

## Session 5: The System of Growth



*The System of Growth* is essential viewing for anyone reaching for spiritual elevation and character development. Rabbi Shafier explains the centrality of Torah learning and giving some practical advice on how to break our negative *middos*. In this class you will learn how to build your *Olam Haba*-and lead happy, spiritually fulfilling lives in this world as well.

ספר מסילת ישרים - פרק א  
אמנם לכשיזכה האדם לטובה הזאת

### Mesilas Yesharim - Perek 1

For a person to attain this good,

ראוי שיעמול ראשונה וישתדל ביגיעו לקנותה,

it is proper that he first exert himself strenuously to acquire it,

והיינו שישתדל לידבק בו יתברך בכח מעשים שתולדתם זה הענין

to exert himself to cling to the blessed G-d through the power of deeds whose consequence is this end.

והם הם המצות

These deeds are the commandments.

One of the questions that I think is worth asking is, why is there so much emphasis on learning *Torah*, in our religion? Why is there so much energy put into it, why's it so important? We know that *Talmud torah shokul kneged kulam*, you take all of the *mitzvahs*, put them in one side of the scale, put *Torah* on the other, it far outweighs all of them.

And the question is why does Hashem want us to be so involved in learning and especially when many of the things that we're going to learn, have no practical application?

Now clearly most of our learning should be involved in areas that do affect our daily life, our involvement in the world, but certainly in your *Yeshivah* years, a young man will spend maybe years, learning things that have nothing to do with anything.

And even when you become a fully mature adult, even if you're in the world and you're really no matter who you are, there'll be huge, huge segments of *Torah* that you're going to be involved in, that have no connection to your daily life.

And the question is why are they relevant, why does Hashem wants us to do this, why are they so significant?

And to understand this a little bit better, we need to understand what I call the system of growth. What is the actual way that the *Torah* was designed to help us to change us, to make us grow?

And it really has two dimensions to it. Let's start with what I call the first overlay, the basic problem that we, human beings is and that is that Hashem took I, the *neshamah*, that pure soul, put I into a body and this body has its own drives and desires, its own interests and I am ever confused, I am in this sort of getting it and not getting it mode and I'm in this ever sort of mixed up quasi conscious, quasi alert kind of state. I like to think of it almost like general anaesthesia.

Now, I'm not unconscious, I'm not out cold, but I never really feel things, I never really get them and why is that? Because again, housed in this body, having to think through this concrete, slow brain, having to filter things through my mind, through my eyes, through my sense, everything gets distorted, everything is changed and I never really get it, I never really understand it.

If you'd like a *mashal*. Imagine you have a beautiful, very expensive shortwave radio. This is a phenomenal radio, could pick up signals from miles, from hundreds of miles, from different continents, very expensive, very delicate radio. And you even have a fine antenna, but you put the radio and the antenna twenty feet deep in a bunker surrounded by solid concrete, with twenty feet of concrete around every side of this radio, it's not gonna pick up much of the signal.

And no matter how fine it is, and no matter how clear the signal is, it's gonna be staticy, it's going to be unclear.

That's I. I was under the *kisei hakavod* and I understand everything and I got it and I realized the consequences but Hashem put me into this body with layers and layers of heavy physicality and that prevents me from feelings things, prevents me from seeing things. The radio waves just get blocked and when I do feel, comes and goes and I never really got it.

And again that's the first part, the balance. But to understand how it functions, and understand how in fact that balance plays out, we have to analyse it a little bit more.

The *Chovos Halevavos* explains that every animal has a *nefesh*. Every animal has a vibrant life part of it, that part Hashem gave all of the instincts, all of the drives, all of the desires, to keep that animal alive. There is very little *sechel*, very little intelligence but there's a lot of instinct, a lot of drive.

A robin, a robin will naturally hunt the worm. The cat, will naturally hunt the mouse. The cat doesn't think about it, the robin doesn't say well based on the general vulnerability as well as the nutritional balance, I think the earthworm should be my food substance.

It doesn't go through those steps, it instinctively hungers for the worm.

Hashem put into the *nefesh*, into the vibrant life part of the animal, all of the instincts, all of the drives to keep the animal alive. Now the animal has a brain also and you could see animals doing things that clearly show intelligence.

They've studied birds that hide seeds. A bird will hide a seed and it will come back the next season and find the seed. That's not so unusual. They've studied birds that buried twenty five thousand seeds, in twenty five thousand different places, and a season later came back and picked up every one. I can't remember where I left my car keys.

But you see, that's functional intelligence in a very limited mode. There's no desire in the animal other than that which Hashem programmed into it. There's no interest in the animal other than that which is imprinted into its *nefesh*. There's no I, there's no agenda, there's just instincts and drives. And again, a semi-computer, whatever the programming is, some animals far more intelligent, some less. But all it does is serves the function of the drives, the appetites, of that animal.

And sometimes you could see animals doing things that are astonishing and seemingly with great self-sacrifice. The emperor penguin in the Antarctic will stand on ice, holding an egg. The female lays this quite large egg, but the problem is that this egg cannot touch the ice. If the egg touches the ice, it cracks, it will never hatch.

The female lays the egg and gently places it on her feet and she waddles over to the male. The male puts his two feet together, the female gently kind of wobbles that egg onto his feet and then the male has a pouch, that pouch covers the egg and the male stands there. The female will then go hunt. She'll go back into the sea to try to add to her fat stores and by doing that eventually she'll come back with the additional milk supply and she'll be able to feed the young.

Keep in mind, minus forty degrees. Howling wind. Where they are, there's no food. The female has to travel quite a distance, she has to cut open the ice, in that place she goes in and she goes under and begins hunting for her food source. But here's the ironic part, the female will spend weeks and weeks sometimes months, the male stands there in the bitter, frigid cold and you could see thousands of these penguins huddling in the bitter, freezing cold as they sit there wasting away.

The emperor male penguin will lose as much as twenty five percent of his body fat as he waits there. Weeks, months later, the female comes back. The egg hatches and the female is there ready to feed the young.

But here's the point. The emperor penguin doesn't say, hmm I would love to say my *yingele* grow up and go to college, let him become a stock broker. The emperor penguin only knows the instincts, it doesn't know why, it doesn't make a choice, instinctively, wants to stay there, instinctively it craves, desires, keeping that egg warm.

It may very well not know what an egg is. It may never have seen an egg hatch before. But it certainly doesn't think for the weeks and months ahead, when the one little young is going to come out of there. It's an instinct, it's a drive, it's a desire that Hashem put into the animal

kingdom. Every animal was given all of the instincts, drives, to keep itself alive as well as to bring the next generation into existence.

And if you like to see one of the wonders of our G-D's creation, if you'd like to see Hashem's handiwork, study the animal kingdom. Study birds involved in courtships. Study, look out and you'll see a world replete with all of that it needs to exist, to keep alive, to bring along the next generation.

But interestingly enough, the *Chovos Halevavos* explains that Hashem gave you and I just such an animal soul. Parallel to the animal soul in the animal, I have just such an animal soul. Within me are all the instincts, all the drives, to keep myself alive as well as to bring along the next generation.

But you see that's the mix. Part of me is brilliant in understanding, part of me came from under Hashem's throne of glory and all that part wants to do is serve Hashem. All that part wants to do is learn, help others, do what's right and good and proper because that part is brilliant insightful, and only wants to do the right thing.

But I, that part was put into this body. And this body has a *nefesh* and that *nefesh* has instincts, drives and desires that have nothing to do with the other part. But you see it's a mix. Part of me stands there, speaking to my Creator, right there. Part of me only wants to do what's right, good and proper.

Part of me, when I hear the plight of a fellow Jew, says *oy* that's terrible. But there's another half of me, the other half of me couldn't care less. The other half of me says who gives a dime? I don't care. I'm not interested in anyone else but me. My appetites, my hungers, I, me, I.

But it's not I, me, I, in an intelligent form, it's hungers, appetites, just drives, desires. I have both of these functioning within me and a strange part of it is we rarely think about ourselves and we're rarely self- introspective to analyze, but you'll find different voices, different competing forces, different things going on.

However, there's one more part to this. These two parts, they're called the *chelek elokim mimal*, the *nefesh hasichli*, the, we'll call it the *neshamah* part, and the *nefesh habahami* both are fighting for primacy. Each are competing to have their voice listened to and they're ever influx. Much like a muscle, the more you use it, the stronger it becomes and with disuse it atrophies, the more you use either part, the stronger it becomes, the more dominant it becomes, the more it becomes a primary part.

So, for instance if a person uses his *nefesh hasichli* to control the animal soul, the shifts start changing, if it was fifty, fifty, it starts becoming sixty, forty. Maybe it becomes seventy, thirty and his brilliant intelligent *neshamah* comes to the fore, comes much more out there and the *nefesh habahami*, animal soul, has much less sway.

And eventually it becomes stronger and stronger and when you read about *tzaddikim*, when you read about people who reached tremendous levels, you have to understand that they're *nefesh habahami* had very little hold, very little control on them.

But here's the problem: The problem is whichever one you use becomes stronger and all day long, every day, we're using the animal soul. I'm eating, I'm sleeping, I'm busy, whatever I'm doing in this world, operates, helps, fosters, strengthens, the *nefesh habahami*.

So I'm using it all day, every day, and it's getting stronger and stronger and explains the *Chovos Halevavos*, left to his own devices, left as he is, man will become mostly animal and very, very little *neshamah*. He'll become eighty, twenty, ninety, ten but the wrong way.

And to allow us to reverse that trend and allow us to become the opposite, Hashem gave us many, many *mitzvahs*, specifically to teach us, specifically to allow to become stronger, to become more in control and ironically the *Chovos Halevavos* explains, that's the *tam*, the underlying reason of many *mitzvahs*.

What we call *chukim*, a *chok* and people assume that means there was no reason or we can't understand the reason, he explains most of those things are very easily understood.

You take meat and you take milk, milk's kosher, meat's kosher, you put them together and it's no good. You know why? Because it strengthens the *nefesh habahami* it gives an inordinate amount of strength to that part of me, it makes that part more prominent.

Of all the animals that are kosher, none are predators. The *mefarshim*, the *Klei Yakar*, others explain the reason. When you eat the meat, you're ingesting part of the *nefesh*. Most of the *nefesh* isn't there but part is still there. When you ingest the *nefesh* of a predator, you're putting within you that predatory sort of need, desire, you're damaging that delicate balance.

Now how it operates, you have to be a scientist of the soul, you have to understand very, very deeply what strengthens the *nefesh habahami*, what weakens it, what changes the balance. But he explains *shatnez*, he explains forbidden relations. Many, many of the forbidden activities in the *Torah* are specifically because they give an inordinate, a very unique amount of strength to the *nefesh habahami* and therefore the *Torah* warns us against it.

If I engage in the opposite effect, then obviously it strengthens me, but here's the problem. I could avoid things that give the *nefesh habahami* extra strength. I can not eat non kosher food, non kosher food deadens the heart, I won't feel things, I get it. But still I have to use the *nefesh habahami* all day, I'm eating, I'm sleeping, I'm doing, if I'm earning a living I'm doing things that I have to do and I'm doing them all day, so even if I avoid things that give it extra strength, there is very little strengthening the other part of me.

It's true if I do a *chessed* for somebody else, if I think about another Jew's plight and I say I am concerned and I act on it, it's true, I'm doing a holy act and my *nefesh hasichli* is becoming stronger, no question, but how much time in our day do we spend doing that? How much energy are we giving there?

Explains the *Chovos Halevavos*, that's why Hashem gave us a number of *mitzvahs* that are very specific, very powerful nutrients for the *nefesh hasichli*, for the *neshamah*. The single, most powerful nutrient, is *limud hatorah*. Hashem's thoughts if it could be, the most holy, most high, most deep concepts in existence, when I engage in the process of learning, it's spiritual nourishment for my *neshamah*, it's rocket fuel for my soul. It strengthens and invigorates, it's a powerful, powerful nutrient that empowers my *neshamah* and changes the balance the other way.

And even if it has nothing to do with my daily activity or anything to do with the world I live in, it could be *ir hanidachas*, it could be *korbanos*, unfortunately we don't have them now, it could be *ben soreh umoreh*, the *Gemara* says it never happened and it never will happen, but it's Hashem's wisdom, Hashem's thoughts and when I engage in that process, it strengthens the *nefesh*, it makes that part of me, the *sechel*, stronger and the more deeply I learn, the more I get into it, the more the effect.

Why is *Gemara* so demanding, it's not just enough that you learn the *Gemara*, you have to learn *Tosfos*, and not just *Tosfos*, you have to learn the *acharonim* and back and forth, what are you, come on, enough.

The more deeply I delve into it, the more I understand on my level, Hashem's wisdom, the more I'm purifying, the more nutrients I'm adding to my *neshamah*, the holier I become, the more deep I'm involved in it, the more it impacts me.

And one of the greatest activities that a human being can engage in is *limud hatorah*. But there are certain other activities that also have a powerful impact on his *neshamah*. *Davening*, explains the *Mesilas Yesharim*, makes very little sense, you see all of my senses, deny Hashem's presence. I relate to this world with my five sense, I see, I hear, I smell, I touch, I taste. But all of them deny Hashem's presence.

If I'm *davening shmoneh esrei*, everything in my frame of reference, everything in my experience called life, denies Hashem's presence and to *daven* as I'm supposed to, what I have to do is close my eyes and transcend the physical barriers called my physical life. My body.

I have to reach way beyond, reach core understandings, recognize that Hashem is present right here and even though my physical senses, my limited, diminutive senses deny Hashem's presence, I feel, I experience Hashem here.

And doing that, demands transcending physical barriers, demands engaging in a very spiritual activity. Connecting to Hashem, relating to Hashem, rising way above.

Learning is a very spiritual activity, *davenen* is a very spiritual activity and when you do this, what you do is you change the balance. When you engage in these things properly and use them

as they're supposed to be used, you begin changing. You reach a different perspective, instead of fifty, fifty, it's sixty, forty, maybe seventy, thirty and if you spend years and years doing it, you really, really change significantly the balance.

And if you'll say to me okay so but what's the manifestation, how do we recognize it what's the *nafka minah*, what's the difference?

I'll share with you something that I consider profound. Sometimes I hear women commenting about other women's mode of dress and they'll say things like it's not *tznius*, why do they dress so tight and so upset and when a woman says that, sometimes I'm very unimpressed with the woman saying it.

Why? Because if the woman saying it is forty five years of age, and she's commenting about a teenager or a twenty year old and saying, oh these young girls, they dress so *untzinus*, it's so improper, I am very unimpressed.

Why? Because Madam with all due respect, you're in your mid-forties, you don't look now as you did when you were twenty years of age. And it's not a big deal for you now to recognize that there are ways that are appropriate to dress and ways that are inappropriate.

How did you dress, how did you speak when you were twenty years of age? That's the question I'd like to ask.

You see, your perspective changes when you're more mature, when you're in a different stage of life, when you have a different worldview, well guess what, it's very easy to look at things difference. And in that case I happen not to be impressed.

However, if you would like to know one of the great accomplishments of growing in this balance, your perspective on everything in life changes. Every value changes, your currency, what you consider important, what you consider significant changes radically. When you're in a state, most people begin you value things like money and honor and wow, that's so important. But as you change, as you change the balance, it's not just that you change something within you, your entire worldview, your entire value system changes and suddenly you pursue vastly different agendas. You're involved in very different things.

And if you'd like a *mashal* to what I mean, imagine the following:

Imagine you're a young *yeshivah bachur*, we'll make you twenty two years of age and you're friendly with this *bal tshuvah*, an older gentleman he comes to learn in *yeshivah*, he's about sixty five. Now you've heard that he's quite successful, like you know obviously he doesn't know much in learning, and you're very kind to him, you're very nice and once a week you learn with him and he grows, and etc.

Okay, one day he comes to you and he says Shmiel, I'm sixty five, I'm now fully *frum* and I get it. I understand there's nothing in the world as valuable as learning *Torah*, I get it. But here's the problem, I'm just too old, it's not going to happen, I'm not going to make it in learning but I know that in the world to come there's nothing that has that significance, nothing that has that importance and I have a problem, I desperately want to learn, I can't and I was thinking about it, I don't know if you know this but I have been very, very successful during my lifetime, in fact wildly successful, thank G-D I'm extremely wealthy.

And I'd like to make you an offer, I will pay you to learn and you and I will split the reward. I'll pay you handsomely. I'll pay you and you and I will split the reward.

Well, you listen, your ears are open, and you say what do you have in mind? Shmiel, I'll pay you one thousand dollars an hour from now on in, every hour you learn, I'll pay you every hour you learn, we split.

You shake hands, you agree, let's go. Could you imagine the zeal, the energy, you'll start learning, oh my, a thousand dollars, let's go. No coffee breaks, no interruptions, your energy, your enthusiasm will be incredible.

Why? Because a thousand dollars an hour, let's go.

Well here's the point, *Chazal* tell us that any earthly value, pearls, diamonds are nothing. It's a *passuk* David Hamelech says "*pnimin*" gold, fine gold "*paz*" it's all nothing compared to the value of words of *Torah*.

Right now that sure doesn't move me because those are words. But if I start changing my perspective, if my balance starts changing, all of a sudden, wait a minute, oh my goodness, more precious than gold, more precious than fine gold, oh my goodness, let's go. And as that balance changes, your worldview changes and as your balance changes you start valuing things more and your currency changes and everything changes.

Because suddenly you start getting it. And changing that balance is the most significant thing you can do because then at that point everything you value, everything you think about, changes radically.

I used to have a *mussar* exercise that I would use when I was a young *beis medrash* guy. It is difficult to learn and certainly with *hasmadah* with energy, and it requires motivation and it requires enthusiasm. So I used to imagine a little scene, you see I was growing up a little bit

different time and in my day most of the fellows who went to High School with me didn't end up in *Beis Medrash*, most of the guys ended up in college. And I didn't look, certainly in High School like I was the fasttrack for a *Yeshivah Beis Medrash* program, as a matter of fact quite the opposite.

And the first few years of learning, some of my buddies from the old days they used to give me pretty, pretty rough time. And during *mussar seder* I envisioned the following:

I'm sitting in this wood box, almost like a sandbox and I and my *chavrusah* are picking up the contents of the box. The contents of this large sandbox are diamonds. Precious diamonds, two carat, four carats, ten carats, my *chavrusah* picks one up he goes look at this one, I say look at this one, we'll look at this ten carat, we'll look at this flaw, I'll pick this one. And one of my buddies from the old days comes round and says, what are you guys messing with little rocks, look what I got and he picks a big earth stone up, ten pound stone made of stone that he picked up in the ground and he says you guys are wasting your time with the little things, use these big things.

You see the vantage point, the perspective is the key. If I could ever get it, the value of a *mitzvah*, the value of helping another Jew, the value of anything that Hashem commands me is beyond my belief. I don't get it because I'm in this thick body and I'm blocked, but the more I change that balance, the more I come to the fore, the more I realize, the more I understand and the more I value things and ultimately I value a vastly different sort of currency and a vastly different thing.

And for that reason you have to work very intensely on changing that balance and again all the *mitzvahs* in the *Torah* do just that. The *averos* are things that the *Torah* warns us not to do are to

avoid things that give inordinate special strength to the *nefesh habahami* and working on changing this balance is a main part of our *avodah*.

However, even if you're highly successful at changing this balance and even if you get to seventy, thirty, eight, ninety, ten if you don't do specific focus work, you're still going to fail.

Let me share with you what I mean:

When my son *Shalom Aryeh* was about I don't know if he was seven or eight, he used to read these books called animorfs. Animorfs is a science fiction story and part of the story is a yurk, a yurk is a little slug, a yurk would go into your ear and the yurk would take over, it would take over your brain. So basically you might have wanted to go left, but the yurk wants to go right, so you're going right. You want to go forwards but the yurk wants to go backwards, and the yurk makes you go backwards.

Yurk climbs into your brain, takes over your existence.

Okay, my son said to me, Abba, isn't that a great *mashal*, isn't that a great *mashal* to the *Yetzer Hara*. You don't want to do it but the *Yetzer Hara* takes over and you do it. Isn't that a great *mashal*?

So, he was a real little guy so I didn't say it to him then, I told him yeah very good *mashal* but I'd like to share with you that it's a terrible *mashal*, it's a terrible *mashal*. Why? Because you see when the *Yetzer Hara* takes over it's not that he wants to do it and I don't, you see I might have been tempted, I might have been lured, I might have handed the desire, had the desire but at a certain point I said the words yes, I will do it. And when I said the words yes I will do it, I now have made the decision because I have two parts to me.

Part of me doesn't want to do it for the life of me, but part of me really does. I do, I don't, I do, I don't, I do. But I am both of those and when I make the decision that yes, I will, I, the totality of me now have made that decision.

So you see, even if I change the balance, and I get to a point of eighty, twenty, the problem is if I don't work on the specific *middos*, the specific traits, I will be triggered and I will become a different human being.

We've discussed anger. When I get angry, I'm enraged and suddenly my entire value system changes. You see let's assume I got to eighty, twenty, and I'm the kind of person who never says insulting, embarrassing things to another human being, I recognize he's another human being, created in the image of Hashem, how dare I utter such words, I never would, until I get angry. And when I get triggered and suddenly that red lens comes in front of my eyes, suddenly I look at you differently. You're not a *mentch*, you're not a human being, do you know what you deserve?

And suddenly those things that were originally so forbidden, so out of bounds, that I would never engage in them, are appropriate, are proper and again all you have to do is catch yourself the next morning, with that sense of what did I do, what was I thinking.

What I did was I got drunk, I got triggered and at that moment I felt differently. So even if I got to a point of eight, twenty, if I keep this individual trait and don't specifically hone in on it, I'll get triggered, I'll react and I'll do things that I never would do, but when I do them, I have decided to do it, I have now changed and I'm now in a vastly different place than I was a moment ago.

And dealing with this second layer, the individual character traits and preventing the emotional hijacking that occurs has to be done specifically and exactly on the trait.

Now the traits might be anger, it might be arrogance, it might be a desire for wealth, a desire for materialism. It might be plain old desire. All of us have at least one specific area of weakness, that's the way Hashem designed me. Hashem designed each of us with a very specific area, one area of real issue, but all of us have some issue with the various traits, with quite a number of them. And I'll share with you an example.

Some people their real Achilles heel is arrogance, do you know who I am, you know who I am, I'm *chashuv*, I'm big, I'm smart, I'm brilliant. For some people, that's their real weakness and they have to work on it because if they don't work on it, they're toast. Do you know how great I am, I am so great, I don't need, I don't need Hashem, what do you mean ask Hashem, I don't need, I don't need anyone.

And if you allow yourself to become inflated, forget about it, you can't serve Hashem and you'll be a horrible human being and you will have very little in this world and certainly much less in the world to come.

However, it's not many people who really have an issue with arrogance, that that's their main problem. However, all of us have a little bit. *Mesilas Yesharim* says "*rov bnei adam*" most people have an issue of arrogance.

Now you may say me, me what do you mean, not me, I'm not a egoist, I'm not a *bal gavah*, what do you mean me.

And I'll explain to you what I believe the *Acharonim* mean.

Have you ever had a situation where you made a mistake and you realize you were wrong and not only did you realize you were wrong, the other person realized you were wrong and you realize that he realized that you were wrong, but you couldn't admit it.

And why can't you admit it, I made a mistake. I make mistakes, you make, we all make mistakes, that's called being a human being, we all make mistakes.

Yet I couldn't admit the words.

Now I understand if we're fighting, if we're competitors I get it, but he's a friend of mine, maybe it's my spouse. I made an error, an error in judgment, whatever it might be, why can't I utter the words, I was wrong?

And the answer is because I'm not quite humble enough to do that. You see humility means recognizing that I do things well, that I do things that are not so smart, I'm a limited human being with limited capacity, mortal flesh and blood, created by Hashem, put into this temporary thing called life and I really don't have all the wisdom in the world, I really don't know things that deeply and concretely and I make many, many mistakes.

Now those words are very easy for me to say, but to feel them, on an ongoing constant basis so that when you make a mistake you're able to say, yeah I made an error and to be able to say it in front of people you respect and especially when it was a gross error, you'll quickly see it's not so simple and if you don't believe that I'm right, ask a husband, ask a wife, how easy it is to apologize when they know that they were wrong and it's a person they deeply love, they're deeply concerned about and they wronged them and saying the words I apologize, I'm sorry, my lips, my knees tremble, my lips, I can't say the words.

Why not? So the why not is because all of us have areas that we need to work on. And working on the various character traits is something that requires specific work and even if you change the general balance, if you don't work specifically on the trait, you're going to be stymied, but not only are you going to be stymied, you'll be triggered and you'll do things that are so outrageous, so different from the *Torah* wants from you, that you'll destroy yourself.

You see, everything that I do changes me, molds me, makes me into who I'll be forever. Why is *chessed* so central in the *Torah*? It's because Hashem created this world as a *metiv*, Hashem acts, manifests Himself as a giver and the ultimate perfection of the human is to be like Hashem, to be other centered, to be a giver.

But a strange thing happens when you concern yourself with others' needs. It's not just that you're doing a *mitzvah*, not just that you're doing a good thing, I change, you see when I act kindly, I become more kindly.

When I act with compassion I become more compassionate. The more that I act in the way the *Torah* wants me to act, the more I become a fine, caring, sensitive human being. And that's why when I engage in *chessed*, it's wonderful, it's great, but the more I act the other way, well guess what? I'm also changing but not for the good.

When I act, when I act arrogant, when I act with anger, when I act with desire, when I act with whatever my drives are, other than the *Torah*, what I'm doing is I'm shaping myself, I'm molding myself, making myself into the opposite of what the perfection of a human being is.

And all day long I'm acting, all day long I'm thinking, all day long I'm very, very engaged and all day long I'm shaping myself, either into something greater, more perfect, or the opposite. And

any time I act in the selfish self-centered mode, where I say it implicitly or sometimes explicitly, I don't care about you.

Number one I'm not acting nice and I'll hurt your feelings. But number two, I'm damaging me, I'm shaping myself, molding myself into what I'll be forever. And if you don't work on the specific traits, if you don't hone in on a. your major area that is your particular issue and again most or many of the other areas, what's going to happen is, you're going to be involved in these things, you're going to have them flare up and you're going to constantly, constantly be changing yourself to the bad and you'll be constantly ending up in a different place.

And even if you get to the eighty, twenty, but if you have a sense of arrogance within your heart, forget it. Anger, forget it, desire, you're going to do all kinds of things, a need to have the biggest house, the nicest house, the fanciest car, whatever your needs are, if you engage in them, if you think in them, what you're doing is changing you and making yourself into the opposite of what you're supposed to be.

But here's the problem, the problem is okay so how do I work on it? How do I change it. I have a temper, what do I do? I don't want it, but I got it. I don't want to wake up and feel I'm G-D's gift to humanity, but I do. What can I do about it?

So it's rather interesting that the work on each specific area is often the same as the work in the general area. Let me explain what I mean. If you have a temper and you want to solve your anger problem, all you have to do is not get angry. Then you've solved the temper problem.

But I don't mean that therefore you won't get angry, I mean you'll solve the problem. Let me explain what I mean. When I was a young father, I made the discovery that there are two ways to do things, the smart way and not so smart way.

I used to give *shuur* and Sunday we had the birthday parties for the kids and I remember I would kind of play a little bit close, if the party started at we made sure the party started two, I basically got home at one thirty and I had enough time, hopefully to set up the house for what was needed, my wife did most of it, but I, my job was to blow up the balloons.

So I remember clearly, for one of the kids birthdays, I came home at one thirty, and I was a little bit tired to be honest with you, you know giving *shuur*, learning in the morning's challenging, but I came home, a half hour, no problem, and there was the big of fifty balloons that I was to blow up and pin on the wall and have the place ready for the child's birthday party.

And I took the first balloon and I ffff fffff ffff, and I took the second balloon and fffff fffff ff and the third and the fourth. By the fifth I was wow, I got forty five to go, and I made an interesting discovery, that is that if you stretch the balloon before you blow into it, it's a whole lot easier to blow them up. And while that's an interesting tit bit as a young father, I think there's a very important parallel.

You see, anger is measured by frequency, duration and intensity. Frequency means how often you get angry, intensity means how intense, how furious. Duration is how long does it last. But you see it starts like a new balloon. If you've never gotten really, really angry, and it never really lasted that long, it's not so angry to get you angry.

But once you get angry, you kind of like blow that balloon up and it's a whole lot easier to get you angry to that extent the next time and it takes less. And if you got angrier still and you really inflated that balloon, the next time it takes less of a trigger and it's even easier to get you angry to that extent.

And as you blow that balloon up, blow it up, what happens is it becomes easier and easier for you to become frequently, intensely angry and the duration continues because like a balloon, the more you stretch it, the easier it then is to blow it up.

However, unlike a balloon, the *middah* also shrinks. So if someone says the wrong line to you at the wrong time and you manage to hold back and don't get angry, well lo and behold it becomes a little smaller. If you spend two weeks and during that two week period you avoid anything that caused you to get angry, and you make sure to run away, what happens is it shrinks and all you have to do to cure an anger problem is not get angry because as you not get angry it shrinks, it shrinks until it takes a lot more to get you angry and suddenly you're back to the beginning point.

And in that sense, at least in theory, working on anger is simple. Now obviously it's not so simple because he said that, I'm angry, and you have to learn the entire *mussar* system and you have to learn the understandings and the techniques not to get angry, not to allow it to get under your skin and everything that normally causes you to, but in the overall picture, the system is by not getting angry you change and when you change, it takes a lot more to get you angry.

But you see that's really how you work on each of the character traits, each of the *middos*, each of the things that take us away from our purpose in existence and the less often that you get hijacked, the less that has sway on you, the less it has control.

But you have to work directly on that trait and it has to be directly on the desire, directly on arrogance, directly on laziness because if you don't hone in directly on that trait, you're never going to cure it. And I have a little *mashal* that I think well defines this:

If a person says I'm going to grow, I'm going to learn, I'm going to *daven*, I'm going to change that balance, I'm going to get to eighty, eighty, twenty, ninety, ten, and I will succeed, but they don't hone in specifically on the traits, on their issues, I have a *mashal* to what it's like.

Imagine a man who gets drunk and when he gets drunk he often falls and he breaks an arm, he gets a black eye, he's beat up, he looks like a war zone and he says to himself, this is crazy, every time I get drunk I fall on my face, this is absurd and he decides to deal with the issue.

What does he do? He goes to ballet. Ballet teaches you balance, and he works on his balance, so now the next time I get drunk, I'm not going to fall on my face.

Now that's not exactly too clever, why? Because when you're drunk, you're drunk and all your fine balance isn't going to help you and you see that's the point. If I change the balance, but I don't focus directly on the *middah*, at that moment I got drunk with that trait, I got enraged or filled with desire or filled with jealousy, or just so lazy to the core of my essence and at that moment I'm drunk with that feeling and it doesn't matter if my overall balance is ninety, ten or whatever it is, I am going to act at that moment as that person and I'm going to change myself, make it far worse, and again, whether it's anger or arrogance, laziness, materialism, and I'm toast.

And for that reason it has to be both. Now let's not make any mistake, if you change the balance, it does a great thing because suddenly I realize the damage that I do. You see if I change the balance whether it's by learning, by *davening*, by doing *chessed*, by doing the various *mitzvahs* in the *Torah*, and now I get from fifty, fifty to sixty, forty, my value system changes and therefore I realize the damage of arrogance, I recognize the damage of laziness, and because of that now I'm usually motivated to actually address that issue. But I have to address it directly.

And there's another advantage. If I change the balance, then I get to seventy, thirty, I now have the bandwidth to actually apply myself and work on that area. You see it takes a lot of emotional fortitude and it takes a lot of strength to change yourself.

That's what we're put on the planet for, Hashem created us imperfect and given the task of perfecting ourselves, but it takes a lot of strength, a lot of energy, a lot of emotional fortitude. And many people are depleted. And many times they're depleted because *luch*, the core of my essence I'm empty.

But when you change your balance and you become sixty, forty, seventy, thirty, then you're growing, you're accomplishing and there's a sense of empowerment within you, there's a sense of joy and happiness and you have the strength to then do the direct work. But if you're not going to change the balance, you're going to be stuck because you don't have the strength, you don't have the balance, you don't have the energy to do it, Hashem created us imperfect, Hashem created us brilliant *neshamah*, put inside this body like that fine radio, inside the bunker, I can't hear things, I can't relate to things.

But Hashem also gave us the *Torah*, the system of spiritual perfection, by doing *chessed*, by learning, by *davening*, I change that balance and I cut through those layers and layers and I change my entire worldview and I change my value system. And as I do that, things that I consider unimportant last year, the year before, suddenly are far more important and I have a different worldview and with that I also have the energy to work.

But the work that I have to do has to be both on that balance as well as the specific traits because if I don't hone in on each specific trait, I'm going to be hijacked, I'm going to be taken over, I'll never succeed. When I do both Hashem helps, when I do both Hashem guides us and protects us.

When I do both, I change, I start growing and I reach the reason for my existence, the reason Hashem put us here, to grow and accomplish.