
PERSONAL GROWTH

IN JUDAISM I

Scaling the Internal Alps

If asked to list the concepts with which Judaism is normally associated, we might suggest Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, the Land of Israel, circumcision, and a variety of other ideals and mitzvot specific to the Jewish religion. There is, however, a concept that is common to many peoples and cultures which occupies a central place in Judaism: personal growth. Judaism's comprehensive and unique approach to personal growth is grounded in a Divine mandate to strive to perfect one's character.

There are two Morasha classes that explore the Jewish approach to personal growth. This first class will discuss the centrality of personal growth in Judaism and explore the nature of the "personal growth" that the Torah calls for human beings to attain. The second class will explore the practical side of personal growth: how to pursue it and how to attain it.

- How does personal development and growth, embraced by many societies, play a central role in Judaism?
- What is unique about the Jewish approach to personal growth?
- In which areas is a person expected to achieve personal growth?
- Who is the ultimate role model to guide our personal growth?
- What is the ideal to strive for in our personal growth and development?

Class Outline:

Introduction.	Scaling the Internal Alps
Section I.	The Centrality of Personal Growth in Judaism
Section II.	The Uniqueness of the Jewish Approach to Personal Growth Part A. Character Development and Personal Ethics are Divinely Based Part B. The Mitzvot Refine our Character Part C. Mitzvah Observance Requires Self-Control Part D. Teshuvah – A Process for Introspection and Character Change Part E. Personal Growth and Hashgachah Pratit (Divine Providence) Part F. Prayer and Personal Growth Part G. Torah Study Part H. Personal Growth and Progressive Spiritual Development Part I. The God Factor
Section III.	The Ultimate Role Model for Our Self-Actualization Part A. Emulating God Part B. Striving for Perfection

INTRODUCTION. SCALING THE INTERNAL ALPS

As reluctant as many of us may be to admit it, we all have shortcomings. There is no such thing as a human being who is absolutely perfect – some people anger easily, others are inconsiderate or miserly, and the list goes on. Of course, there may be people who are averse to investing the time and energy that it takes to grow and to refine their characters – but even those people who choose not to engage in self-improvement certainly would agree that it is a valuable endeavor. Even if people possess good attributes – kindness, consideration, generosity, and conscientiousness, etc., – perhaps they could even *excel* in these areas would they only apply themselves more.

Judaism attaches tremendous value to the concept and practice of self-improvement. The Torah requires each person to strive for perfection and not to be satisfied with their personal status quo. The most famous and dramatic illustration of the Jewish commitment to personal growth are the ten days from Rosh HaShanah through Yom Kippur when Jews worldwide make a personal accounting of how they are utilizing the attributes with which they were created and whether they are on the path to achieving their mission in life. Another such part of the year, although less well known, is the seven-week period between Pesach and Shavuot, when Jews focus on refining their characters in their rededication to Torah study and practice.

But the global approach of Judaism to personal growth is that it is essentially a lifetime effort – day by day, hour by hour – whether at home, in school, at the office, and even during “vacation,” as the following story at a Jewish summer camp illustrates:

It was the Senior Division All-Star Baseball Game of Color War, and hundreds of campers and staff members were sitting on bleachers and standing on the sidelines watching a very exciting game. The score was tied 1-1 and David Tepper was on second base. David was fifteen years old, in the camp's senior bunk and possibly the best player on his team. His team was in high spirits as he took a lead off second base while the next pitch headed toward home plate.

The batter swung and hit a line drive into the outfield. David rounded third base and headed for home plate as the crowd roared. There was a play at the plate; as David slid into home, the catcher caught the throw and tagged him. "Safe!" the umpire shouted. The catcher was obviously upset. He told the umpire that he had tagged the runner before he had touched home plate. But the umpire stood by his call.

David's team was jubilant. They had taken the lead and were now in a position to pick up some crucial Color War points. And perhaps a victory in the All-Star game would give them the momentum to win Color War. David had been slow in standing up and dusting himself off. As he walked away from home plate, his teammates surrounded him, pounded him on the back and congratulated him. Strangely, he was the only one who did not seem to be excited. Quietly, he made his way through the crowd and approached the umpire. "I was out," he said quietly.

The umpire was not sure that he had heard correctly. "What did you say?" he asked. "I said that I was out," David replied. "I am positive that he tagged me before I touched home plate." Suddenly, everyone grew silent. Many people had been close enough to hear the conversation and word of David's admission made its way quickly through the crowd. The umpire pondered the matter silently.

After what seemed like a very long time, the umpire cleared his throat and said, "Well, I'm human and I can make a mistake. If you're positive that he tagged you before you reached home plate, then you're out." The game ended in a tie.

*On the last night of camp, the head counselor addressed campers and staff: "There are a lot of memories that we take home after an eight-week camp season. But if there's one memory above all that we should take home with us, it's that of David Tepper speaking the truth after being called 'safe'" (from Rabbi Shimon Finkelman, *The Gift of Speech*, ArtScroll Publications).*

In this incident, there are three heroes. David could have quietly accepted the winning slide into home plate, rationalizing that the umpire called him safe. The umpire could have refused to acknowledge that he made an incorrect call. Finally, the head counselor emphasized to the entire camp how the game's ending teaches a life-long lesson about how our characters determine the outcome of life. Imagine how consequential the stakes are when our behavior and attributes really matter – in our interpersonal relationships with family, friends, teachers, colleagues, and God Himself.

To some of us, achieving our potential may appear as an unscaleable mountain peak. However, not only is this goal attainable, it is this very challenge which enables us to accomplish our mission in this world (see Rambam/Maimonides *Hilchot Teshuvah/The Laws of Repentance* 5:2).

SECTION I. THE CENTRALITY OF PERSONAL GROWTH IN JUDAISM

Several sources point to the centrality of personal growth in Judaism. Although the refinement of character faults is in most cases not explicitly commanded by the Torah, this is not because it lacks fundamental importance. In fact, the great mystic and sage, Rabbi Chaim Vital, writes that the reason character refinement

is not commanded in the Torah is that refinement of character is the necessary *prerequisite* for Torah since without refined traits, a person simply cannot fulfill the Torah.

1. **Rav Chaim Vital, Shaarei HaKedushah, Section 1, Gate 2 – Good character traits are a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the Torah's commandments.**

Character traits are not included in the 613 mitzvot, but they are essential prerequisites for the 613 mitzvot, since they can lead either to their proper fulfillment, or their desecration ... Thus we find that a person must be even more careful in staying away from bad character traits than in fulfilling the positive and negative commandments, because when he achieves refinement of character, he will be able to easily fulfill all of the mitzvot.

אין המדות מכלל התרי"ג מצוות ואמנם הן הכנות עקריות אל תרי"ג המצוות בקיומם או בביטולם . . . ונמצא כי יותר צריך לזהר ממידות רעות יותר מן קיום המצוות עשה ולא תעשה כי בהיותו בעל מדות טובות בנקל יקיים כל המצוות.

2. **Vilna Gaon, Even Shleimah 1 – All spiritual growth depends on improving character traits.**

All service of God is dependent upon the improvement of one's character since character traits are like clothing to the mitzvot and are the general principles of the Torah. Conversely, all transgression stems from unimproved character traits.

[Explanation from Rabbi Reuven Leuchter: The meaning of the term "clothing" here, is that the character traits are the vessels through which the holiness of the mitzvot are revealed here in this world (just as a person reveals himself through his clothing) and that is apparently the reason that the character traits are "the general principles of the Torah" because the entire purpose of the Torah is to reveal holiness in this world.]

כל עבודת ה' תלוי בתיקון המדות, שהם כמו לבוש להמצוות וכללי התורה, וכל החטאים מושרשים במדות.

[הסבר של הרב ראובן לויכטר: הכוונה של לבוש בזה הוא, שהמדות הם הכלים, שעל ידם הקדושה של המצווה מתגלית כאן בעולם (כמו שהאדם מתגלה כאן על ידי לבושיו) וזה לכאורה גם הטעם, שהם כללי התורה, כי כל תכלית התורה היא לגלות קדושה כאן בעולם.]

3. **Orchot Tzaddikim, Introduction – The importance of refining character traits.**

If you do not possess refined character traits, then neither do you possess Torah and mitzvot, for the entire Torah depends on the refinement of character traits.

כשאין בידך מידות טובות - אין בידך תורה ומצוות, כי כל התורה תלויה בתיקון המידות.

Not only is character refinement essential; it is the purpose of life itself!

4. **Vilna Gaon, Even Shleimah 2 – What is life for if not for character refinement?**

The prime purpose of man's life is to constantly strive to break his bad traits. Otherwise, what is life for?

עיקר חיות האדם הוא להתחזק תמיד בשבירת המדות, ואם לאו – למה לו חיים?

The following anecdote reflects just how literally our Torah giants took these words of the Vilna Gaon.

A man once approached Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach, the famous Rosh Yeshivah and Torah sage, with a heartrending question. He had been diagnosed with a terminal illness, and the doctors had told him that he had only six months to live. How should he spend the remaining six months of his life?

The man expected the great rabbi to suggest an intensive regimen of Torah study, to devote the remaining months of his life in this world to purely spiritual pursuits. To his surprise, Rabbi Shach responded, “Work on your character and overcome some negative tendencies.” The rabbi explained, “The Vilna Gaon tells us that this is the entire purpose of our existence in this world. If you have only a few months left to live, it makes sense to devote those months to achieving your purpose in life.”

5. **Rabbi Yehudah Ades, Address at the Convention for Sephardic Rabbis, 1986 – The main task in life is character refinement.**

Twenty-seven years ago we convened for a conference of Ponevezh Yeshivah graduates. The center stage was taken by the great *tzaddik* Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, of blessed memory. On which topic did Rabbi Yechezkel decide to speak, in front of hundreds of disciples, who had already grown in stature to become deans of yeshivahs, rabbis, and so on? He lectured about the evils of haughtiness, on how this attribute influences a person, and takes over his entire being.

My friends asked me, “Is this what we came for, leaving our jobs and our studies to hear about haughtiness?” I replied that their very question revealed the importance of the matter! A person must not think that he is entering life, and has many challenges ahead – on the contrary, the Arizal stated that the principal challenge in a person’s life is to rectify his flawed dispositions. The Mashgiach came to teach us what the main task is: to refine character traits, first and foremost that of haughtiness.

לפני כעשרים ושבע שנים התקיים כנס בוגרים של תלמידי ישיבת פוניבז'. במרכז עמדה שיחת הגאון הצדיק רבי יחזקאל לוינשטיין זצ"ל. על איזה נושא מצא המשגיח לנכון לשוחח בפני מאות תלמידים, שכבר גדלו וצמחו לראשי ישיבות רבנים וכו'? הוא שוחח על מידת הגאווה שיש באדם, כיצד היא משפיעה עליו וממלאת את כל ישותו וכו'.

שאלוני ידידי באותו מעמד, האם לשם כך עזבנו את תפקידינו ולימודינו בשביל לשמוע על מידת הגאווה? עניתי להם: דווקא מתוך שאלתכם הבנתי את חשיבות העניין! כל יחשוב האדם הנה הוא יוצא לחיים וכמה אתגרים בפניו – אדרבה, אמר הארי ז"ל האתגר הראשון העומד בפני האדם הוא לתקן את המידות הרעות. המשגיח בא ללמדנו מהו עיקר המשימה: תיקון המידות, ובראשן הגאווה.

If our purpose in life is to refine our characters, it only makes sense that mitzvah observance, which is the means with which we refine ourselves and build our relationship with God to reach perfection, should be an integral component in developing our personal attributes. It is therefore not surprising that the Rambam lays down a fundamental principle: that the purpose of the mitzvot is to achieve character perfection.

6. **Rambam, Hilchot Temurah (The Laws of Temurah) 4:13 – The mitzvot are God’s instructions and advice for living and improving our character.**

And all these matters [the mitzvot] are to [help us to] overcome our negative inclinations and to correct our traits; and most laws of the Torah are instruction from afar from the Great Adviser [to help us] to correct our character traits and straighten our ways.

וכל אלו הדברים כדי לכוף את יצרו ולתקן דעותיו ורוב דיני התורה אינם אלא עצות מרחוק מגדול העצה לתקן הדעות וליישר כל המעשים.

The Rambam reveals to us that the purpose of the mitzvot is the character refinement that is brought about by their performance. But there is another form of character refinement which is necessitated by mitzvah observance: the refinement of the very performance of the mitzvot. Even when we perform virtuous acts, we must strive to do them with purity of motivation and intent.

7. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal), *The Path of the Just*, Introduction – The need to strive for “purity and cleanliness” of action.

And since every man of wisdom recognizes the need for perfection of Divine service and the necessity for its purity and cleanliness, without which it is [not only] completely unacceptable, but repulsive and despised – “For God searches all hearts and understands the inclination of all thoughts” (I Chronicles 28:9) – what will we answer on the Day of Reproof if we weaken in this study and forsake that which is so incumbent upon us as to be the very essence of what the Lord our God asks of us?

וכיון שכבר התאמת אצל כל חכם צורך תמימות העבודה וחובת טהרתה ונקיונה שזולת אלה אינה נרצית ודאי כלל, אלא נמאסת ומתועבת, “כי כל לבבות דורש ה' וכל יצר מחשבות מביין” (דה"י א כח), מה נענה ביום תוכחה אם התרשלנו מן העיון הזה והנחנו דבר שהוא כל כך מוטל עלינו שהוא עיקר מה ה' אלהינו שואל מעמנו.

In truth, the potential to grow in the purity of our mitzvah observance is nearly limitless. As the following story illustrates, no matter how high a level a person succeeds in reaching, there are always even more exalted levels of righteousness that he can achieve in the observance of the very same mitzvot.

A tzaddik once discovered an indigent family and gave them a generous amount of charity. Shortly thereafter, the tzaddik returned and gave them more money. He explained that when he first came across the family and saw the degree to which they were suffering, their deprivation caused him great personal anguish. Thus, when he initially gave them tzedakah (charity), the act was tainted by self-interest; he wanted to alleviate his own distress. Once he had alleviated his own discomfort by giving them a generous donation, he returned to give tzedakah once again, this time without any personal gain whatsoever (Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, Twerski on Spirituality, p. 67).

How many people today would consider it a deficiency in their performance of the mitzvah of tzedakah if their tzedakah helped alleviate their own distress at the recipient's plight? The level of righteousness that this tzaddik achieved reflects the infinite possibility for refinement and improvement in our performance of mitzvot.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ∞ Character refinement may be a universal ideal, but takes on far greater significance in the context of Judaism. Espousing the Torah without being prepared to strive for refined character traits is self-contradictory.
- ∞ The development of good *middot* (character traits) is a prerequisite for the study of Torah and performance of its mitzvot. Only a person who has engaged in character improvement can properly serve God by performing the mitzvot.
- ∞ Character development and refinement is the very purpose of life in this world.
- ∞ The primary purpose of many mitzvot is to bring about character refinement.

- ∞ An important aspect of personal growth is the purification and elevation of the mitzvot and good deeds that we do. Every person should work to make sure that they perform mitzvot with pure intentions.

SECTION II. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE JEWISH APPROACH TO PERSONAL GROWTH

The Jewish approach to personal growth and development is comprehensive and systematic; anchored in a Divine framework; and guided by mitzvah observance, *teshuvah* (lit. return), prayer, Torah study, and by God Himself.

PART A. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND PERSONAL ETHICS ARE DIVINELY BASED

Jewish principles of personal growth are rooted in the Divinely given Torah, in contrast to secular wisdom. Ethics of the Fathers, Pirkei Avot, which deals with ethics and character refinement, begins with a summary of the chain of the transmission of the Torah, starting with Mount Sinai. This transmission was specifically recorded in this tractate of the Talmud, not in any other. Why? God did not leave the topics of ethics and character development in the domain of human wisdom, as in all other societies. Rather, the standards for ethical behavior and character improvement are anchored in Torah. Only by studying and integrating Torah values can we really understand how to become “better people.”

1. Pirkei Avot 1:1 – Avot begins with the chain of transmission of the Torah.

Moshe received the Torah at Mt. Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua (Joshua), Yehoshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Great Assembly. They said three things ...

משה קיבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה. הם אמרו שלושה דברים...

2. Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura, Pirkei Avot 1:1 –The Sages’ ethical teachings are not their own invention; rather, they are a part of the Torah, which is the Word of God.

I say that because this tractate is not based on the explanation of one of the mitzvot of the Torah, as are the other tractates of the Mishnah, rather it is completely concerned with *mussar* [educational and ethical concepts] and good character traits, and the wise men of the nations also wrote books according to their own understanding of the ways of *mussar* concerning how a man should behave with his friend – for this reason, the Tanna begins this tractate [of Avot] with the statement “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai” – to teach you that the ethics and morals in this tractate were not formulated by the elders of the Mishnah merely from their own understanding, but even these were spoken [by God] at Sinai.

אומר אני, לפי שמסכת זו אינו מיוסדת על פירוש מצוה ממצוות התורה כשאר מסכתות שבמשנה, אלא כולה מוסרים ומדות, וחכמי אומות העולם ג"כ חברו ספרים כמו שבדו מלבם בדרכי המוסר כיצד יתנהג האדם עם חבריו, לפיכך התחיל התנא במסכת זו משה קבל תורה מסיני, לומר לך שהמדות והמוסרים שבזו המסכתא לא בדו אותם חכמי המשנה מלבם אלא אף אלו נאמרו בסיני.

PART B. THE MITZVOT REFINE OUR CHARACTER

The mitzvot (commandments) were given by God to the entire Jewish nation at Mt. Sinai and govern our relationship with God, our fellow man, and ourselves. One of the main reasons for the mitzvot, as the Rambam explains above (Section I.6), is for us to achieve character perfection.

Many mitzvot directly accomplish the goal of character refinement: through inviting guests, giving tzedakah and loans, visiting the sick, comforting mourners, arranging and attending funerals, speaking the truth, and honoring parents. Moreover, as will be illustrated in the second Morasha shiur on Personal Growth, even mitzvot that do not seemingly improve our character, also have the ability to do so.

PART C. MITZVAH OBSERVANCE REQUIRES SELF-CONTROL

The third area that distinguishes the Jewish approach to personal growth is a consequence of having mitzvot. The awareness of a commandment triggers a productive dynamic internal struggle within a person that itself creates the possibility for personal growth by his exercising self-control. Self-control is at the heart of all personal growth. This is derived from the following Talmudic principle:

1. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Kiddushin 31a – It is more meaningful when someone acts on account of a mitzvah rather than performing an act spontaneously.**

Rabbi Chanina taught, “Greater is one who acts because he is commanded than one who acts without being commanded.”

דאמר רבי חנינא: גדול מצווה ועושה ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה.

Why should this be so?

2. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, World Mask, Targum Press, pp. 110-112 – Self control is the basis of all personal growth and development.**

Greater is he who is commanded and does... We have a principle that one who does because he is commanded is greater than one who acts spontaneously. This is counter-intuitive; surely spontaneity is greater? Surely if an action is generated within myself it is greater than an action performed because I am obliged from without?

One of the classic answers to this question is that when one is commanded to act, one is immediately confronted by resistance – one’s own *yetzer hara*, or lower self, steps in and says “Don’t tell me what to do!” The ego, the “I,” that deep root of the personality (and its spiritual core), wishes to assert itself, refuses to be subdued. Therefore, in order to fulfill a command one must overcome this inner resistance, and in doing so lies the secret of inner growth. Self-control is at the heart of all personal growth, and it is developed by the discipline required to obey. However, when one acts spontaneously there is no resistance to overcome and the action is relatively easy; it is not intrinsically an exercise in self-control and therefore has relatively little growth potential.

But there is more here than meets the eyes. When one acts spontaneously, motivated only by that which arises within one’s own consciousness, one is expressing oneself. That may be a great thing, But it can never be greater than the individual who is performing the act. At best. The act will be a full and true expression of the one who performs it. But when one fulfills a Divine command one is expressing the Divine! The person who acts in fulfilling a commandment is no less than a partner with the Divine; that person has locked into the infinite dimension and reveals in the world what the Divine Source of that action intends to reveal. The word *mitzvah* is based on a root meaning “together”, partners.

“*Gadol ha’metsueh...*” – far greater is the one who acts because he is commanded!
The secret depth here is that in overcoming the private, limited self, because one overcomes that individual self, one arrives at a greater Self, one merits a closeness with the Source of reality.

PART D. TESHUVAH – A PROCESS FOR INTROSPECTION AND CHARACTER CHANGE

God created each individual with unique attributes and talents, and the ability to exercise free will in order to reach his potential. Each day, we may make mistakes and use our free will to undermine our ability to reach our potential. God therefore gave us the precious gift of *teshuvah* (literally “to return”), enabling us to correct our mistakes, regain our lost potential, and repair our relationship with our fellow man and with God.

1. Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf, *Rosh HaShanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit, Leviathan Press, p.102 – Dealing with mistakes.*

The issue on Yom Kippur (and throughout the year) is this: How do we correct the mistakes of our past and avoid repeating them in the future? If we can understand this, then we possess the key to unlocking an enormous reservoir of latent potential for greatness that would otherwise lie dormant.

This is teshuvah. The common translation of teshuvah is “repentance.” Again, a rather foreign sounding idea. The proper translation of the word teshuvah is “to return.” Teshuvah is an animated technique for locating the rationalizations that lie at the root of our mistakes: recognizing them, dealing with them, and eliminating them.

The process of teshuvah is addressed separately in two Morasha shiurim.

PART E. PERSONAL GROWTH AND HASHGACHAH PRATIT (DIVINE PROVIDENCE)

Life is not random – we have an exalted purpose in this world, and we are given Divinely orchestrated opportunities and challenges to help us reach our potential.

1. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur, Vol. I, p. 168 – The profound importance of each individual*

Every person needs to know that he has importance. Not an imagined importance that he “considers himself as special”... rather a deeply profound importance that is even shocking.

The Talmud states, “Each and every person must declare, ‘The world was created for me’ (Sanhedrin 37a). Rashi explains that this means I am considered as important as the entire world...”

“Like the entire world” – This is the one-time life experience of a particular person – there was never a person like him and nor will there ever be a person like him throughout history. I, with my special character strengths, the child of my parents, born at a specific time period, and in a certain environment – certainly there

כל אדם חייב לדעת, שיש לו חשיבות. לא חשיבות מדומה שהוא “מחשיב עצמו בעצמו”... אלא חשיבות בעלת משמעות עמוקה ואף מועזת.

“כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר: בשבילי נברא העולם” - רש"י: “כלומר: חשוב אני כעולם מלא, לא אטרד את עצמי מן העולם בעבירה אחת.” (סנהדרין לו, א)

“כעולם מלא” – זוהי חיות חד-פעמיותו של האדם, שלא היה עוד כמותו ולא יהיה כמותו עד סוף כל הדורות. אני עם המיזוג המיוחד של כוחותי, בן לאותם אבות, נולד בתוך אותה תקופה ובאותה סביבה - בודאי עבודה מיוחדת מוטלת עלי, חלק מיוחד לי בתורה, וכל הבריאה מחכה לי שאתקן את המוטל עלי, כי את

is a unique challenge that is placed upon me. I have a special share in the Torah, and the entire world is waiting for me to actualize that which is incumbent upon me. For my role cannot be exchanged with anyone else in the world!

עבודתי לא אוכל להחליף עם שום אדם אחר בעולם!

See the Morasha shiurim on Caring for the Jewish Soul, Free Will, and Hashgachah Pratit.

PART F. PRAYER AND PERSONAL GROWTH

Prayer plays a central role in our personal growth by enabling us to communicate with God, helping us to evaluate our attributes and actions, and as the means to ask for Divine assistance in our quest for perfection.

1. Pirkei Avot 1:2 – Prayer is one of the three principal goals of Creation.

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say, “The world rests on three things: On Torah, on *Avodah* (Divine service, i.e. prayer) and on acts of kindness.”

שמעון הצדיק היה משירי כנסת הגדולה, הוא היה אומר, על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים.

The importance of prayer is derived from its direct relationship to *Avodah*, (Divine service in the Temple). After the destruction of the Temple, prayer replaced *Avodah* as a primary means of building a relationship with God on both a personal and national level.

2. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, Translated by Dayan Dr. I Grunfeld, The Soncino Press, Jerusalem, 1891, p.472 – Evaluating our character, actions, and goals through prayer.

Hithpallel, from which “*tefillah*” is derived, originally meant to deliver an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself or an inner attempt at so doing such as the *hithpa’el* (reflexive) form of the Hebrew verb frequently denotes ... Thus it denotes to step out of active life in order to attempt to gain a true judgment about oneself ... about one’s relationship to God and the world, and the world to oneself ... In English we call *tefillah* “prayer,” but this word only incompletely expresses the concept “to pray,” i.e. to ask for something is only a minor section of *tefillah*.

PART G. TORAH STUDY

When God created the world, He looked into the Torah and used it as the blueprint for the creation of the universe. The whole purpose of Creation is Torah study; it is what sustains the world. When we study Torah and work on perfecting ourselves, we become partners with God in Creation. The Torah we study infuses the world with holiness, helps us navigate our moral and ethical decisions, and is our essential source of wisdom.

1. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Derech Hashem. 1:4:9 – Torah study leads to personal perfection.

Out of all the means that God has given us to

ואמנם אמצעי אחד נתן לנו האל יתברך שמו שמודריגתו

come close to Him, there is one that stands higher than all the rest. This is the study of Torah. This consists of two parts: one is the reading and understanding of the Torah, and the other is the deeper comprehension of Torah. With His kindness, God authored a text in accordance with His wisdom, which He then presented to us. This is the Torah (i.e. the Five Books of Moses) as well as the books of the prophets that followed. These texts have a special property, namely, that when one reads them with sanctity and purity, and with the proper intent – to fulfill God’s Will – he will be imbued with a great loftiness and a very great level of perfection. Similarly, when one works at understanding the content of these books, as well as the accompanying explanations that God presented to us, he will attain one level of perfection after another.

למעלה מכל שאר האמצעים המקרבים האדם אליו, והוא תלמוד תורה. והוא בשתי בחינות. האחת, בבחינת ההגיון והלמוד. והשניה בבחינת ההשכלה. כי הנה רצה בחסדו וחיבר לנו חבור דברים כמו שגורה חכמתו ית' ומסרם לנו והיינו כלל ספר התורה ואחריו ספרי הנביאים, שבסגולת הדברים האלה יהיה שמוי שיהגה בהם בקדושה ובטהרה על הכונה הנכונה שהיא עשיית חפצו ית' שמו, יתעצם בו על ידם מעלה עליונה ושלימות גדול עד מאד. וכן מי שישתדל בהבנתו ובידיעת מה שמסר לנו מפירושיהם, יקנה כפי השתדלותו, שלימות על שלימות...

Furthermore, Torah study is critical since it guides us how to act properly.

2. **Rambam, Hilchot Talmud Torah (Laws of Torah Study) 3:3 – Torah study is the most important mitzvah because it teaches one how to live.**

There is no mitzvah that is equal to that of Torah study. Rather, Torah study is equal to all of the mitzvot together. The reason for this is that study leads to practice.

אין לך מצוה בכל המצוות כולן שהיא שקולה כנגד תלמוד תורה אלא תלמוד תורה כנגד כל המצוות כולן, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה.

See the second Morasha shiur on Personal Growth that discusses the importance of the study of mussar, ethical development, an area of Torah that focuses on the pursuit of self-control, the perfection of one’s character, and the purification of one’s motives and values.

PART H. PERSONAL GROWTH AND PROGRESSIVE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Self-actualization is a long-term, on-going effort, accomplished one step at time. Torah study not only helps us to refine our character, it can catalyze a lifetime journey of building our spiritual potential.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah 20b – Progressive process of personal and spiritual development.**

Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said, “Torah brings one to vigilance, vigilance brings one to enthusiasm, enthusiasm leads to [spiritual] cleanliness, cleanliness leads to abstinence, abstinence leads to purity, purity leads to righteousness, righteousness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of transgression, fear of transgression leads to holiness, holiness leads to Divine inspiration...”

א"ר פנחס בן יאיר תורה מביאה לידי זהירות זהירות מביאה לידי זריזות זריזות מביאה לידי נקיות נקיות מביאה לידי פרישות, פרישות מביאה לידי טהרה, טהרה מביאה לידי חסידות, חסידות מביאה לידי ענוה, ענוה מביאה לידי יראת חטא, יראת חטא מביאה לידי קדושה מביאה לידי רוח הקודש...

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto wrote an incisive guide, *The Path of the Just* (*Mesillat Yesharim*), for every Jew to develop his personality based on Rabbi Pinchas Ben Yair's teaching. This book has been studied daily worldwide by thousands ever since its publication in the 18th century.

PART I. THE GOD FACTOR

Finally, the principle which raises the bar on our quest for personal growth is the Jewish aspiration to emulate God. This is addressed in the next section, *The Ultimate Role Model for Our Self-Actualization*.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

The following areas distinguish the Jewish approach to personal growth and development:

- ≈ Jewish principles of personal growth are rooted in the Divinely given Torah, in contrast to secular wisdom.
- ≈ The mitzvot were given by God to the entire Jewish nation to achieve character perfection.
- ≈ Mitzvah observance requires self-control, which is at the heart of all personal growth.
- ≈ Teshuvah enables us to correct our mistakes, regain our lost potential, and reconcile our relationships with our fellow man and with God.
- ≈ We are given Divinely orchestrated opportunities and challenges (*hashgachah pratit*) to help us reach our potential.
- ≈ Prayer plays a central role in our personal growth by enabling us to communicate with God, and helps us to evaluate our attributes and actions.
- ≈ Torah study leads to personal perfection. The study of mussar is especially helpful, focusing on the pursuit of self-control, the perfection of one's character, and the purification of one's motives and values.
- ≈ Torah study not only helps us to refine our character, it can catalyze a lifetime journey to progressively develop our spirituality.
- ≈ Emulating the attributes of God is our ultimate guide for personal growth.

SECTION III. THE ULTIMATE ROLE MODEL FOR OUR SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Before founding Silicon Graphics, Jim Clark, founder of several computer companies, said a fortune of \$10 million would make him happy; before Netscape, \$100 million; before Healtheon, \$1 billion. Now he says, "Once I have more than Larry Ellison, I'll be satisfied." Ellison, founder of the software company Oracle has \$13 billion (Rabbi Dan Roth, Relevance, Feldheim Publishers, p.84).

What kinds of values guide Jim Clark's choice of a role model?

Judaism teaches that a person finds happiness and reaches his potential by striving to emulate the One Who is the best possible teacher.

PART A. EMULATING GOD

Character refinement is a universally recognized value. Asked whether refining one's character is an achievement worth striving for, virtually everyone would agree that this is so. In Judaism, however, the concept of refining character traits takes on a more profound depth and meaning. More than just becoming "a better person," one who refines his character strives to emulate God, and thereby comes close to Him. The ultimate role model to guide our personal growth is God Himself. (See also the Morasha shiur, Being Like God.)

We will now discuss two aspects in our quest to emulate God: 1) aspiring to integrate God-like attributes and behavior into our lives, and 2) striving for perfection.

The requirement to "emulate God" appears both in the Torah itself and in the words of the prophets.

1. Devarim/Deuteronomy 10:12 – Following the ways of God.

Now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God, ask of you – only that you should fear the Lord, your God, to go in all of His ways, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God, with all your hearts and all your souls.

ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה את ה' אלהיך ללכת בכל דרכיו ולאהבה אתו ולעבד את ה' אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך.

2. Yirmiyahu, Jeremiah 9:22-23 – The pride of all possessions: Knowledge of the ways of God.

Thus says God, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that pursues glory take glory in this: that he understands, and knows Me, that I am God, Who exercises mercy, justice, and righteousness on earth. For in these things I delight," says God.

כה אמר ה' אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו ואל יתהלל הגבור בגבורתו אל יתהלל עשיר בעשרו: כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי כי אני ה' עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ כי באלה חפצתי נאם ה':

This injunction, however, is difficult to understand. How is it possible to emulate God? God, after all, is infinite and beyond any human comprehension. What are we being told to do? "Emulating God" must mean copying the ways and deeds that God reveals to us. By acting toward us in a certain way, God demonstrates to us what He expects us to do.

3. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a – The principle of emulating God.

In the Bible it is written: "You shall walk after the Lord your God" (Devarim 13:5). But is it possible for man to walk after the Presence? Is it not written, "For Hashem your God is a devouring fire" (Ibid. 4:24)? Rather, the meaning is: Follow

מאי דכתיב אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו וכי אפשר לו לאדם להלך אחר שכינה והלא כבר נאמר כי ה' אלהיך אש אוכלה הוא אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא מה הוא מלביש ערומים ... אף אתה הלבש ערומים הקדוש ברוך הוא ביקר חולים ... אף אתה בקר

Him by imitating his dispositions. Just as God clothes the naked ... so should you clothe the naked; just as He visits the sick ... so should you visit the sick; just as He consoles the bereaved ... so should you console the bereaved; just as He buries the dead ... so should you bury the dead.

חולים הקדוש ברוך הוא ניחם אבלים ... אף אתה נחם
אבלים הקדוש ברוך הוא קבר מתים ... אף אתה קבור
מתים:

All of the acts enumerated here – charity, visiting the sick, consoling mourners, and burying the dead – are acts of kindness. The lesson of this Talmudic passage, then, is that a person emulates God by engaging in acts of kindness, just as God performs acts of kindness for human beings.

4. **Sifri, Eikev 13 – The Torah’s requirement to follow the ways of God means that we must inculcate the attributes of kindness and compassion within ourselves.**

“To walk in all His ways” – these are the ways of God, as it is written, “Lord, Lord, God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in kindness and truth, Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who cleanses ...” (Shemot/Exodus 34:6).

Just as God is termed compassionate and gracious, so you should be compassionate and gracious, and give selflessly to all. Just as God is called righteous, as it is written (Tehillim/Psalms 145), “God is righteous in all His ways” so you should be righteous. God is called magnanimous as it is stated (Ibid. 145), “God is magnanimous in all His deeds” so you too should be magnanimous ...

ללכת בכל דרכיו. אלו דרכי הקב"ה שני' [שמות לד] ה'
ה' אל רחום וחנוך ארץ אפים ורב חסד ואמת נוצר חסד
לאלפי' נושא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה...

מה המקום נקרא רחום וחנוך אף אתה הוי רחום וחנוך
ועשה מתנת חנם לכל. מה הקב"ה נקרא צדיק שני'
(תהלים קמה) "צדיק ה' בכל דרכיו" אף אתה הוי צדיק.
הקב"ה נקרא חסיד שנאמר וחסיד בכל מעשיו אף
אתה הוי חסיד...

The following story illustrates just to what extent a great rabbi understood the obligation to “emulate God”:

Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky (1886-1976) was a Torah scholar and sage of great prominence and stature. After an operation, Rabbi Abramsky used to take a daily walk through his neighborhood in Jerusalem to regain his strength, and the neighborhood children would often follow him. One day, Rabbi Abramsky noticed a five-year-old girl sitting on the grass, crying. He bent over and asked, “Why are you crying?”

“Because Miriam said that my dress is not nice,” the girl said, and started crying again.

“What is your name?” Rabbi Abramsky asked.

“Shoshana,” she answered softly.

Rabbi Abramsky looked at her and said firmly, “Tell your friend that the Rabbi said that your name is beautiful and your dress is beautiful.”

The little girl ran off happily, having been complimented by the great rabbi. The children who witnessed this event were astounded. Rabbi Abramsky had always been known for his stern demeanor, which commanded respect,

reverence, even awe. It seemed out of character for him even to notice the child, let alone stop and become involved with her trivial problem.

A few days later, someone asked Rabbi Abramsky why he had stopped to engage the little girl in conversation. He replied, “The Sages tell us that we should imitate Hashem; just as He is kind and considerate, so should we be kind and considerate. The prophet says, ‘May Lord, God, wipe away tears from every face’ (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 25:8). Why does the verse stress ‘every’ face? Because,” he concluded, “it refers to removing the tears even from the face of a little five-year-old child” (Rabbi Paysach Krohn, *Along the Maggid’s Journey*, page 106).

Kindness does not constitute the entirety of one’s character. Every individual’s personality is made up of numerous traits, attributes, and tendencies. The word for character traits is *middot*, which also means “measurements.” This teaches us that we must *measure* each of our traits and ensure that we are using it to the correct degree. How do we know what is the correct measure of each attribute?

5. **Rambam, Hilchot De’ot (Laws of Conduct) 1:4-5 – The source of the Golden Mean (the middle path).**

The right way is the middle path in each of a person’s dispositions; meaning that disposition which is equidistant between the two extremes, so that it is not nearer to one than to the other. The early Sages therefore recommended that one should always keep evaluating his dispositions, calculating and directing them into the middle path, so that he may be perfect in his bodily constitution.

What does this mean? One should not become enraged and easily angered, but neither be like a dead man without any feeling; but he should follow the middle path, only becoming angry over a matter which is appropriate to become angry over. This approach will prevent him from reacting the same way on a different occasion. Likewise, he should not crave foods other than those required for his health, and without which he would be unable to live ...

Similarly, he should work only to attain what he needs ... he should not be frivolous, nor melancholic and depressed, but content; and he should live tranquilly and with a happy expression on his face. This should be the guideline for all other character traits. This way is the way of the wise; every person whose dispositions follow the middle path is termed “wise” ...

This approach of following the middle path in each of our dispositions is an obligation, and this is the intention of the verse, “You shall walk in His ways” (Devarim 28:9).

הדרך הישרה היא מדה בינונית שבכל דעה ודעה מכל הדעות שיש לו לאדם והיא הדעה שהיא רחוקה משתי הקצוות ריחוק שווה ואינה קרובה לא לזו ולא לזו לפיכך צוו חכמים הראשונים שיהא אדם שם דעותיו תמיד ומשער אותם ומכוין אותם בדרך האמצעית כדי שיהא שלם בגופו.

כיצד לא יהא בעל חמה נוח לכעוס ולא כמת שאינו מרגיש אלא בינוני לא יכעוס אלא על דבר גדול וראוי לכעוס עליו כדי שלא יעשה כיוצא בו פעם אחרת וכן לא יתאוה אלא לדברים שהגוף צריך להן ואי אפשר להיות בזולתן ...

וכן לא יהיה עמל בעסקו אלא להשיג דבר שצריך לו לחיי שעה ... ולא יהא מהולל ושוחק ולא עצב ואונן אלא שמח כל ימיו בנחת בסבר פנים יפות וכן שאר דעותיו ודרך זו היא דרך החכמים כל אדם שדעותיו דעות בינוניות ממוצעות נקרא חכם ...

...ומצווין אנו ללכת בדרכים האלו הבינונים והם הדרכים הטובים והישרים שנאמר “והלכת בדרכיו”.

Thus, the Rambam describes following the “Golden Mean” as another component of the obligation to emulate God and learn from His ways.

Sometimes, the requirement to follow the ways of God adds another dimension to behaviors that we are already supposed to adhere to. For instance, the Torah prohibits lying, but there are certain situations when that prohibition does not apply. Nevertheless, the requirement to emulate God obligates us to refrain from uttering falsehood even when it is not technically forbidden.

6. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Notations from the Vaad (4-5), p. 153 – Clinging to truth in following the ways of God.**

Concerning the attribute of truth, we find in the writings of Rabbeinu Yonah (Pirkei Avot, end of Chapter 1) that “one must walk in the ways of God, which are all true, as it is written, “You shall walk in His ways” (Devarim 28:9). The Sages therefore taught that one should be wary of speaking a falsehood even in the most trivial matters ... For one who becomes accustomed to speaking falsehoods in matters that neither cause him benefit nor detriment, will eventually come to lie concerning important matters, and he will not be able to speak the truth since he has become accustomed to speaking falsehood.

I.e., even when there is no proscription on lying, nonetheless the obligation of “walking in His ways” requires a person to refrain from anything that contravenes the attribute of truth.

כתב רבינו יונה ז"ל בפירושו למסכת אבות סוף פ"ק
לגבי מדת האמת דצריך ללכת בדרכי הקב"ה אמת
שנאמר והלכת בדרכיו ואמרו חז"ל שאפילו ספור
דברים בעלמא אין לו לאדם לשקר ... כי המרגיל לשונו
לדבר שקר בדבר שאין בה לא הפסד ולא תועלת גם
כי יבא לדבר דברים של עיקר לא יוכל לומר האמת כי
פיהו המדבר וההרגל שולט עליו עכ"ד

כלומר דאפי' בדבר שאין בו משום איסור שקר מ"מ
משום מצות והלכת בדרכיו צריך האדם להימנע מכל
דבר המהווה סתירה למידת האמת.

PART B. STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

The achievement of Godliness is not merely another path to greatness; it is an essential part of the Divine plan for mankind and the world. As Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto explains, although God has no need for humanity, He created us in order for us to benefit from His inherent goodness. The way to merit this goodness is to emulate the perfection of God. By moving closer to perfection, we are better able to attach ourselves to the ultimate Perfection, and to bask for eternity in His infinite goodness.

1. **Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Derech Hashem (The Way of God) 1:2:1, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translation, Feldheim Publishers – The purpose of Creation: allowing man an attachment to God's perfection.**

God's purpose in Creation was to bestow of His good to another. God alone is true perfection, free of all deficiency, and there is no perfection comparable to Him. ...

This is also true in another way. True good exists only in God. His wisdom therefore decreed that the nature of this true benefaction be His giving created things the opportunity to attach

הנה התכלית בבריאה היה להטיב מטובו ית' לזולתו
והנה תראה, כי הוא לבדו ית' ש השלימות האמיתית
המשולל מכל החסרונות, ואין שלימות אחר כמוהו
כלל. ...

והנה מצד אחר, הטוב הזה אי אפשר שימצא אלא בו,
על כן גזרה חכמתו שמציאות ההטבה האמיתית הזאת
יהיה במה שייתן מקום לברואים לשיתדבקו בו ית',

themselves to Him to the greatest degree possible.

Therefore, even though created things cannot emulate God's perfection in their own right, the fact that they can be attached to Him allows them to partake of it, since they can be considered part of God's perfection as a result of their association with Him. They can thus derive pleasure from that true good to the greatest degree possible for them.

The purpose of all that was created was therefore to bring into existence a creature who could derive pleasure from God's own good, in a way that would be possible for it.

באותו השיעור שאפשר להם שיתדבקו.

ואז נמצא שמה שמצד עצמם אי אפשר שיתוארו בשלימות כשלימותו ית', הנה מצד התדבקם בו, יגיע להם באותו השיעור שאפשר ליתאר בשלימות ההוא ית', מצד היותם מתדבקים בו, וימצאו נהנים בטובה האמיתית ההיא, בערך שאפשר להם ליהנות בה.

ונמצא היות כונתו ית"ש בבריאה שברא, לברוא מי שיהיה נהנה בטובו ית' באותו הדרך שאפשר שיהנה בו:

The purpose of the creation of mankind, then, is for human beings to achieve perfection, to the best of their abilities, by cleaving to God, Who is the ultimate source of perfection. And because God is the source of all perfection, we must look to what we know about God in order to understand what perfection really is.

2. **Ibid., 1:2:2 – A human being must strive for the type of perfection that resembles the perfection of God.**

God's wisdom, however, decreed that for such good to be perfect, the one enjoying it must be its master. He must be one who has earned it for himself, and not one associated with it accidentally.

In a way, this can be said to partially resemble God's own perfection, at least to the degree that this is possible. God is perfect because of His intrinsic nature, and not because of any external attribute. His true essence makes perfection imperative and precludes any fault.

ואולם גזרה חכמתו, שלהיות הטוב שלם, ראוי שיהיה הנהנה בו בעל הטוב ההוא. פירוש - מי שיקנה הטוב בעצמו, ולא מי שיתלוה לו הטוב בדרך מקרה.

ותראה שזה נקרא קצת התדמות, בשיעור שאפשר, אל שלימותו ית'. כי הנה הוא ית"ש שלם בעצמו, ולא במקרה, אלא מצד אמתת ענינו מוכרח בו השלימות ומשוללים ממנו החסרונות בהכרח..

3. **Ibid. – The world was created with elements of perfection and deficiency and God gave man access to both through free will.**

No other being can have such a quality, where its essential nature requires its perfection and precludes all deficiency. Nevertheless, in order to resemble God to some degree, it is at least necessary that this creature himself [from his free-will] earn for himself the perfection that its essence does not require, and remove from his own choices the deficiencies that its nature does not preclude.

ואולם זה אי אפשר שימצא בזולתו, שיהיה אמתתו מוכרחת לו השלימות ומעדרת ממנו החסרונות. אך להתדמות לזה במקצת צריך שלפחות יהיה הוא הקונה השלימות שאין אמתת ענינו מוכרח לו, ויהיה הוא מעדיר מעצמו החסרונות שהיו אפשריים

God therefore decreed and arranged the creation of concepts of both perfection and deficiency, as well as a creature with equal access to both. This creature would then be given the means to earn perfection and avoid deficiency.

Having accomplished this, the creature could then be said to have made itself resemble its Creator, at least to the degree that this is possible. As a result, it is then worthy of being drawn close to Him and deriving pleasure from His Truth.

על כן גזר וסידר שיבראו עניני שלימות ועניני חסרון,
ותברא בריה שיהיה בה האפשרות לשני הענינים,
ויותנו לבריה הזאת אמצעיים שעל ידם תקנה לעצמה
את השלימות ותעדיר ממנה את החסרונות,

ואז יקרא שנתדמית במה שהיה אפשר לה לבוראה,
ותהיה ראויה לידבק בו ולהנות בטובו:

God's essence is perfect. Man's essence is imperfect. However, the closest thing we have in our essence that resembles God is our free will, which enables us to choose good.

4. **Ibid., 1:2:3 – The nature of perfection is one's attachment to God, for all perfection stems from Him.**

In order to understand this, one must realize that true perfection is God's essence. Every fault is merely the absence of His good and the concealment of His presence. The closeness of God and illumination of His presence is therefore the root and cause of every perfection that exists. The concealment of His presence, on the other hand, is the root and cause of every fault, the degree of deficiency depending on the degree of this concealment.

This creature then stands balanced between perfection and deficiency, which in turn are the result of this illumination or concealment. When he grasps elements of perfection and makes them his inner gains, he actually grasps Him (blessed be His name), as He is their Root and Source. The more elements of perfection he gains, the greater becomes his grasp and bond of closeness to Him. Finally, as he attains the goal of earning perfection, he thereby attains the goal of an ultimate grasp and bond of perfection to Him, and he thus becomes attached to Him, deriving both pleasure and perfection from His goodness, while he is himself the master of his own good and perfection.

והנה תראה כי השלימות האמיתי הנה הוא מציאותו
ית', וכל חסרון אינו אלא העלם טובו ית' והסתר פניו.
ונמצא שהארת פניו ית' וקרבתו תהיה השורש והסבה
לכל שלימות שיהיה. והסתר פניו השורש והסבה לכל
חסרון, אשר כשיעור ההסתר כך יהיה שיעור החסרון
הנמשך ממנו.

ועל כן הנברא הזה העומד בשיקול בין השלימות
והחסרונות, שהם תולדות ההארה וההסתר, בהתחזקו
בשלימות והקנותם אותם בעצמו, הנה הוא אוחז
בו ית' שהוא השרש והמקור להם. וכפי מה שירבה
בשלימות כך הוא מרבה האחיזה וההתדבקות בו, עד
שבהגיעו אל תכלית קניית השלימות, הנה הוא מגיע
אל תכלית האחיזה וההתדבקות בו ית', ונמצא מתדבק
בו ית' ונהנה בטובו ומשתלם בו, והוא עצמו בעל טובו
ושלימותו:

What is a realistic goal in our quest for perfection?

5. **Dr. Joshua Mark, *The Power of the Positive*, Targum Press – Differentiating between healthy and excessive perfectionism.**

Perfectionism has gotten a bad name. Popular self-help gurus say that striving for perfection is unhealthy. We are warned to “take it easy,” “be cool,” and “don’t worry; be happy.” Anti-perfectionism has become so popular that it’s a wonder society still functions. I often wonder how the peddlers of mediocrity would respond if a neurosurgeon or a car mechanic decided that perfection was no longer worth it!

The truth is, of course, that there is much room for perfection. We all value a job well done. To dismiss the effort toward perfection is to deny ourselves one of the great pleasures of life. On the other hand, the desire for excessive levels of perfection can be deadly. Since perfectionists have exaggerated superstitions about failure, they avoid anything that will take them to growth and success. Failure and imperfection are so threatening that they would rather not take risks. Of course, without risk-taking there can be no achievement. Failure to achieve leads to demoralization. Despair and depression quickly follow ...

So what’s the difference between healthy perfection and excessive perfectionism?

An excessive perfectionist sets standards beyond reach and reason, whereas a healthy perfectionist sets high standards, but still within reach. An excessive perfectionist is never satisfied by anything less than perfection, while a healthy perfectionist enjoys the journey to the goal as well as the outcome. An excessive perfectionist becomes dysfunctionally depressed when he or she experiences failure and disappointment, while a healthy perfectionist bounces back from failure and disappointment quickly and with energy.

How can we strike a balance between healthy striving for excellence and excessive perfectionism? In my own experience, it is most sensible to select no more than two areas for perfection. Look at your life and what is important to you □ study, community projects, prayer, relationships, charity, and career are all examples of areas you can choose to excel in.

The following is an example of an entire community that recognized the importance of emulating Divine qualities:

With their plane delayed, 500 El Al passengers were stranded in JFK airport. Trouble began for passengers on the 002 El Al flight to Israel almost immediately after they boarded their plane at 7 p.m. last night. A heavy snowstorm blanketed the east coast, grounding air traffic to a standstill. The flight was continuously delayed and when El Al finally decided to cancel the flight, the airport had closed and the runway had iced over. Passengers were forced to stay on the airplane until 3 a.m. By the time passengers managed to disembark, they, along with another El Al flight that had been delayed, faced another hurdle.

As the night turned to day, El Al attempted to get sandwiches to the passengers but the truck got snowed in. It had been a particularly long night for Rabbi Benzion Klatzko. Leaving Monsey at 6 on Sunday night to make his 11 p.m. flight, Rabbi Klatzko made it to the airport at about the same time the passengers of El Al flight 002 were allowed off the plane. Rabbi Klatzko, the national director of outreach for the HW Foundation, was running a trip for Jewish college students. Altogether, over 200 of the passengers were visiting Israel as part of various Israel experience programs. The delays and lack of food were having an effect on the trip participants.

“It was pretty brutal and some of these kids were even speaking about pulling out of the trips,” Rabbi Klatzko explained. Most of the college students were hungry and exhausted. Rabbi Klatzko decided to try to contact members of the local Five Towns and Far Rockaway Jewish community to see if they’d be willing to help provide some food for

the passengers. He turned to a website he runs as a hobby, *Shabbat.com*, a social networking site where people can sign up to be hosted for weekends at Jewish families. Many of the host families come from the Five Towns and Far Rockaway and Rabbi Klatzko sent out a few emails alerting the community about the plight of the passengers.

“If they’re hosts for students on Shabbat, they’re going to be giving people,” Rabbi Klatzko said. “This is something important perhaps people would get involved in.” Even then, he wasn’t expecting what happened next. “The response was an avalanche,” he said. “There’s no other way to explain it.” Within hours, the email had spread throughout the community. Announcements were made in local shuls and store owners heard about it. By noon, the once kosherless airport was filled with hundreds of bagels, 15 dozen doughnuts, 50 pies of pizza, multiple trays of fish, meat and close to a thousand cans of soda all donated by community members and local supermarkets Brachs, Supersol, and Gourmet Glatt. People even drove into the airport to ferry passengers back to their houses to shower and sleep.

Yanky Brach, owner of Brach’s supermarket, said he found out about the passengers through the first customer in the store. He was picking up crates of candy for the passengers. “The first customer of the day wasn’t even there for himself,” Brach said. “He was there doing a mitzvah.” Brach himself drove out to the airport to deliver hundreds of bagels along with 15 pounds of cream cheese, tuna, crates of Tam Tams, and other products. Gratitude for the delivery went both ways. “I think I got a two and half thank you’s from everyone,” he said. Rabbi Berel Wolowik who runs the deli department at Gourmet Glatt, said that people driving to the airport got stuck in the store’s parking lot while picking up supplies, but that didn’t stop them. “It was amazing to see how many people were ready to jump out in the treacherous weather.” said Rabbi Wolowik.

Adam Sweet, 23, of Toronto was on the second leg of his journey when the plane got stuck, but wasn’t too unhappy about it. “I feel like this experience and seeing the generosity made my trip better than had we made it to Israel without any delays,” he said.

Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, of the Young Israel of Lawrence-Cedarhurst, who helped organize the delivery said this was part of what makes the community special. “People have a sensitivity to other people and they want to give and help ... This embodies what chesed is – it doesn’t get much closer to pure chesed than people stranded without much to eat nor a place to stay.”

Oceanside-resident Keith Rosenblum, 22, was also on his way to Israel when the plane was delayed. “I’ve never been so impressed in my life,” he said about the delivery. “The roads are bad; it’s impossible to drive, [but] the Jewish community comes together in such an amazing way.” Arthur Lavitt of Lawrence was traveling with his wife, Phoebe, to attend his granddaughter’s bat mitzvah. “The Five Towns came through with enough food to feed 500 plus travelers,” he said. “Thank God for making Jews that care.”

There is an unexpected epilogue that underscores the impact of this event. One of the JFK snowstorm survival students was eating a Shabbat dinner with a family in Jerusalem before her flight home after three weeks in Israel. “What was the favorite part of your trip to Israel?” someone asked her. “Was it climbing Masada at sunset? Visiting the Western Wall? Jeeping in the Judean desert? Studying Jewish philosophy? Shopping in the bustling Jerusalem market, Machane Yehudah?”

She thought for a moment. “It was being invited to a family in New York to rest, wash-up and eat something after sitting on the plane for several hours and not taking-off. I was exhausted, and the family didn’t know me at all – they just welcomed me into their home and took care of me. That was amazing. It will remain with me forever.”

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ∞ The ultimate role model to guide our personal growth is God Himself. There is a commandment in both the Torah and the Prophets to emulate God and follow in His ways.
- ∞ The ways of God include performing acts of kindness for others. Thus, one way to emulate God is to engage in the performance of kindness and charity.
- ∞ One of the ways of achieving perfection is to strive to achieve a balance in the use of every character trait. A person should always seek to strike a balance, not veering too far toward either extreme.
- ∞ The requirement to emulate God sometimes obligates us to go beyond the letter of the law and refrain even from actions that are not technically prohibited, but are still not Godly.
- ∞ The Divine plan for the world is the creation of a creature that could achieve perfection by emulating God. In fact, perfection means attaching oneself to God. Even though man cannot hope to achieve the level of complete perfection that God possesses, we must learn the nature of perfection from God. Perfection is something that we build through our own actions and choices. When we choose to refine our characters, we bring ourselves closer to God and merit a connection with Him.

CLASS SUMMARY:

HOW DOES PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH, EMBRACED BY MANY SOCIETIES, PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN JUDAISM?

Personal growth is an imperative of Judaism. In fact, according to many commentators, improving our character traits is a prerequisite to any spiritual accomplishment. The requirement to work on character improvement is part of the Torah's injunction to emulate the ways of God. Furthermore, God put us in the world in order to attain perfection and thereby be worthy of His goodness – and perfection can be attained only by attaching ourselves to the Divine.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT THE JEWISH APPROACH TO PERSONAL GROWTH?

1) Jewish principles of personal growth are rooted in the Divinely given Torah, in contrast to secular wisdom; 2) the mitzvot were given by God to the entire Jewish nation to achieve character perfection; 3) mitzvah observance requires self-control, which is at the heart of all personal growth; 4) teshuvah enables us to correct our mistakes, regain our lost potential, and reconcile our relationships with our fellow man and with God; 5) we are given Divinely orchestrated opportunities and challenges (hashgachah pratit) to help us reach our potential; 6) prayer plays a central role in our personal growth by enabling us to communicate with God and helps us to evaluate our attributes and actions; 7) Torah study leads to personal perfection, and the study of mussar is especially helpful; 8) Torah study not only helps us to refine our character, it can catalyze a lifetime journey of progressively developing our spirituality ; and 9) emulating the attributes of God is our ultimate guide for personal growth.

IN WHICH AREAS IS A PERSON EXPECTED TO ACHIEVE PERSONAL GROWTH?

Personal growth takes many forms in Judaism. A person should develop the habit of engaging in acts of kindness and altruism toward others. One should also endeavor to achieve the proper balance with regard to all of one's character traits. Furthermore, self-improvement includes refining and purifying one's motivations when engaged in the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvot.

WHO IS THE ULTIMATE ROLE MODEL TO GUIDE OUR PERSONAL GROWTH?

The Torah instructs us “ללכת בכל דרכיו”, to emulate the ways of God. Clearly, we are not expected to become “like God” in the literal sense, since God is far beyond our comprehension and we are mere mortals. Nevertheless, in His interaction with the world, God has revealed to us which character traits we should adopt in order to achieve the ideal of emulating Him. Since God has demonstrated the traits of kindness and compassion in His treatment of human beings, we should learn from Him to inculcate those traits within ourselves. The obligation to follow the ways of God also requires us to practice truthfulness and honesty even to a degree beyond the letter of the law.

WHAT IS THE IDEAL TO STRIVE FOR IN OUR PERSONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT?

God created us and placed us in the world in order to achieve perfection. This is how we can realize our potential! Since God Himself is the Source of all perfection, a human being is considered to have achieved perfection to the extent that he has succeeded in attaching himself to God. This is accomplished by learning from the ways of God and emulating them. We strive to be a healthy perfectionist, setting high standards, but still within reach, in contrast to an excessive perfectionist setting standards beyond reach and reason.