

Strive for Perfection but don't be a Perfectionist

As we approach the *Yamim Noraim* — the High Holidays — the themes of teshuva and self-improvement are on everybody's mind. It seems that every year, we dutifully beat our chests and recite the same *Al Cheits*, but are these actions getting us where we want to be? Though we remedy some of our sins, it seems that there are always new ones to atone for and spiritual challenges to meet. Where does our yearly mandate of self-improvement lead us? Are we expected to achieve perfect spirituality?

Strive to be Perfect

One doesn't have to go beyond the first sentence of Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto's *Mesilat Yeshrim* for one approach. Rav Luzzatto (known as the Ramchal) writes:

יסוד החסידות ושרש העבודה התמימה הוא שיתברר ויתאמת אצל האדם מה חובתו בעולמו ולמה צריך שישים מבטו ומגמתו בכל אשר הוא עמל כל ימי חייו. מסילת ישרים, פרק א

The foundation of true piety and the root of perfect service of Hashem are formed by a person's clarifying and verifying to himself what is his obligation in his world and toward what goal he should direct his outlook and ambition in everything he strives for during all the days of his life.

Mesilat Yesharim Chap. 1

The Ramchal delineates what our outlook and ambition should be and



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in great detail expands the sequence listed by R. Pinchas Ben Yair (*Avodah Zara* 20B)¹ for attaining this perfect service of Hashem. Ultimately, in the final stages, all of a person's actions and intents, physical and spiritual, are purely for the sake of Heaven and culminate with an almost complete negation of the physical and complete attachment to Hashem.

In a similar vein, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year when spiritual strivings find their fullest expression, we divest ourselves of our physical trappings and liken ourselves to angels. According to the Rama (*O.C.* 610:4), one of the reasons we wear white on Yom Kippur is “*dugmat malachei hashareit*” — to be likened to angels. We also recite “*Baruch shem k'vod Malchuto leolam va'ed*” aloud during the Yom Kippur service because, as the *Mishnah Berurah* (619:2) explains, “This is the song of angels and on Yom Kippur, Jews are compared to angels.” Is our demeanor on Yom Kippur indicative of what our lifetime goal should be — to achieve “angelic” spiritual perfection?

But We Can't be Perfect

On the other hand, there are countless

sources that seem to imply that spiritual perfection is unattainable for mortals. From the outset, our world was created with inherent spiritual pitfalls, and sin is almost inevitable. Kohelet clearly tells us:

כי אדם אין צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא.
קהלת ז:כ

For there is no righteous man on earth who does good and does not sin.

Kohelet 7:20

Given these conditions, humans could not withstand a world guided solely by *midat hadin*, absolute justice, which demands perfection and swift punishment for any infraction. Therefore Hashem partnered *midat harachamim* (compassion) with *midat hadin* (absolute justice) to create the world (Rashi, Bereishit 1:1).

In Vayikra, the verse states:

אֲשֶׁר נָשִׂיא יִחָטָא; וְעָשָׂה אֶחַת מִכָּל מִצְוֹת ה' אֲלֵקָיו אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂינָהּ, בְּשִׁגְגָה--וְאָשָׂם.
ויקרא ד:כב

When a ruler sins, and commits one from among all the commandments of Hashem that may not be done — unintentionally — and becomes guilty.

Vayikra 4:22

The S'forno suggests that this verse begins with the term “*asher nasi yecheta*” — when a ruler sins — implying that committing sin is inevitable, because all people, even our leaders, are going to sin.

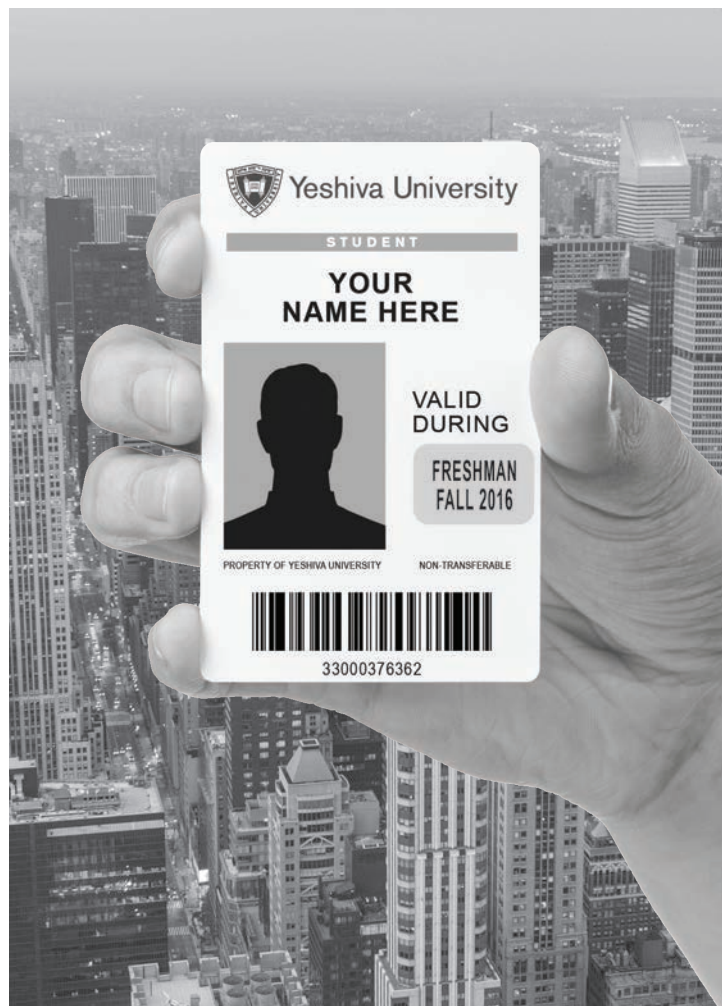
The Talmud in four instances² discusses cases that factor in human failings. One example is the discussion (*Kiddushin* 54a) of whether the kohein may derive personal benefit from the *bigdei kehuna*, the priestly garments. After the kohein has completed the Temple service, he cannot immediately remove the holy garments but must walk to the designated changing area. The Talmud posits that perhaps there is a problem that during this time, he is wearing the holy clothing merely to protect his body and not for the Avodah, the holy Temple service. The Talmud responds that this is not a problem because “*Torah lo nitna lemalachei hashareit*” — The Torah was not given to ministering angels. The Torah was designed for human beings and takes into account our imperfections and physical needs.

From these teachings, one may draw the conclusion that spiritual perfection is unattainable and despite our greatest attempts, it is beyond our reach. Should this leave us paralyzed or even despondent? If we can't achieve perfection, what's the point of trying?

Pitfalls of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is commonly defined as a refusal to accept any standard short of perfect. People who are prone to perfectionistic thinking do not accept any failings on the road to achieving their goals, and their fear of failure leads to great distress. They typically engage in “all or nothing” thinking and evaluate their performance in black and white terms. Perfectionists cannot move beyond any shortcomings and begin to view themselves and the whole enterprise as a failure. In a sense, perfectionists set themselves up for failure because achieving their expected lofty accomplishments without any setbacks is often impossible. The anxiety that perfectionists experience about making mistakes leads to procrastination and avoidance and may hold them back from ever achieving success.³

This mindset can manifest itself in any realm of a person's life but is primarily experienced with the issues a person cares most about. This can include religious observance, and many perfectionists expect their religious behaviors to be 100 percent unwavering, with no setbacks. Once



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they have sinned at all or achieved less than the unrealistically high standards they've set for themselves, they perceive total failure. They then turn a negative behavior into a negative identity. They cannot say, "I am basically a good person with behavior I must correct." Rather they say, "I am a total failure, a bad person and a bad Jew." This train of thought is sometimes followed by "How can I stand before Hashem to daven or learn when I am a sinner?" The overwhelming guilt leads to their feeling empty and worthless, which can then lead to feelings of despair.⁴ The destructive guilt which perfectionists experience does not lead to their improving themselves, but rather leads them to becoming paralyzed and paradoxically being unable to correct the sinful behavior.

Earlier we mentioned the paradox of striving for spiritual perfection on the one hand and the impossibility of achieving such perfection on the other. For one who has a perfectionistic outlook on his or her religious behavior, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur can be particularly challenging. Remorse, which is a necessary step in the teshuva process (*Hilchos Teshuva* 2:2), becomes destructive guilt. Even though Hashem is the benevolent God who has compassion on the individual, the perfectionist cannot have compassion on himself or herself.

The following concepts can help people struggling with all types of perfectionism, and most certainly those struggling with the religious variety of perfection at this time of year.

1. Optimalist vs. Perfectionist⁵

Alongside the perfectionist is the optimalist. Both may have equally high ambitions and both will try to avoid failure. However, whereas perfectionists intensely fear failure and setbacks, optimalists recognize that there will be ups and downs on the way to achieving their goal. An optimalist has a healthy attitude toward failure, namely that all humans make mistakes, and that is OK. A success that was arrived at after a series of difficulties is as much a success, or perhaps even greater a success, than one that was setback-free. As King Shlomo said:

כִּי שֶׁבַע יְפוֹל צְדִיק וְקָם.
מִשְׁלֵי כֹדֶטֶז

A righteous person falls seven times and rises.

Proverbs 24:16

This is not a *rasha* who sins — it's about a *tzaddik* who learns from his sins. Despite multiple failings, he gets up immediately and rights his improper behavior and is still referred to as a *tzaddik*.

Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as the Steipler, writes about life's spiritual ups and downs:⁶

לכן אין מה לפחד אלא יבין בדעתו שכך הוא
טבע האדם וסדר חייו שפעמים יש עליות
ופעמים ירידות, וכמעט בלתי אפשרי להחזיק
מעמד במצב נעלה ומרומם בתמידות. ובאמת,
יותר מזה הוא, שאי אפשר לאדם להגיע
לעלייה יותר גדולה בלי ירידה.

Therefore, there is nothing to fear. But understand that this is human nature and the pattern of life, that there are at times ups and at times downs. And it is almost impossible to withstand high and exalted status constantly. More than that, it is impossible for man to achieve

Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky



Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as The Steipler or The Steipler Gaon (1899–1985), was a rabbi, Talmudic scholar, and posek ("decisor" of Jewish law). He was born in the Ukrainian town of Hornostaypil, from which his appellation, "the Steipler", was later derived. Having progressed rapidly and gained a reputation as a talmid chacham, around the age of 19 he was sent to set up a branch of the yeshiva in Rogochof. However, the Bolshevik Revolution was in full swing and Rabbi Kanievsky was conscripted into the Red Army. In spite of the harsh conditions, he continued to strictly observe all the mitzvot. In 1934, he moved to Israel, settling in Bnei Brak, where his brother-in-law Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (the Chazon Ish) had already been living for a year and a half. For many years he was head of two yeshivas there. Though known as a world-class scholar, Rabbi Kanievsky shunned publicity and lived in humble surroundings, teaching, writing and devoting himself to Torah and good deeds. The Steipler is most well-known for his *Kehillot Yaakov*, a prolific analysis of most volumes of the Talmud.

Adapted from Wikipedia

even greater heights, without some downward movement.

2. Productive vs. Destructive Guilt

When setbacks do occur, guilt and remorse are necessary components of the teshuva process and the distress experienced motivates us to change and improve. But this can only occur if the guilt experienced is productive guilt. Destructive guilt, on the other hand, effectively blocks teshuva and leads one to give up trying to improve.

The Steipler also writes about destructive guilt:⁷

ואולם האדם אשר נכשל בחטא ... ומרגיש רגשי אשמה עד כדי שיעסיקו את מחשבותיו כל היום, וכל הזמן הוא עושה חשבונות מדוע ועל מה קרה ככה וכדומה, ואינו יכול לרכז מחשבתו, ואינו לומד ומתפלל כראוי כיון שמחשבתו טרודה ואינו נותנת לו שום מנוחה — ידע שאין זה רצון הבו"ה, ואין זה אופן הראוי להשתמש בכוח זו.

When a person sins ... and he is wracked with guilt all day, and he constantly questions why and how this occurred and the like, and he cannot concentrate and cannot learn and pray as usual because he is obsessed with these thoughts and he cannot find any rest, He should know this is not what Hashem desires and this is not the proper function of guilt.

The Steipler's advice for a person overcome with unremitting guilt is to designate a short period each day, "such as 15 minutes," to contemplate his sins and feel remorse. He should not, however, think of his sins while learning Torah or praying, because these activities need to be done *b'simcha*, with joy.

Every night at Maariv, in the paragraph beginning with "Hashkeveinu," we say "Vehaser satan melifanenu u'meachareinu" — Hashem

should remove the Satan from in front of us and from behind us. We request that Hashem remove the Satan from "in front of us" to prevent us from sinning. But why do we need to ask Hashem to remove the Satan from "behind us?" Perhaps it's because after the sin, the Satan tries to distance us from the proper behavior with destructive guilt. Rather than healthy reflection which can empower one to improve, destructive guilt generates a sense of *ye'ush* (despair). This causes one to feel that all is lost and that he or she cannot get back on track.

An example of this difference can be seen in the way we diet, and many who have tried dieting have experienced this destructive guilt. There are two distinct emotional reactions one may have after eating a "forbidden" cookie while on a diet. One might feel remorseful and consequently refrain from having the second cookie. This is healthy guilt, and the likelihood is that one will be back on track with the diet. But if one feels so upset about eating the cookie and thinks in an "all or nothing" mindset, the dieter will convince himself or herself, "It's hopeless. What's the point in trying to diet? I failed my diet; I might as well eat another three cookies." This is destructive guilt.

When we fall short of any undertaking, we have to acknowledge that we made a mistake, and we can then continue moving toward our goal.

Rambam in *Hilchot Teshuva* describes three categories of people:

כל אחד ואחד מבני האדם, יש לו זכויות ועונות. מי שזכויותיו יתירות על עונותיו, צדיק. ומי שעונותיו יתירות על זכויותיו, רשע. מחצה למחצה, בינוני. הלכות תשובה ג:א

Each and every person has merits and sins. A person whose merits exceed one's sins [is termed] righteous. A person whose sins exceed one's merits [is termed] wicked. If [one's sins and merits] are equal, one is termed an in-between (Beinoni)."

Teshuva 3:1

Rambam further describes how one should perceive oneself:

לפיכך צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל השנה כולה כאילו חציו זכאי וחציו חייב. הלכות תשובה ג:ד

Therefore a person should always consider oneself as equally balanced between merit and sin.

Teshuva 3:4

Why should one picture oneself as a *beinoni*, as being in the middle? Perhaps if one imagined oneself as a *rasha*, one would more strongly feel the need for teshuva? The answer is that when someone experiences himself as a *rasha*, the chances of improving actually diminish. One is more likely to give up and say "What's the point? I am too far gone to return; all is lost." The individual experiences a break in his or her relationship with Hashem and feels there is no way back. Hence the proper self-assessment is that of a *beinoni* who says, "I acknowledge the good that I've done and I have significant merits and unique talents that I can feel proud of. I also have sinned and done terrible things for which I feel awful and must do teshuva."

Not only must one avoid the perfectionist's fear of failure and the pitfall of "all or nothing" thinking described above; the perfectionist should also try to cultivate a healthy sense of self.

3. Realistic Self-Assessment vs. Superhuman Expectations

Underlying a perfectionist's fear of failure is often a deficiency in self-esteem. The individual who lacks an overall sense of self-worth and personal value may feel "I can only be successful by achieving, without any mistakes or setbacks. A truly competent, worthwhile person would have gotten it right the first time." Working on self-esteem involves realistically recognizing our accomplishments and failings while holding on to the notion of our inherent goodness and potential. We must remember that we are children of Hashem and just as parents accept their child with his or her imperfections, Hashem accepts us even when we are off track.

The Rebbe Menachem Mendel Mi-Kosov writes an incredible insight in the *Sefer Ahavat Shalom to Parshat V'Zot Habrachah* (pg. 330). The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* (4:1) says "Aizehu ashir? Hasameach b'chelko" — Who is considered rich? One who is happy with his portion. While the traditional understanding is regarding physical possessions, being happy with what you own, the Rebbe Mi-Kosov says this is also true with spiritual matters. When one feels depressed over a sin or a lapse in behavior and is feeling that all is lost, he should recognize and acknowledge the portion of mitzvot and good deeds that he has. "Sameach b'chelko" — Be happy with your portion, meaning your collection of accomplishments, and be content. The Rebbe Mi-Kosov goes as far as to say that even while one is experiencing guilt, one should sustain one's happiness and in this manner better serve Hashem.

Toward a Lasting Spiritual Perfection

The Talmud (*Shabbat 55b*) recounts that there were actually four people who never sinned: Binyamin the son of Yaakov, Amram the father of Moshe, Yishai the father of David, and Calev the son of David. These individuals were spiritual giants who warrant our admiration and deepest respect. Yet others, such as the Avot, Moshe Rabeinu and Aharon Hakohein, who by tradition did sin, are deemed our greatest role models and occupy the highest levels of esteem as foundational leaders of our nation. As Rabbi Zevulun Charlop, Dean Emeritus of RIETS, explained,⁸ these four did not sin because they did not step out of their comfort zone to overcome life's challenges. It is those who take risks to lead and inspire others who will inevitably make mistakes and sin, but will also continue to reach even greater heights. Being able to look back on a life devoid of sin is undoubtedly a lofty goal, but perhaps sinning, overcoming that challenge, and continuing to rise up is even greater. Our most exalted leaders provide us with a more realistic depiction of what our spiritual journey will look like, detours, disruptions and all.

So, where should a lifetime of self-improvement lead? Most definitely in the direction of spiritual perfection.

As Chazal say:

כל אחד מישראל חייב לומר "מתי יגיעו מעשי למעשי אבותי אברהם יצחק ויעקב."

תנא דבי אליהו, פרק כה

Every Jew is obligated to say "When will my actions reach those of my forefathers — Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov?"

Tanna D'bei Eliyahu, chapter 25

We must aspire to reach the level of the Avot and continually work on ourselves

to attain the greatest heights possible. But as much as we would like the path between where we are spiritually holding today and where we want to go to be in a straight line, it will likely not be — and that is OK. The process and the direction in which we are moving matter more than the end result. As long as we keep the goals of spiritual perfection in view and use its guiding principles to help us navigate, we will always be on the right track.

Notes

1. ת"ר: ונשמרת מכל דבר רע - שלא יהרהר אדם ביום ויבוא לידי טומאה בלילה. מכאן א"ר פנחס בן אייר: תורה מביאה לידי זהירות, וזהירות מביאה לידי זריזות, זריזות מביאה לידי נקיות, נקיות מביאה לידי פרישות, פרישות מביאה לידי טהרה, טהרה מביאה לידי (חסידות, חסידות) (קדושה, קדושה) מביאה לידי ענוה, ענוה מביאה לידי יראת חטא, יראת חטא מביאה לידי (קדושה, קדושה) (חסידות, חסידות) מביאה לידי רוח הקודש, רוח הקודש מביאה לידי תחיית המתים
Our Rabbis taught: The words, Thou shalt keep thee from every evil thing, mean that one should not indulge in such thoughts by day as might lead to uncleanness by night. Hence R. Phineas b. Jair said: Study leads to precision, precision leads to zeal, zeal leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to restraint, restraint leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to meekness, meekness leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to the [possession of] the holy spirit, the holy spirit leads to life eternal. (Soncino Translation)

2. *Berachot 25b, Yoma 30a, Kiddushin 54a, and Meilah 14b.*

3. Flett, G. L. and Hewitt, P. L. (2014), A Proposed Framework For Preventing Perfectionism And Promoting Resilience And Mental Health Among Vulnerable Children And Adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools* 51: 899–912.

4. B.A. Fedewa et al. (2005), Positive and negative perfectionism and the shame/guilt distinction: adaptive and maladaptive characteristics. *Personality and Individual Differences* 38 1609–1619.

5. In *The Pursuit of Perfect*, Tal Ben-Shahar devotes pages 7-36 to develop this topic.

6. *Eitzot V'Hadrachot, Aliyot Veyeridot* pg 76.

7. *Eitzot V'Hadrachot, Rigshei Ashamah*, pg. 86.

8. Personal communication.