

In The Footsteps of Avraham Avinu: The Process of Change in the Attainment of Teshuva

During the season leading up to the Yamim Noraim, there is much focus on teshuva and change. On a basic level, each of us are called upon to take an accounting of where we stand in our observance and faith, and to commit ourselves to fewer sins and greater merits in the year ahead. On a deeper and more holistic level, we are encouraged during this season of teshuva to shed whatever brings each of us down, so that we may actualize the potential that lies within. Whether this means stepping up to a role of leadership in our communities and our families, or even just taking the reins of our own lives, transformation in Tishrei is about recognizing what each of us is capable of, and settling for nothing less.

The Halachic Calendar: The Inherent Dilemma about Behavioral Change

The very nature of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur season illustrates an interesting conflict with regard to the Torah approach to change. We ask ourselves: What can I take on? What can I do better? What must I atone for, and determine to do differently in the coming year? When we stand in individual and collective prayer, saying *s'lach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper*



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lanu — forgive us, absolve us, grant us atonement — we are beseeching God and also ourselves. With those words, each of us proclaims, “I fully intend to be a reformed person in the new year. Please God, consider me not as the person I am, but as the person I want to be.”

And yet we know that each year we stand in shul with the changes we intended to make last year at least partially unfulfilled. While we are sincere in our desire for *teshuva sheleima*, complete or perfect teshuva, we also acknowledge that there will always be more work for us to do. The message here, we believe, is that change is inherent in Judaism. The very fact that there is a system of teshuva, and that there is this very specific time period built into our calendar every year, tells us that teshuva is meant to be a process that is life-long, never quite complete.

In the following pages, we will examine modern-day psychology’s view on behavioral change and personal transformation, and how it conforms with the Torah’s framework for change. To that end, we will analyze the narrative of one of the most transformational leaders in our nation’s history, Avraham Avinu. Avraham was a leader who underwent significant personal change in order to accomplish tremendous goals. Transforming himself from a passive observer to a leader of his family, and ultimately his nation, Avraham introduced a whole new philosophy into the world. His road to these changes was complex and deep, and was marked by a constant interplay of divine revelation and intentional behavioral change. While Avraham certainly possessed personal qualities that made him uniquely suited to this incredible responsibility, it is our belief that Avraham’s story reveals

universal truths about the path to change, which are teachable examples for us all.

The Transtheoretical Model of Change: Change in Stages

Also known as “stages of change,” the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) describes a process involving progress through a series of stages (Prochaska and Velicer). Developed by Prochaska and Di Clemente in 1977, this model delineates six discrete stages that make up the complete experience of individual change. Those are: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination.

In the precontemplation stage, an individual is not yet ready for change, and is not yet thinking about a particular change as part of his or her future. This person may be unaware that his or her behavior is problematic, and is not intending to take action in the foreseeable future. In the next stage, contemplation, we begin to see the precursors of movement. Individuals in this stage are beginning to recognize that their behavior

is problematic, and are starting to look at the pros and cons of their current actions. We can think of these individuals as on the cusp, getting ready to activate a transformation in the near future.

Once an individual arrives at the preparation stage, he or she is ready. He is intending to take action in the immediate future, and may begin taking small steps toward behavioral change. These early, incremental first steps may be small, but their impact is large. They help propel this individual into the next stage, which is action. Individuals in the action stage are making specific, overt modifications to their behaviors. When these changes are made and sustained for at least six months, we consider this individual in the maintenance stage. He may now shift his attention to working to prevent relapse. Finally, the termination stage is reached when an individual has no residual temptation and is sure that he will not return to his old unhealthy ways.

Often when we think of change, we think only of the end product, focusing all our attention on the

visible results. This conception of change is ill advised. In fact, change tends not to occur in a vacuum. Rarely if ever do we experience a singular flash of inspiration that then spurs a transformation that stands the test of time. Real change is built in stages and arrived at slowly. And in fact, even thinking about and engaging with the possibility of change is a step in the process which, if we stay on course, can ultimately bring us to achieve our goals.

The story of Avraham is no exception. Looking at the narrative presented to us in Tanach, it is easy to hone in on a few blockbuster events and be fooled into thinking that they alone were responsible for Avraham’s growth as a leader. Hashem tells Avraham (Bereishit 12:1), “*lech lecha*” — go forth (to the Land which I will show you) — and Avraham goes, leaving behind his old life. But in fact, those “*lech lecha*” moments are pieces of a far vaster story. Those moments of divine intervention were there, and surely they were significant in their impact, but they were preceded by, and precursors of, behavioral changes that Avraham made. Examining the



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narrative more closely, it is clear that Avraham's transformation was not instantaneous and did not stem from a single source. Just the contrary. Avraham grew into the leader he was via change that was slow, developmental, and transactional.

The Rambam in *Hilchot Avodat Kochavim* 1:3 paints a rich story of Avraham's path to the point of "*lech lecha*." Avraham began to question the status quo in Terach's house very early on. At a young age, Avraham realized that it did not make sense to worship idols, and began looking for a master of the universe.

According to the *Midrash HaGadol* 11:28, he first believed that it was the sun, only to realize that the sun sets and the moon comes out. Following that thought process, he began to disqualify every tangible source of power that he could conceive of, ultimately concluding that there is one Supreme Being who must have created all the others.

In *Bereshit Rabba* (*Parshat Noach*, parsha 30) there is a disagreement regarding Avraham's age when he discovered Hashem:

רבי לוי בשם ריש לקיש אמר בן ג' שנים הכיר אברהם את בוראו וכו' ר' חנינא ור' יוחנן תרוויהו אמרין בן ארבעים וח' שנה הכיר אברהם את בוראו.

R. Levi said in the name of Reish Lakish, Avraham was 3 years old when he recognized his creator ... R. Chanina and R. Yochanan say that Avraham was 48 years old when he recognized his creator.

There seems to be a dispute as to whether Avraham was 3 or 48 when he recognized HaShem. Which one is it? The *Kesef Mishneh* (who notes that Rambam's version of the midrash is 40 rather than 48) solves the dilemma by stating that it can be both:

והגהות כתבו בשם הרמ"ך שאפשר לקיים זה וזה דבן שלש שנים היה כשהתחיל לחשוב ולשוטט במחשבתו להכיר בוראו אבל כשהיה בן ארבעים השלים להכירו. ורבינו כתב העיקר שהוא גמר ההיכרא דהיינו כשהיה בן ארבעים. *In the glosses, it is written in the name of Ramach that it is possible to maintain both opinions. He was 3 years old when he began to think and contemplate how to recognize his creator but when he turned 40, he completed his quest. [Rambam] wrote 40, which is the most important age because it is when he completed his recognition.*

Kesef Mishneh, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:3

Put in psychological terms, Avraham spent his early years in contemplation, and arrived at a state of readiness when he took action. Avraham began teaching and inspiring others, transforming himself into a leader within his community.

Consistent Action as a Linchpin for Lasting Change

After many years spent in contemplation of change, it is telling that a major boost in transformation came after Avraham's "*lech lecha*" moment. Cognitive behavioral principles instruct that our feelings result from our thoughts and behaviors. Whereas we often think that it is our emotions that drive our behavior (I am not comfortable leading, and therefore I don't act as a leader), cognitive behavioral psychology explains that it is actually our behaviors that perpetuate our emotional state (because I do not rise to lead, I do not think of myself as "leadership material"). As such, in order to bring about emotional transformation, one must start with simple behavioral change. More specifically, in order to achieve real

transformation, one must begin to act not as he presently is, but as he wishes to be. (Deacon and Abramowitz, 2004)

Looking at the story of Avraham, change in action and change in perception went hand in hand. Avraham spent many years thinking about God, but his transformation was largely confined to his personal internal experience. This all changed when Avraham took overt behavioral steps, signaling that he was ready for more pervasive transformation. When Avraham took action in Terach's house, when he forcibly showed his family that idol worship is foolish, that is when we start to see Avraham acting as the leader that we now know him to be. In order to solidify his transformation, Avraham had to leave his home, change his environment and act in a way that was conducive to his new mission. And in fact, it was after making these tangible changes, that the pace of Avraham's transformation increased even more. Avraham really starts hearing from God, with God telling him "*lech lecha*," commanding him to act again. Now, Avraham is no longer just thinking or talking about God. Now he is acting in accordance with God's word, actualizing the character that God intended him to be.

The actions required to make change happen can be small, but they need to be meaningful and consistent, realistic and specific. They need to coalesce to create an environment that is conducive to the change being sought. In doing so, they set the wheels in motion, driving the individual into the action stage, where the bulk of his transformation will occur. The same applies to the process of teshuva or personal growth. One must set

realistic spiritual goals, paired with specific behavioral changes that will bring him to attainment. Whether it be by setting up a chavruta, joining an online learning community or changing one's schedule to allow for davening, an individual seeking spiritual growth must set up his environment so that it is conducive to reinforcing this change.

Change as Commitment

In the Transtheoretical Model, the last and final stage of behavioral change is that of maintenance. In order for change to be long lasting, one must commit to a new habit to replace the old. In some ways, this stage can be the most challenging. After the early excitement of achieving one's goals begins to wane, maintenance requires unyielding diligence and ongoing commitment. In this regard too, we can learn from Avraham. As discussed by Rabbi Baruch Simon in his shiur "Change/Commitment in Avodas Hashem," the Gemarah in *Berachot* states that one who sets up a *makom kavua*, a set place to pray, is going to be protected by the G-d of Avraham.

אמר רבי חלבו אמר רב הונא: כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו - אלקי אברהם בעזרו. וכשמת - אומרים לו: אי עניו, אי חסיד, מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו!

R. Chelbo said in the name of R. Huna: Anyone who sets a place to pray has the G-d of Avraham in his midst. And when he dies, we say to him, what a humble person, what a pious person. He is a student of Avraham Avinu.

Berachot 6b

The Gemara indicates that Avraham was known for always davening at the same time, in the same place. This is striking because we have been talking about Avraham as a symbol of change and transformation, not of regularity

or consistency. However, what maintained Avraham's transformation was his commitment to regular and consistent practice. When it comes to our own teshuva, it is our persistent determination to stay the course that will ensure our lasting success. It is when our new behavior becomes one of routine, that we know that it will stick.

Ambivalence in Change

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straight, and one especially valuable aspect of the Transtheoretical Model is the room it leaves for doubt, or fluctuations in our motivation.

Avraham too had moments of doubt. For example, Rabbeinu Bechaya comments that when Avraham got to Canaan, he was hesitant and nervous about building his tent in the middle of the Canaanites.

והכנעני אז בארץ. על דרך הפשט הכנעניים אומה חזקה היו יושבי הארץ ההיא, ולפי שהיה אברהם מפחד מהם הרבה בהיותו עובר בארצם, ע"כ לא היה בונה מזבח עד שבא אל מקום שכס ונראה לו ה' ית'.

And the Canaanite was in the land at that time: The plain meaning of these words is that the Canaanite, a powerful people, dominated that land at that time. Avraham was afraid of them and this is why we did not hear of his building an altar, i.e. preaching his religion, at that time until God appeared to him at Shechem.

Rabbeinu Bechaya, Bereishit 12:6

In telling us of this worry, the Torah seems to highlight the fact that even Avraham Avinu displayed some ambivalence about his ability to fulfill God's plan for him. In fact, even as he was being led by God, Avraham's transformation was gradual, and he continued to seek divine reassurance that he could do what was being asked of him.

God did reassure Avraham, and Avraham followed His command. Following in the word of God, even in the face of his own self-doubt, Avraham created a space for continued divine intervention in his life. What started out as a dance between Avraham and his environment grew into an interaction between Avraham and God. Avraham continued on this transformative path, taking every opportunity that God put before him and using them to propel him to transform himself and his nation.

Avraham's story presents an uplifting model for those of us attempting teshuva. When we hear the first shofar blasts as the month of Elul begins, how motivated are we, really? And how confident are we that we will be able to succeed? In reality, our confidence and motivation will likely wax and wane. Fortunately, seen in the context of the Transtheoretical Model, a temporary failure to progress in change is not an absolute failure. Instead, our ambivalence or hesitation

is an indication that we are presently on an earlier stage than we had thought or hoped.

Intentional Change Theory: Returning to One's Core

In addition to the Transtheoretical Model, there is another theory of change that provides a beautiful supplement to our understanding of this process, particularly as it relates to teshuva. Developed by Richard Boyatzis, Intentional Change Theory centers around the assumption that each of us has a core, or ideal self (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006). Both privately conceptualized and socially influenced, an individual's sense of ideal self results from his own personal vision of who he really is, and who he wants to be. According to this theory, real transformation can occur only when an individual knows what he hopes to accomplish for his future, and has a sense of self efficacy, or a belief that he has the ability to achieve his goals.

Intentional Change Theory states that a person will make lasting changes if he is motivated by the idea that these changes are returning him to who he truly is, at his core. Whereas change that results from fear or avoidance may happen quickly, those changes will not be nearly as long lasting. For example, if I only stopped speeding because I got a ticket, then next week I will likely find myself speeding again. However, change that is not simply reactive, not simply a response to an external punisher, has the potential to be much more meaningful. When a person works toward reaching what he believes is his own core self, he feels excitement and positive energy. This is the ultimate

intrinsic motivation, and leads to long-lasting change that is deeply transformational.

This idea is consistent with our concept of teshuva. Teshuva literally means "to return." Our goal should not be to change who we are entirely, but to actualize each of our own potential. Change does not "stick" if one is trying to be someone else — that is something that is done out of fear or self-hatred, and will not produce healthy, lasting results. Our goal in our pursuit of teshuva is to return to the ideal state that each of us is meant to be.

Again, we see an allusion to this concept in the steps of Avraham's transformation. "*Lech lecha*," literally translated as "go to yourself," can be understood as an instructive to go toward who you are already (*Kli Yakar*, Bereishit 12:1). Avraham's tests were designed by God to elicit the tremendous potential that was always at his core. The Ramban teaches:

(א) והאלקים נסה את אברהם - ענין הנסיון הוא לדעת, בעבור היות מעשה האדם רשות מוחלטת בידו, אם ירצה יעשה ואם לא ירצה לא יעשה, יקרא "נסיון" מצד המנוסה, אבל המנסה יתברך יצוה בו להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל הפועל, להיות לו שכר מעשה טוב לא שכר לב טוב בלבד.

And God tested Avraham: The issue of this test is, in my opinion, shows that a person has the absolute authority to perform an action; one can do what they want, and not do what one doesn't want. It is called a "nissayon" [test] for the individual being tested [e.g., Avraham], but the blessed Tester will command him to bring out the thing from ability to actuality, giving a reward for a good action and not just a reward for a good heart.

Ramban, Bereishit 22:1

Avraham had a sense early on that he was not meant to worship idols with the society around him. He had internal surety about who he was, and who he was meant to be, which spurred him to execute behavioral changes. Much of the change he achieved was about awakening his internal potential.

In Elul, we use the shofar as one tool to wake us up, to bring us back to our core. The powerful last blast of the shofar, in the last moment of the Yom Kippur service, is meant to spur within us a moment of clarity, where each of us is awakened as to who we really are. Our challenge then, is to take that gift of inspiration, take that moment where our potential feels revealed, and turn it into something long lasting. As Avraham did, we must follow that moment of inspiration with behavioral change. In doing so, we set the stage for lasting transformation in the new year.

May this Yamim Noraim season bring each of us many moments of insight. May we take those moments and use them as a catalyst for real behavioral change, so that we may transform our core self into our lived self, in the year to come.

Citations

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