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Office of the Rabbinate of Elad, Rosh HaAyin and Herzelia

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TORAT

Parashat Bahaalotcha

HAMELECH

How to Deal With Negative Character Traits

Questions:

The *parashah* begins with a commandment for Aharon HaKohen to light the menorah. The *pasuk* then states, "and Aharon did so." In other words, he followed Hashem's command. Rashi [8:3], quoting our Sages, comments that that this *pasuk* is coming to praise Aharon because he did not stray one iota from that which Hashem commanded him.

1. Many great commentators have already asked what great novelty there is in the fact that Aharon did not do anything differently from that which Hashem commanded. Why would he do anything differently?
2. Furthermore, it is known that even the slightest act performed in fulfilling a mitzvah has a very great effect in the world and causes great spiritual rectification. It follows therefore that altering from Hashem's command will wreak tremendous spiritual damage [See *Menachot* 29b which illustrates how even the crowns on top of the Torah's letters have great secrets and significance.] Therefore, why would Aharon change anything?
3. Later, the *parashah* continues to relate the story of the individuals who were ritually impure and wished to offer the Pesach offering [29:7]. Our Sages teach that these men were impure either because they were came into contact with a corpse or because they carried the *aron* of

Yosef, Yosef's coffin. Since the Torah explicitly forbids one who came into contact with a dead body to bring the Pesach offering, how could they have asked for a new law to be established in the Torah?

The Secret to Dealing with Negative Traits

It is natural that every man will have negative character traits which present an obstacle to fulfilling the Torah's mitzvot or living a productive family and social life. For example, there can be one individual who is a miser and one who hot-tempered; another who is arrogant and another who takes revenge or holds a grudge. There is another who is plagued by jealousy; another who covets items that belong to others, as well as the lazy individual. Usually, in instances where fulfilling the mitzvot or behaving properly with his surrounding environment clashes with this trait, he has difficulty managing and stumbles. Usually, he even comforts himself by saying that this is how he was born and that there is nothing he can do about it. He wants his surroundings to acclimate themselves to his traits, and not that he refine his traits in order to mesh with his surroundings. However, the Torah reveals the secret to succeed in life and not stumble. We will explain shortly that the secret lies in habituating himself to actions – even little ones – that are the opposite of his negative trait. The more he does these things, the more it will ingrain in him the exact opposite of the trait he wishes to change.



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This way he can succeed and be saved from stumbling.

David HaMelech Feared the “Minor” Sins

In Tehillim [49:6] David HaMelech states, “Why will I fear in the days of evil, when the sins that I tread [akeivai] upon will surround me?” Our Sages teach [*Tanchuma Eikev* 1] that David was saying that Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish Nation, which consists of 613 mitzvot, some which are considered “minor,” and some more severe. Since there are those that are “minor,” individuals tend not to pay as much attention to them and trod on them with their heel [*eikev*]. Therefore David feared the day of judgment. He exclaimed that he did not fear the severe commandments of the Torah. Rather, he feared the “minor” commandments, for perhaps he was not careful with one of them, and Hashem has stated that we must be as careful with the minor mitzvot as we are with the severe ones. We see, then, that David is teaching us that habituating oneself to making light of small sins that are trotted on by the heel is a very great danger. This is because habituation causes something to become permanently ingrained in an individual whether for bad or all the more so for good.

First Sin is Similar to a Spider’s Web and Then to the Cables of a Wagon

R’ Yehudah similarly states in *Succah* [52a] that in the World to Come, Hashem will bring the yetzer hara and slaughter it before the tzaddikim. To the tsaddikim, it will appear like a high mountain, and to the wicked, like a string of hair; each will

cry. The tzaddikim will cry, exclaiming, “How were we able to conquer a high mountain such as this?” The wicked will cry, exclaiming, “How were we not able to conquer such a hair?” Hashem will also marvel at them. R’ Asi exclaimed that the yetzer hara is at first compared to a spider’s web but ultimately it is similar to the cable of a wagon. We see that our Sages are teaching us that, in truth, the yetzer hara is not a mountain that one must deal with; rather, it is like a spider’s web. However, specifically because of this, the yetzer hara is able to make man stumble. Man views the yetzer hara as something insignificant, however after stumbling it turns into the thick ropes of a wagon, into a true mountain. The wicked, who are unaware of this great principle will be shown in the future how they were ensnared by their inclination for a mere spider’s web. The righteous, on the other hand, who are aware of this, triumph over one string after another, until it is revealed that they were successful in conquering a high mountain.

Once an Individual Has Repeatedly Transgressed a Sin, He Views it as Being Permissible

Our Sages teach in a number of places that once an individual repeats a transgression, it seems to him as if it is permitted [Also see *Arachin* 30b, *Rabbeinu Yonah’s Shaarei Teshuvah shaar* 1, *The Shelah (Toldot Adam, peticha* 1).] In the *sefer Daf al Daf* [*Arachin* 30b] the author adds in the name of R’ Yisrael Salanter, that the first time someone repeats a sin it appears to him as permissible, but



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the second time he repeats it, it appears to him as a mitzvah.

The Words of the Rambam and Chinuch on How External Actions Arouse One Internally

This principle has been written by the Rambam [*Peirush Hamisnayot, Avot 3:15*]. Commenting on the Mishnah in *Avot* [3:19] which states, "All is foreseen ... everything depends on the abundance of good acts." The Rambam writes that one will not climb to great heights by committing one great act; rather, by habituating oneself by performing many acts. He cites a parable to illustrate this: If someone presents someone else 1000 *dinar* at one time, he will not acquire the trait of generosity like the individual who gives a *dinar* 1000 times, each time giving in a generous fashion. He will acquire the sought after trait, while the other individual will not, for despite the fact that he is indeed aroused to perform one great act, it subsides thereafter. The same thing applies to the Torah's rewards: The reward for one who redeems a captive for 100 *dinar* or who gives a pauper 100 *dinar* is not as great as one who frees 10 captives or gives *tzedakah* to ten paupers, even if he only gives 10 *dinarim* in total. This is what the Mishnah means when it states that man is judged by the "abundance" of good acts but not according to one great act.

This idea is also echoed by the *Sefer HaChinuch* [mitzvah 16]: He writes that man is affected by his actions. His heart and mind are always drawn after the actions that he performs, whether good

or bad. Even a complete *rasha* whose thoughts are constantly involved in wickedness, if he has a change of spirit and dedicates himself to diligent Torah study and performance of mitzvot – even not for the sake of Heaven – will immediately be inclined to do good. Through the power of his actions he will kill his *yetzer hara*; for after the actions are the hearts drawn. On the other hand, an individual may be a total *tzaddik* and his heart is upright, desiring Torah and mitzvot. But if he constantly engages in bad things, let us say, for example, the king forces him to engage in a bad trade every day, the entire day, he will eventually be transformed into a totally wicked individual. Because it is known and true that each man is effected according to his actions [See the warning of the *Pri Chadash* [*Yorah Deah* 84:53] regarding eating insects.]

Even if it Begins Not For the Sake of Heaven it Will Eventually Become For the Sake of Heaven [*Pesachim* 3b]

Quoting the aforementioned statement of our Sages, the *Otzar Efraim* writes that even though the deeds that an individual does are not for the sake of Heaven, nevertheless, an abundance of good deeds engrave the innermost parts of one's soul. It changes him until his deeds are for the sake of Heaven. One does not know how a physical action influences the internal soul.

How Aharon habituated Himself To Changing the Truth For Peace

According to what we have explained, we can answer the question about Aharon that we began



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with. It states in Avot [1:12], "Be from the disciples of Aharon: Love peace, pursue peace, love mankind, and draw them close to Torah." The Rav, quoting from the *Avot de'Rebbi Natan*, relates what Aharon used to do: There were two individuals who had a quarrel. Aharon would go and sit next to one of them and would say, "My son, your friend admitted that he was wrong." Then Aharon would sit next to the other one and tell him the same thing. When the two individuals would meet afterwards, they would embrace each other and kiss one another. Afterwards [12:3-4] it states that there were thousands amongst the Jewish Nation who named their children Aharon, because if not for Aharon the children would not have been born, as Aharon had restored peace between husband and wife. They therefore named the baby after him. The Yaavetz explains that even though our Sages [*Shabbat* 55a] state that the signature of Hashem is truth, it is not difficult how Aharon could lie. He explains that peace is more important than truth, and therefore it was appropriate for Aharon to lie for the sake of peace. The explanation is that Aharon understood that there is an internal desire in man to have peace with everyone. He therefore allowed himself to do this thousands of times, as our Sages teach that thousands of children were born just from Aharon's intervention in cases of marital harmony. As we explained above, if man repeats an action an abundance of times he will ingrain it in his soul. Therefore Aharon was in danger of acquiring the trait of altering his actions the way he altered the truth so many times.

Praise of Aharon That He Did Not Change

This, then, is the explanation of why it was praiseworthy that Aharon did not alter even slightly in performing the commandment of Hashem. This specifically applied to Aharon who, after having altered the truth so many times for the sake of peace, when it came to other matters had the self-discipline needed to carry them out exactly as he had been instructed.

Words of Mussar

We have learned that, on one hand, David feared the sins that are treaded upon repeatedly, less he had begun to view them as permissible. Similarly, any negative action an individual performs repeatedly becomes ingrained inside of his soul, and it is difficult to stop himself from doing it again. This is as our Sages have stated that everyone stumbles in *avak lashon hara* [a less severe, although forbidden stage of evil speech]. This is because man considers it permissible until it becomes a part of his soul.

On the other hand, every good act that man accustoms himself to performing will be acquired by him as well. Therefore to perform a difficult mitzvah or rectify a particular trait, one must habituate himself each time to the desired mitzvah or trait. He must repeat it again and again until it becomes second nature and easy for him. As the *pasuk* states [*Iyov* 8:7], "Even though your beginning was little, your end will flourish greatly."

Shabbat Shalom,
Rav Mordechai Malka