though, it won't work and we won't be able to evade the pain. Our other choice is to think about the situation until we see the truth, that though it will take work, it can be done: **we can escape the clutches of desire and take control.** This doesn't mean the *yetzer hara* will never catch us again. That might happen at some point, especially early on. But messing up will no longer mean that we can't succeed.

We can take charge and live amazing lives. But this is only possible if we believe we can pull it off. Once we do, we will be able to start working toward that goal without self-doubt getting

in the way.

Ultimately, we probably want to go with the truth, which is that we can take control of our lives. It has been done, even by people who thought their situation was hopeless. Yes, it takes work and is hard, but it definitely is worth it. We will be free instead of shackled, and confident instead of miserable. Rather than feeling like bad people, we will feel special and significant. We don't have to feel bad about ourselves any longer. We don't need to live with guilt for the rest of our lives. No matter how bleak the situation is, we can turn it around. Our lives can change in an instant!

Each time we feel incapable of self-control, we must remind ourselves that this is wrong. If we don't, we will begin to believe that we can't control ourselves, and when we are challenged, we will give in because that's what we expect to do. Instead, we must realize the truth — we can do it! Any thoughts to the contrary are a trick from the *yetzer hara*. By fighting back, we will become confident that we can win, which will bring us tremendous success.

If we ever doubt our ability to win this battle, we must fortify ourselves with the knowledge that Hashem is helping us. Hashem, Who appeared to our nation on Har Sinai and is the Master of all strength, is giving us the strength to fight. This is especially so if we cry out to Him for help. There is no doubt He will help us, and with His help, we can accomplish **anything!**

The *yetzer hara* sometimes tries a different trick to make us feel incapable of beating him. He causes us to feel pressured to be perfect. Our demands make us miserable, and it only gets worse when we don't live up to them. It's only natural for us to defend ourselves from these expectations by saying we can't do it. Feeling incapable shields us from the immense pressure to become all we can be, and it protects us from the painful feelings whenever we

fall short. The *yetzer hara* creates feelings of perfectionism within us with this goal in mind. He hopes we will tell ourselves that we are incapable of succeeding to get him off our back, knowing that this will stop us from controlling ourselves.

If pressure to be perfect is causing you pain, the first thing to do is relax the pressure upon yourself. You might not want to — maybe you believe the pressure is built on truth or is best for you spiritually. You might think you need this pressure to avoid sinning and to fulfill your obligations. Nevertheless, relax the pressure because in reality, that will help you serve Hashem better. Remind yourself that you want to serve Hashem and are trying, and that you will rectify your mistakes with *teshuva*. If you stop hurting yourself in your attempt to force yourself to behave, you will be much happier and serve Hashem a thousand times better.⁹⁴

A person who views life as a large series of demands rather than as an opportunity is making a huge mistake. Hashem created us to give us the greatest opportunity ever — the opportunity to accomplish. Try to forget the pressure and stop caring about how everyone else would judge you. Their opinion doesn't matter anyway. Instead, unleash your excitement for life. Focus on your aspirations and forget everything else. You will accomplish things that will astound you! You will become much stronger and face your challenges calmly and confidently. You will gain a zeal for life, and you will overcome the *yetzer hara*.

As always, the way to determine the right choice is to figure out what will help you serve Hashem best. If pressure has caused problems for you in the past, remember your experiences and what you have learned from them. You know whether pressure will motivate you to serve Hashem or *chas veshalom* damage you

94. Effective willpower is discussed in Part 7.

and weaken your service of Hashem. Use this knowledge to guide yourself so you can determine the correct approach — the approach Hashem wants you to take. Make the choice that's right for you.

Obviously, the *yetzer hara* does not save his dirty tricks for when we lose to temptation. He is always trying to make us think we are incapable of self-control and to get us to have the wrong attitude toward desire. He bombards us with these thoughts because he knows how important they are to his success. He needs to sap our excitement about fighting him to get us to give in and be miserable. Of course, these thoughts don't seem to come from him. We think these thoughts are really our own, and we might even think they stem from the good part of us. But when we examine the ramifications of these thoughts, we see who is behind them.

The *yetzer hara* tries to get us to think that since we won't be perfect, it is pointless for us to try. As we discussed in Chapter 2, this is built on the wrong perspective of what our goals in life should be. Our objective in life is to accomplish and become someone special, not to just avoid messing ourselves up. Every ounce of effort matters a lot. Not being perfect has no bearing on the significance of what we can accomplish.

In addition, any limiting thoughts are built on thin air. We can barely see two days in front of us. How do we know what we can reach? Although it would be foolish for us to try to jump up ten rungs of the ladder at once, once we eventually reach the ninth rung, who says we won't climb one more? Growth comes one step at a time. We don't know what we can reach until we are up to that step. Until then, we should focus on what we can accomplish now, without limiting ourselves in what we can reach later. Who says we can't attain complete control? Who says we can't reach lofty levels?

And who knows what will be in the future? Who knows which person Hashem will send us, or which *sefer* will be just what we were looking for? With the right *rebbe* or friend on our side, who knows what we can do? Hashem helps those who are trying (*Yoma* 38b-39a), and His salvations are incredible! Let's not sell ourselves short. Who knows where we can reach?

Feeling that we are growing and becoming great is so sweet. Let's not take away from it in any way. If thinking about what will be later is disheartening, let's just focus on what we are accomplishing right now and ignore the future. Each moment of self-control is priceless!

Sometimes, the *yetzer hara* tries a variation of this trick. He makes us feel immense pressure to live up to levels that are beyond us. We begin to notice that we are messing up left and right, and feel incapable of fixing all of it. The pressure to act way above where we are holding overwhelms us. We see that we are not living up to our unattainable expectations and we feel down. And even if we don't feel like a failure, we believe the only way to reach greatness is to act in ways so far above us that they are unattainable. As a result, we feel overwhelmed and flat, and we might even feel like giving up.

But this is just more nonsense from the *yetzer hara*. Our sages have taught us that Hashem does not judge us based on anyone else. He judges us in our own lives based on what we are capable of. What anyone else has reached is irrelevant. (See Chapters 23-24.)

Further, Hashem wants us to be effective. He does not ask us to drive ourselves crazy in His service. He wants us to grow in a healthy manner that we will be happy and comfortable with (see *Sefer Cheshbon Hanefesh*, subsections 4,16,17). Though we must not slack off and forget about growth in *Avodas Hashem*, we must also not push ourselves too hard because that will be

ineffective or worse.

Any pressure we feel probably comes from the *yetzer hara*. He tells us that pressure is part of being religious so we don't realize to eliminate it. This is so important to him because he knows that if we feel pressured, we probably won't be happy in our *Avodas Hashem*, and our physical part might even rebel or burn out. Therefore, we must do what we can to remove this pressure.

Ultimately, all Hashem asks of us is to do what we can. We are to try to improve upon and do *teshuva* for any flaws we notice, and then trust Him to take care of the rest. We must try our best and pray to Hashem for His help. Then, we can be comfortable with ourselves, knowing that Hashem does not ask any more from us. Hashem considers trying our best to be true accomplishment, whether we succeed or not. With this attitude, we will protect our desire for growth and the sweetness we feel from accomplishment, and we will reach great heights in *Avodas Hashem*.⁹⁵

Another mistake the *yetzer hara* tricks people into making is thinking that they must feel incapable of controlling themselves to avoid being arrogant. You might hear people say, "Who do you think you are? So many Rabbis in the *Gemara* struggled in this area. This *tzaddik* and that *tzaddik* said they found the battle with desire quite challenging. Who do you think you are to say that you can control yourself? Do you think you are better than them? You are arrogant and delusional!"

Of course, this is a silly argument. There is no comparison between any two people's challenges. Our job is to do our best in our situation without worrying about situations that are different

95. If this trick is giving you some difficulty, read Chapter 23-24. Also, see Chapter 12 for the right way to change bad habits.

than ours. And anyway, what are we supposed to do now that Hashem challenged us? Are we supposed to say that we can't win and give up, or are we supposed to fight using the strength Hashem gives us?

Hashem placed us in a world full of challenges. What does He want us to do when we face them? Does He want us to fight confidently, or does He want us to convince ourselves that we can't win and give up? The answer is obvious. Hashem wants us to do our best to win our battle — a battle He gave specifically to us. If we need to believe we are capable of self-control in order to win, then that's what He wants us to believe. He doesn't want us to feel incapable if it will sap our strength and cause us to sin. And fortunately, it is true that with Hashem's help, we can win our battles and become great.

Feeling capable is not arrogance, especially when you know that Hashem is the One Who gives you your strength. You are allowed to control yourself and to do whatever it takes to succeed. You are even allowed to accomplish incredible feats that would make great *tzaddikim* proud. You don't have to be dysfunctional or an utter failure to avoid arrogance.⁹⁶

When you score a victory against the *yetzer hara*, he becomes desperate because he knows that if you become excited about your success, he is doomed. He knows that your excitement to fight him can be stronger than the desires and deception he uses against you. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and he will do anything to stop you from feeling good about your efforts. He does not want you to be excited to fight him, and he'll stop at nothing to prevent this from happening.

Usually, his first attempt is to convince you that you are not allowed to feel good about your amazing feat of self-control

96. For more on this, see Chapter 24.

because that is arrogance. This works on most people. But in reality, feeling good about your profound accomplishment is not arrogance. This is elaborated upon in Chapter 24. For now, it should suffice to quote *Chovos Halevavos* (5:5): “You should hold highly in your eyes any small victory over the *yetzer hara* and the slightest increase of power you achieve over it. This will lead you to become greater and to reach a higher level.” Feeling good about your victories is vital for success, as is illustrated in Chapter 25. Just remember that you did it with Hashem’s help.

Next, the *yetzer hara* reminds you that you had to control yourself anyway because giving in would have been a sin. He then makes you feel that since you had to stand strong, doing so was no big deal. You believe that when you held back from doing what you longed to do, you just avoided damaging yourself but didn’t actually gain. This myth was addressed in Chapters 1-2 and in Part 6.

The *yetzer hara* follows that up by telling you that whatever you have accomplished is not impressive because everyone else does even better. If you respond by pointing out people who are struggling mightily with their self-control, this inner voice will say that those people don’t count.

The solution is to know that all that matters is how difficult it was for you, and you know how hard it was. Though “everyone” appears to be doing better, how do you know that they really are, or that it is as hard for them as it is for you? Anyway, that’s all irrelevant because controlling yourself despite the difficulty is incredible no matter how many people have done “much better.” Other people are irrelevant when evaluating the greatness of what you have accomplished.

At this point, the *yetzer hara* gets really desperate, and he tries to make you feel bad about yourself to stop you from feeling good about your victory. He reminds you of all the bad sins you

committed so you won't be excited about your accomplishment. This dirty move is very effective, and it takes great work to combat it.

The proper response is that whatever bad you have done doesn't take away from the incredible value of your accomplishment. You might also have to review some of what was discussed about guilt if the *yetzer hara* attacks you strongly. Most important, you must put in the work to train yourself to view life with the right attitude.

That's why we must spend so much time reviewing the proper attitude on life. If we forget that **life is the greatest opportunity there ever was**, we will be susceptible to the *yetzer hara's* shenanigans. We must review this concept and think about it **every day**. We must win our battles while feeling this excitement and then celebrate our successes, which will pound this attitude in. This perspective needs to be strengthened constantly because it can slip away so easily. But the effort is well worth it because it **is the most important thing we can do to defeat the *yetzer hara***.

In addition, we must remind ourselves that once we have turned the page on our past behavior and are trying to act differently, it no longer defines us. When we did *teshuva*, Hashem forgave us and wiped it off our slate. It's as if we never did it, and we no longer have to feel bad about it.⁹⁷ The *yetzer hara's* trick is to remind us about the sins we have repented for to make us feel down and ashamed. We are supposed to acknowledge that we have repented and forget about them so we are not affected by this ploy.

If we have not yet done *teshuva*, feeling worthless is not the answer. Rather, we can respond by doing *teshuva* now and

97. See Rambam *Hilchos Teshuva* 7:4, quoted earlier in this appendix. But we should confess our sins again every *Yom Kippur*; see Rambam *ibid* 2:8.

getting rid of those sins forever. And if we are not ready to do a complete *teshuva* now, we can express our wish that we were on the level that we no longer did these sins, and then rely on that we will do a complete *teshuva* at some later point to remove them.

Getting depressed and feeling hopeless is never productive. Rather, we must remember that although it might take time until we master self-control, we are moving a little closer every day. At some point, we will escape the grasp of our desires, even though it seems impossible now. We must realize that the situation is not hopeless. We are not permanently damaged with no way of rectifying it.

We must never give up hope of escaping our desires or of doing a complete *teshuva*. We don't know what will happen with time. How can we know the opportunities Hashem will give us? We don't know how much we can grow. There is a great chance that at some point we will gain the upper hand.

Furthermore, Hashem loves the *teshuva* of a person who is trying. Though the person might be failing and feel like a hypocrite whose *teshuva* is worthless, it is immensely valuable. If we just don't know whether we want to leave our desires and we cry out to Hashem that we wish we were acting as He wants, that is a great act of *teshuva* that removes most of the sin. Hashem cherishes our plea, and He will help us escape the clutches of desire as well.

Next, the *yetzer hara* tries to get us to focus on a part of the battle we weren't perfect in, even if it is small compared to what we did right. If he cannot, he tries to make us feel bad for having these desires and thoughts. He blames us for our urge to give in, or at least makes us feel embarrassed about it. He will do anything to take the focus off the good we have done because he doesn't want us to be excited by what we have accomplished.

Many times, despite your amazing victory, there is a

small part of your behavior that you can improve. But right after beating the *yetzer hara* is not the time to concern yourself with doing so. That moment is the time to rejoice over your great accomplishment. Any imperfection is a separate matter that you will fix later. Right now is the time for rejoicing over what you did!

This applies even when the good we did seems minor, such as when we held ourselves back for a minute before succumbing. Surely, we should be excited when we score a major victory with one small flaw that can be rectified later with *teshuva*. Again, this is possible because we focus on accomplishing, which is the point of life! And when we address our mistake later on, we will be doing so to remove any inappropriate actions with *teshuva* and to score an even bigger victory in our next battle.

We must never forget that it is normal to have desires and that we sometimes make mistakes even though we don't want to. Shlomo Hamelech, the wisest man who ever lived, taught us, "There is no *tzaddik* in the entire land who always does good and never sins" (*Koheles* 7:20). He also wrote, "A *tzaddik* falls seven times, but he gets back up" (*Mishlei* 24:16).

It takes great effort for us to overcome our desires. Therefore, we should never berate ourselves for anything we have done or feel pressured to be perfect. Acting this way is ineffective and misguided. Instead, we should be excited about our amazing opportunity to accomplish what has rarely been done before! After that, our goals are just to do our best and to know that we will rectify any mistakes with *teshuva*.

We should never attack ourselves for wacky thoughts that come into our head. The *yetzer hara* puts these thoughts in our minds to challenge us. We are being tested whether we will steer clear of these thoughts once we notice them, or beat ourselves up for having them. We should not blame ourselves for these

thoughts, no matter how inappropriate they are. They come from the *yetzer hara*, who wants us to beat ourselves up for them. Instead, we should deflect them and stop thinking about them when we notice them (see Chapter 43).

The *yetzer hara* makes one more attempt to destroy our excitement about what we are accomplishing. He tells us that even though self-control is so challenging, our accomplishments are not valuable because we brought the challenges upon ourselves. We made the battle more difficult, whether by not being careful enough to avoid challenges or by strengthening our desires when we gave in previously.

The *yetzer hara* uses all sorts of creative ways to get us to find fault with ourselves so he can cripple us and defeat us. Often, we don't bear such responsibility, as was discussed earlier regarding excessive guilt. And even if it was our fault, that does not take away *at all* from anything we accomplish. These accomplishments are just as great as if we did not contribute to the level of difficulty. (This is discussed further in Chapter 21.)

The *yetzer hara* constantly tries to make us feel down in order to defeat us, and we must know how to prove him wrong. But still, we must remember that we just won't be happy and have excitement for life unless we start exerting self-control instead of giving in (*Mesillas Yesharim*, Chapter 1; *Midrash Koheles* 6:7). We can't feel great about ourselves unless we are acting with self-control, accomplishing great feats, growing spiritually, and becoming better people. We won't satisfy our yearning unless we are doing something meaningful with our lives.

Acting with self-control makes people feel much happier and more confident because they have taken control over themselves. They are running their lives instead of being dragged around by their desires and "needs." The feeling of power that brings is exhilarating. Those who act with self-control are happy with their decisions,

because they know they chose for themselves instead of being knocked around by their impulses. Even better, they know that they decided as they did because it was right. This makes them feel good about themselves.

Nevertheless, the first step for a person being verbally attacked by the *yetzer hara* usually is to calm down that attack. It often is too hard for the person to change when the *yetzer hara* is making him feel worthless and hopeless. Therefore, the first step is to neutralize this attack. This enables the person to start the transformation that will make him accomplish great things and be happy.

The *yetzer hara* is our biggest enemy. He works within our heads to destroy us before the battle even begins. By learning how to defuse his arguments, we will deal him a crushing blow in the most challenging and encompassing battle of all, the battle of the generation.

APPENDIX B

Dealing with Social Pressure

Social pressure is a great challenge. It can cause us to do things we didn't want to do and stop us from following our dreams. We must learn how to manage it so it doesn't get in our way.

In the battle against desire, social pressure rears its ugly head in many ways. We might be tempted to engage in forbidden activities because others are doing so, or we might follow the crowd to avoid friction. And even if we are strong enough to hold back from overt sins, we might at least forgo our usual safeguards to avoid being an outcast.

But the most common desire-related *nisyonos* caused by social pressure involve inappropriate conversations. They come up often, and winning takes great strength. Because we care about what others will think about us, it's hard to stay out of them.

This challenge can take on many forms. If our friends make lustful comments or jokes when we are around, it is hard to change the topic or to leave. There will be times when we hear things that are hilarious but inappropriate, and we will be tempted to repeat them to others. And if we suddenly stop talking about these matters with our friends, we might be accused of "becoming too religious."

In addition, just seeing people we identify with doing

something makes us more likely to act that way. If our friends speak freely about inappropriate matters, we might do the same, even when we're not pressured to.

Social pressure is a real force built on deep needs within a person. Overcoming it is tricky. It's so hard to say no when social pressure makes us want to give in.

Though some people are not fazed by what others think about them, most people care a lot about it. It is very important to many people, especially in our times. Though some people have attained enough perspective to realize that other people's opinions don't matter, this idea doesn't help those who do care what others think about them. Using logic to show that what people think doesn't matter, saying that everybody is too focused on themselves to be thinking about the person, or lecturing to "just get over it" because "you shouldn't care what others say" is usually counterproductive. The person just feels worse about himself for caring about what he shouldn't, and thinking badly of oneself causes a person to be even more self-conscious. And at best, these statements are only mildly helpful. A self-conscious person has a real, unsatisfied emotional need for other people's approval. For such a person, it is so frustrating to be told to just not care when he just does care. He is left feeling misunderstood, or worse, that there is something wrong with him.

This preaching-from-above method is not built on much substance. Most people naturally care a lot about how others perceive them. Just because it's not entirely logical, that doesn't mean something is wrong with them. Most drives are not built on logic, yet we have them. If we were purely logical, we would always act like angels. Rather, Hashem gave us these drives and we must deal with them in the proper way, which often is not intuitive.

If we care about what others think about us, that's normal.

Our job is to work with it and not let it interfere with our lives, rather than denying that we care or trying to force ourselves not to. Those actions make the problem worse. We must be empathetic with ourselves, admit that Hashem gave us this drive to add another layer of challenge to many of our tests, and address it properly in an emotionally satisfying way.

To stop social pressure from holding us back, we must figure out what makes us view ourselves the way we do. How do we form our identity?

At first glance, it seems most people view themselves based on what others think of them. This goes so far that people often act the way others think they will act. What others think about them becomes their identity. Even if they wish they would act differently, they feel pressured to act the way others expect them to. That's also why people want so much for others to think highly of them, and they put in a lot of effort to attain this.

But something is missing from this outlook. Why doesn't the attention we crave make us happy? Why does it feel empty? The answer is that the approval of others can't make us feel good about ourselves if it doesn't feel genuine. If we know it's fake, we will still feel inferior.

That's why a poor person who is honored for being wealthy does not feel satisfaction even if he values money highly — he knows it's all a lie. How great does a valedictorian feel if he knows he cheated his way through school and is lazy, dishonest, and unintelligent? If someone is praised for performing good deeds that he didn't do, it doesn't make him feel like a good person. If we know it's fake and is not really our identity, it does nothing for us.

So how do we identify ourselves? Usually, it's based on how we think others would view us if they knew everything. That's why if we think others would look down on us if they

knew the truth, we feel worthless.

But we can do much better than that. What really matters is what *we* think about ourselves. We are just allowing our opinion to be swayed by what others would think. That's why we care. But if we think for ourselves and figure out what *we* value, our lives would be much better.

If we are dominated by others' values, we will find ourselves doing things we didn't want to do. We will look down on ourselves because they do, and we will chase goals that we will later see are empty. Our values will take a back seat, and we will violate them because of what others think. We won't chase our dreams because others won't approve. In short, we will miss out on life for nothing. What could be sadder?

Why should we let others' values run our lives? The only One whose values matter is Hashem. We can mold our values to match His. Then, we will be confident that our values matter. Even if others don't approve, we will think highly of ourselves. And Hashem will think highly of us too.

If we follow others' values, especially if we know they are improper, we won't be satisfied or think highly of ourselves. But if we realize the greatness of self-control and notice ourselves acting with it, of course we will be impressed! Viewing everything with our own values will dramatically change our lives.

We must look in the mirror and figure out what *we* think about ourselves. We know every challenge we have been through and how hard it has been, and we know that all that matters is how much we have accomplished despite difficulty. Once *we* think highly about ourselves, we will automatically care much less about what others think about us. This is one of the many ways feeling good about ourselves makes us less vulnerable to weakness. We can form an identity we will love and be proud of, and we will become different people. Most important, we will

live with enthusiasm for life and it will be amazing!

If you are self-conscious, that usually means you feel insecure or think lowly of yourself. That means it's time to remember what you have accomplished in the face of great difficulty, and then to accomplish more with excitement! It's time to turn yourself into the great person you dream of being. Make yourself proud! It sure is worth it.

But although this method will cure some people of their self-consciousness, others will only be partially helped. Self-consciousness often runs deep and can't always be cured so fast. And some people will be uncomfortable looking themselves in the mirror because they end up focusing on the bad they have done. There can be many contributors to low self-image and it is not so easy to solve (though Chapter 10 and Appendix A might be helpful). Therefore, we must explore other methods of treating social pressure, even if they don't attack the root of the problem and only stop it from holding us back.

If you are afraid to change your actions because you think others will look down on you, or if you suffer from excess shame because of how you think others view you, try thinking about each person whose opinion you care about individually. What will he think about you? Will he approve or disapprove? Often, by thinking about each person in your life individually rather than thinking about what "everyone" will think about you, it becomes clear that most people won't view you as badly as you think. They might even approve, or they might not notice anything. The odds that your friends will think poorly of you is low even if you act out of character for yourself, as long as what you are doing is not bad or wrong.

Even if you have thought about each person individually and are convinced that many of your friends will think bad of you for trying to attain self-control, that doesn't mean they will.

This applies even if your friends tease you or confront you. There are many reasons they might react that way. They might be afraid that you will shun them and they fear losing your friendship. They might even worry that you will feel superior and look down on them. If this is what's bothering them, they will soon realize they have nothing to worry about. They will realize that although you are acquiring self-control, you are not becoming a robot. And they will see that you know that "becoming religious" while hurting your friends is not truly being religious.

Another reason your friends might be bothered by your changes is that they feel guilty that they're not doing the same. If so, they will eventually learn from your behavior as their own social pressure fizzles, and they will change too. After you break the ice, they will follow your example. Keep up the connection and be careful not to judge them. Some well-timed positive encouragement will help too, as long as you make them feel good about themselves rather than the opposite.

Your friends might have other reasons for reacting negatively toward your changes. It's difficult to know what those reasons are. But the reason usually isn't that they think lower of you for changing.⁹⁸ They are friends with you for a reason. They admired you even before you made these changes. No doubt, your friends are impressed by what you have done, even if they express negative feelings for whatever reason.

When you stand up for what's important to you in the face of strong desire and peer pressure, you ultimately gain only respect from yourself and others. Even if they insult you, deep down they respect you and are blown away by your strength to

98. As I once heard a student say to an older student who didn't have a cell phone, "I respect you but I don't want to be like you." Even if the person doesn't want to live that lifestyle or can't handle it, the respect is there.

stand up for what you value. Though they might be embarrassed to admit it publicly, they will eventually tell you that they admire you and wish they could be like you. You will be everyone's inspiration to change. Though it might at first seem that others look down on you, you will ultimately realize that they look up to you as a hero!

Some people face difficult situations when the whole world seems to be against them. It seems to them that everyone looks down on them, and it might even be true. This is one of the most difficult challenges a person can face. Hopefully, when we realize what matters in life, we will hold highly of ourselves despite what others think. But it can still be very painful to go through such situations, especially if those who look down on us are authority figures or people we respect.

And even if we don't face such challenges, if we care about what others think of us, it will probably cause us pain at some point. There will be times when nobody seems to respect us, and it won't be so easy to convince ourselves that people respect our self-control. We might feel that others think we are ultra-religious and strange. Thus, we need one more tactic to solve this.

In the next world, Hashem's perspective on what is impressive will be clear to all. At that point, **everyone will view life the way Hashem does**. As a result, every person, whether they respected those who were flashy and cool or those who looked so religious, will respect only those who put in effort in the face of difficulty. By fighting in the most difficult battle ever, we **guarantee** that we will be highly regarded in the next world by **everyone**, including those who look down on us now.

When you make a noticeable change, it's important to tell your friends in advance. Doing this properly prevents conflicts and minimizes social pressure. If you defuse the tension before it starts, there will be less resistance to your new way of acting.

You have a choice between one uncomfortable conversation and months of discomfort. Don't let uneasiness stop you.

When you tell others about the changes you are making, you want to make sure you don't come off as feeling superior. The way to do this is to relate that you have a weakness, and that you have come up with a plan to improve. Ask them to help you by supporting your decision and helping you keep to your plan. This shows that you don't feel above them; instead, you are depending on them.

Also, confide in them that you know it will be hard but you will try your best anyway because it is important to you. This will increase their respect for you, and will limit any friction later on. And by confiding in them, you will cause them to feel important in your eyes and they will act like allies. They will respect your decision and help you attain your goals.

There is a second aspect of social pressure that can have an even bigger effect because of its subtlety. We are affected by our friends' values and actions. Even if we don't feel pressured to join them, what they do becomes normal in our eyes and we slowly start to value what they value. We must learn how to respond, whether publicly or just to ourselves, so we are not affected.

In Shmuz 78: "Kiddush Hashem," Rabbi Shafier conveys one method to prevent our view of acceptable behavior from slowly changing to match what others are doing. When we see people doing something forbidden, we must tell ourselves that though we don't judge or look down on them — if we had the same life-setting, we might do the same or worse — these actions are not normal Jewish behavior. When we see others valuing something we don't, we must remind ourselves that these values are not consistent with what truly matters. If our friends make inappropriate comments and express excitement about running after temptation, we must tell ourselves that they are talking in

an unrefined manner and that we hope never to speak that way. And we must note to ourselves that they are mistakenly hyping cheap thrills that don't make us happy and ultimately are nothing to get excited about. **If we don't think this to ourselves, we will be emotionally affected in some way.** We will live with the message that these things are the most exciting things in life even though we know they're not. We will begin to feel that it is cool to make these comments and to chase our desires. It's hard to uproot feelings once they become a part of us. If we don't stand up against these values at least within our minds, they will infect us to some degree.

Sometimes, we will need to take a bolder stance against mistaken values, obviously in the proper way. At the end of Chapter 5 of *Mesillas Yesharim*, the Ramchal relates that there will be times when we must control the conversation by talking enthusiastically about our values. This stops us from being affected by what others value. He writes that even David Hamelech felt the need to do this when he met with other kings. When they would glorify luxuries and pleasures, he would speak about his most important value, Torah.

From time to time, we will need to speak publicly about our values. We will need to express that accomplishing by overcoming challenge is far more rewarding than cheap physical pleasures. Of course, we need to present our values in an appealing way so others will be interested, and we must ensure that we don't come off as speaking from above. But it's not so hard for us to bring up topics such as what makes people happy or what brings meaning in life, and when these topics are discussed, it presents us with an opportunity to praise and promote what we value in a way that our circle will take to heart. (But let it be a discussion, and comment at the right time. Don't preach.)

Finally, there will be times when we realize that some of

our friends are not the best influences on us. Nevertheless, we probably won't want to cut off from them, nor should we without advice from a Rebbe or mentor who understands us. But there still is something we can do to limit any negative influence. We should look to expand our circle by finding new friends who have the right values and are pleasant people. This will balance out some of the negative influence of our other friends. By spending more time with the right crowd, we will automatically pick up good values, and we will want to be like these new friends. This will make it easier to act as we aspire to.

Social pressure is a significant factor that comprises part of the difficulty of our battle against desire. By dealing with it properly, we can overcome this obstacle and deal the Yetzer Hara a crushing blow in the battle of the generation.

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