

## Timeless Tips Toward Improvement:

From Moses Maimonides to Benjamin Franklin

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### Small Achievable Goals

#### 1. Rabbi Avraham I, Kook (19<sup>th</sup> century Israel), Orot HaTeshuvah 13:6

כשהאדם רוצה, שכל חושיו וכחותיו הפנימיים יתקדשו בבת אחת לפי אותה העליה הרוחנית שבהכרתו כשהיא מתעלה, וכן שכל הפגמים המעשיים יתישרו מיד וישתלמו בתקון מוחלט, לא ימצא לנפשו שוב מעמד ולא יוכל לחזק את רצונו לצעוד על דרך השלמות האמתית. אלא העיקר שהכל בו היא עלית ההכרה, הגברת אור התורה, והתשובה המעשית תהיה סמוכה לה, בתחלה בדברים שלהבא, ואח"כ בדברים שבעבר הנח להתקן, ואח"כ יתרחב החוג גם בדברים שתקונם כבד, וכה ילך הלך ועלה עד אשר יזכה לתקן את הכל: אבל אל יזוז משום דבר מצעידתו הרוחנית ע"פ אותה המדרגה הפנימית שנשמתו בקרבו תובעת אותו

When person desires, that all his inner senses and powers be sanctified at once, according to the same spiritual ascension in his consciousness as it ascends, and that all practical defects be immediately rectified and made up for in absolute correction, he will not find for himself any standing again, and he will be unable to strengthen his desire to walk the path of true perfection. Rather the main thing that everything depends on is the elevation of consciousness, the strengthening of the light of Torah, and the practical restoration will be close to it, first in the areas in the future, and then in the things that the past leaves to be corrected, and then the circle will also expand in things for which repair will be heavy, and so on it will continue to elevate until he merits to fix everything. But he must not move for anything from his spiritual pace according to the spiritual level which his soul demands from him.

#### 2. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (20<sup>th</sup> century Israel), Alei Shur 2:2

אך לנו יש עוד ענין גדול במעשים הקטנים הם אינם מעוררים את כח המרידה! המקבל על עצמו איזה דבר גדול המכביד עליו-ברבות הימים הוא ירגיש היטב את כח המרידה ההולך ומתגבר עליו. אבל מעשה קטן שאינו מכביד כלל על האדם, אין בו כדי לעורר אותו. ויש לי על זה ציור מוחשי: אחר מלחמת יום הכיפורים טסתי למצרים. בהגיע המטוס לתחום מצרים ראיתי שהוא מנמיך מאד, ממש כמה מטרים מעל לקרקע. חשבתי כי אולי חל איזה קלקול במונעים, ושאלתי מה קרה לו. אמרו לי כי עכשיו אנו בתחום הראדר המצרי, ולא כדאי שהוא יבחין במטוס יהודאי, לכן הוא מנמיך טוס למטה מגובה הראדור, כי הראדר מבחין רק במטוס הטס למעלה מהגובה שלו, ובמטוס הטס מתחת לגובהו אינו מבחין. והוא הציור: גם לכח המרידה יש "ראדר", וגם הוא מבחין רק במעשים שהם מעל לגובהו, ובמעשים קטנים שהם מתחת לגובהו אינו מבחין.

But we have another great interest in the small deeds: they do not arouse the power of rebellion! He who takes upon himself some great thing that burdens him — in the days to come he will feel well the power of rebellion which overcomes him. But a small act that does not burden the person at all, does not provoke it. And I have a tangible example of this: After the Yom Kippur War, I flew to Egypt. When the plane reached Egypt, I saw that it was very low, just a few meters above the ground. I thought there might be some engine failure, and I asked what had happened to it. I was told that we are now in the area of the Egyptian radar, and it's better that it should not notice a Jewish plane, so he lowers the flight below the height of the radar, because the radar only notices a plane flying above its height, and the plane flying below its height does not notice. And this is the example: the power of rebellion also has a "radar", and he also notices only deeds that are above his height, and small deeds that are below his height he does not notice.

### Focusing on the Future

#### 3. Rabbi Avraham I, Kook (19<sup>th</sup> century Israel), Orot HaTeshuvah 13:9

יסוד התשובה צריך לעולם להיות מונח על התיקון של להבא. ובתחלה לא ישים כל כך לעיקר מעכב על דבר העבר, כי אם יבא מיד לעסוק בתיקון העבר ימצא מניעות רבות ויהיו דרכי התשובה וקרבת ד' קשים לפניו: אבל בהיותו עסוק באמת לתקן את מעשיו, הדבר מובטח שאז יעזרוהו מן השמים גם כן על תקנת העבר..

The Foundation of Teshuva needs to be placed on correcting the future. Originally, a person shouldn't focus too much on the past, for if he moves immediately to the past, he will find many obstacles and his paths of restoration and closeness to G-d will be difficult in front of him. However, if sincerely engages in fixing his behavior, it's guaranteed that he will have divine assistance in fixing the past.

## Shaking Up Our Environment

### **4. Rambam Laws of Repentance 2:4 tr. Simon Glazer**

מִדְרָבִי הַמְשׁוּבָּה לְהִיטֵב צוֹעֵק תָּמִיד לְפָנֵי הַשֵּׁם בְּכִי וּבְתַחֲנוּנִים וְעוֹשֶׂה צְדָקָה כְּפִי כַחוֹ וּמִתְרַחֵק הַרְבֵּה מִן הַדְּבָר שֶׁחָטָא בוֹ וּמְשַׁנֶּה שְׂמוֹ כְּלוֹמֵר אֲנִי אֲחֵר וְאִינִי אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ שֶׁעָשָׂה אוֹתוֹ הַמַּעֲשִׂים וּמְשַׁנֶּה מַעֲשָׂיו כְּלֵן לְטוֹבָה וּלְדָרֶדְרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגוֹלָה מִמְּקוֹמוֹ. שְׁגָלוֹת מְכַפֶּרֶת עֲוֹן מְפָנִי שְׂגוֹרָמֶת לוֹ לְהִכְנַע וְלִהְיוֹת עָנּוּ וְשָׁפֵל רוּחַ

Among the ways of repentance are, for the penitent to continue to cry out in tearful supplication before the Name, to bestow alms according to his means, and to distance himself exceedingly from the thing wherein he sinned, to have his identity changed, as if saying: "I am now another person, and not that person who perpetrated those misdeeds", to completely change his conduct for the good and straight path, and to exile himself from his place of residence, for exile atones iniquity, because it leads him to submissiveness and to be meek and humble-spirited:

## Peer Supervision

### **5. Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi (13<sup>th</sup> century Spain), Igeret HaTeshuvah**

דֶּרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁיבוֹר לוֹ הָאָדָם לִירֵאת שָׁמַיִם לִקְנוֹת לוֹ חֵבֵר אֶחָד אוֹ רַבִּים לְדַבֵּר עִמָּהֶם תָּמִיד בִּירֵאת שָׁמַיִם וְאִם יִחְטָא אֶחָד מִן הַחֲבֵרִים אוֹ יִתְרַשֵּׁל בְּמַצוּה יוֹכִיחֵנוּ חֵבִירוֹ וְיִזְכִּירוּ עָלָיו דֶּרֶךְ מִצְוֹת וְיִזְהִירוּ זֶה אֶת זֶה עַל הַתְּפִלִּין, וְשֵׁלָה לְדַבֵּר דְּבָרִים בְּטִלִּים בְּבֵית הַהִכְנֶסֶת, וּבִפְרָט בְּעוֹד שֶׁשֵׁ"ץ חוֹזֵר אֶת הַתְּפִלָּה. וְכֵן יִזְכִּירוּ זֶה אֶת זֶה לְקִרְאָה בְּכָל שַׁבּוּעַ אֲגַרְת הַתְּשׁוּבָה, וְיִשְׁאֲלוּ אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ מֵהֶם הַדְּבָרִים מֵאֲגַרְת הַתְּשׁוּבָה הַהִיא. וְאִם יֵשׁ דְּבָרִים שֶׁאִינּוּ מְקִיִּים אוֹתָם יִחְזִיקוּ חֵבִירָיו אֶת יָדָיו לְקִיִּים כָּל דְּבָר מֵהָאֲגַרְת הַנִּ"ל וְזֶה הוּא דְּבַר הַצְּלָחָה לְתְּשׁוּבָה וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים וְחֹבִיב לְשָׁמַיִם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (מְלָאכִי ג) אִם נִדְּבַרוּ יִרְאֵי ה' אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ.

A direct way for a person toward fearing G-d is to acquire one or many friends to talk to them always about the fear of heaven, and if one of the members sins or is negligent in the mitzvah, his friend will reprimand and remind about the path of mitzvot, and they will warn each other about tefillin, not to mention idle things in the synagogue, especially when the chazzan repeats the prayer. And they will also remind each other to read the letter of Teshuva each week, and they will ask each other what are the things from that letter of Teshuva? And if there are things that he does not fulfill, his friends will hold his hands to observe everything from the above letter and it is a method of success for Teshuva and good deeds and lovable to the heavens as it is said (Malachi 3) then those who fear G-d will speak to each other...

## Practical Study

### **6. Rabbi Avraham I. Kook (19<sup>th</sup> century Israel), Orot HaTeshuva 13:5**

דֶּרֶךְ הַתְּשׁוּבָה הַיּוֹתֵר מְקוֹרֵית וְטוֹבָה, הַנוֹבַעַת מֵאוֹר הַתּוֹרָה בְּעוֹלָם, הִיא הַשְּׁנוֹן בְּחֵלֶק דִּינֵי מְמוֹנוֹת וְכָל הַמְשַׁפְּטִים שֶׁבִּין אָדָם לְחֵבֵרוֹ הַכְּלוּלִים אֲצִלְנוּ בְּלִמּוּד "חֲשׁוֹן מִשְׁפָּט", בְּכָל הַבְּקִיאוֹת הַגִּירָסָאִית הַיּוֹתֵר בְּהִירָה וְכָל הַחֲרִיפוֹת הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְהַרְחֵבָה הַיּוֹתֵר אֲפִשְׂרִית. הִיא מְתַקֶּנֶת אֶת כָּל מְשׁוּלֵי הַלֵּב שֶׁבְּחַיִּים וּמַעֲמִידָה אֶת הַצְּדָק הָאֱלֹקִי עַל בְּסִיסוֹ הַנֶּאֱמָן וְנוֹטֶלֶת אֶת מַחֲזֵץ הַסֶּפֶק וְהַנְּבוּכָה מִתּוֹךְ הַנִּשְׁמָה, ע"י מֵה שֶׁמֵּאִירָה הִיא בְּאוֹרָה הַבְּהִיר אֶת דֶּרֶךְ הַחַיִּים הַמַּעֲשִׂיִים. אֲמֵנָם צְרִיךְ תָּמִיד לְהַכְשִׁיר אֶת הַלֵּב וְאֶת הַמֶּחֶ ע"י יִתֵּר חֵלְקֵי הַתּוֹרָה, וּבִיחּוּד ע"י הַשְּׁפָעָה מוֹסְרִית וְעִיּוֹנִית חֲזָקָה וְרַחֲבָה, בְּטֵל הָאוֹר שֶׁל הַהִגְיוֹנוֹת הַפְּנִימִיִים שֶׁבְּהִכְרוֹת הָאֱלֹקִיּוֹת הָאֲצִילִיּוֹת, כְּדֵי שֶׁתְּהִיָּה הַנִּשְׁמָה מוֹכְשֶׁרֶת לְהַתְּדַבֵּק יָפֵה בְּצִדֵּק הָאֱלֹקִי שֶׁבְּחֵלֶק הַמְשַׁפְּטֵי שֶׁל תּוֹרַת הַחַיִּים, וְאִזּוּ יִבֵּא לָהּ מִקְצֵעַ זֶה כֶּשֶׁמֶן בְּעֲצָמוֹתֶיהָ לְרוֹמְמָה וּלְשִׁגְבָה.

The most original and good way of returning, which stems from the light of the Torah in the world, is the study of the monetary portion of the law and all the laws [which govern relationships] between a person and his friend included in our study of "Choshen Mishpat" with the clearest textual proficiency and all the straightest and most extensive sharpness possible. It corrects all the obstacles of the heart in life, and places the divine justice on its faithful foundation and takes the crush of doubt and embarrassment from the soul, in that it illuminates the path of practical life with its clear light. However, the heart and mind must always be trained by the other sections of the Torah, and especially by a strong and broad moral and theoretical influence, with the dew of the light of the inner logics which is contained in the noble divine cognitions, so that the soul may be able to cling nicely to the divine justice in the legal part of the Torah of life. Then this profession will come to her as oil in her bones for exaltation and height.

כֶּשֶׁחֲפִץ אֶל הַצְּדָק הַמוֹחֵלֵט הַתִּיאוֹרִי בְּצוֹרְתוֹ הָאֲצִילִית מִתְגַּבֵּר הַרְבֵּה בְּנִשְׁמַת הָאָדָם, עַל יְדֵי טֵהַר נַפְשׁוֹ בְּמַדּוֹת טוֹבוֹת וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים, וְתְּשׁוּבָה גְּמוּרָה מֵאֲהָבָה, פּוֹרְצַת הִיא הַתְּשׁוּקָה הָעֵלְיוֹנָה הַזֹּאת וּבּוֹקֵעַת אֶת כָּל הָאוֹיְרִים הַרוֹחֲנִים, וְדוֹחֶקֶת אֶת עֲצָמָה עַד לְמַטָּה לְאַרְץ, וְדוֹרֶשֶׁת בְּחֲזָקָה אֶת תְּפִקִּידָה לְהַרְיֵץ בְּאַרְץ מִשְׁפָּט. וּמִזֶּה נּוֹלֶדֶת חֵבֵה חֲמִימָה מֵאֵד לְעִיּוֹן וּלְשְׁנוֹן שֶׁל עֲמֻקֵי הַהִלְכוֹת שֶׁבִּין אָדָם לְחֵבֵרוֹ, וְהַמְקַצֵּעַ הַיּוֹתֵר גְּדוֹל

שבתורה, שהוא דיני ממונות, הולך ומתרחב, מתחדד ומתלבן, ועמו כל המקצעות של ההלכות המעשיות. וכיון שהצורה הרוחנית של הצדק האלקי מתגלמת בחיי המעשה הרי היא מוסיפה עז, והנשמה מתחזקת עוד יותר, וההארה הרוחנית שלה מתבררת עוד במעלה יותר עליונה. When the desire for absolute justice described in its noble form grows strong in the human soul, by purifying his soul with good traits and good deeds, and a complete return from love, this supreme desire bursts and pierces all the spiritual realms, and pushes itself all the way down to earth, and strongly demands its purpose: to make justice run throughout the earth. And from this a very warm love for the study and analysis of the depths of the laws between man and his neighbor, and the greatest subject in the Torah, which is monetary law, it expands, sharpening and blending, and with it all the subjects of practical laws. And since the spiritual form of divine justice is embodied in the practical life, it adds a power, and the soul is further strengthened, and its spiritual enlightenment become clearer at an even higher level.

### **Defining Our Values and Tracking Progress**

#### **7. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (18<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam), Mesilat Yesharim Chapter 3, tr. Rabbi Yosef Sebag**

הנה הרוצה לפקח על עצמו, שתים הנה ההשקפות הצריכות לו: האחת, שיתבונן מהו הטוב האמיתי שיבחר בו האדם, והרע האמיתי שינוס ממנו. והשניה, על המעשים אשר הוא עושה לראות אם הם מכלל הטוב או מכלל הרע. וזה, בשעת מעשה ושלא בשעת מעשה. בשעת מעשה שלא יעשה שום מעשה מבלי שישקול אותו במאזני זאת הידיעה ושלא בשעת מעשה שיעלה לפניו זכרון כלל מעשיו וישקול אותם כמו כן במאזני המשקל הזה לראות מה יש בם מהרע למען ידחה אותו, ומה מן הטוב להתמיד בו ולהתחזק בו. ואם ימצא בהם מן הרע, אז יתבונן ויחקור בשכלו איזה תחבולה יעשה לסור מן הרע ההוא וליטרה ממנו

He who wants to watch over himself must investigate two matters. The first: that he contemplate what is the true good for man to choose and what is the true evil for him to flee from. The second: on the actions which he does, to determine if they are in the category of the good or the evil. This applies both to times when he is in the act of doing and when not in the act of doing.

When in the act of doing: that he not do any act without first weighing it on the scales of this understanding.

Not in the act of doing: that he bring up before himself the remembrance of his deeds in general and weigh them, likewise, in these scales to determine what they contain of evil in order to relinquish it and what of good, in order to perpetuate it and strengthen himself in it. If he finds in them of the evil, he should then contemplate and investigate, reasoning out a strategy to employ in order to turn away from that evil and cleanse himself of it.

#### **8. Rabbi Berel Wein, Jewish History Blog, Ben Franklin...Jewish Ethicist?**

<https://www.jewishhistory.org/ben-franklin/>

One of the strange quirks in history is that Rabbi Salanter and the followers of his Mussar Movement were strongly influenced by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's personal life leaves much to be desired. However, his ideas were extraordinary in many respects.

In the 1700s, Ben Franklin had published *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which includes in it a great deal of philosophy. In it he listed 13 famous character traits, which he said are the foundation of a good person and a good society. Included on the list are such traits as thrift, honesty, silence, study, etc.

A Lithuanian Jew by the name of Menachem Mendel Lefin (also Menahem Mendel Levin — 1749–1826) had traveled west and studied in the universities of Germany and France. There he read the writings of Benjamin Franklin, and became greatly influenced by them. He wrote a book of Jewish ethics based on Franklin's ideas, almost quoting him verbatim but never mentioning his name. It was as though it was his book.

Rabbi Israel Salanter read his book and was very impressed by it. He subsequently published it in Kovno using his own funds. The book was republished by his followers a number of times. As late as the 1930s it was still being published by the Slobodka Yeshiva.

#### **9. Benjamin Franklin, The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin pg. 83- 85**

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/148/148-h/148-h.htm>

It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong, I did not see why I might not always

do the one and avoid the other. But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another; habit took the advantage of inattention; inclination was sometimes too strong for reason. I concluded, at length, that the mere speculative conviction that it was our interest to be completely virtuous, was not sufficient to prevent our slipping; and that the contrary habits must be broken, and good ones acquired and established, before we can have any dependence on a steady, uniform rectitude of conduct. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method.

In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalogue more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name. Temperance, for example, was by some confined to eating and drinking, while by others it was extended to mean the moderating every other pleasure, appetite, inclination, or passion, bodily or mental, even to our avarice and ambition. I propos'd to myself, for the sake of clearness, to use rather more names, with fewer ideas annex'd to each, than a few names with more ideas; and I included under thirteen names of virtues all that at that time occur'd to me as necessary or desirable, and annexed to each a short precept, which fully express'd the extent I gave to its meaning.

These names of virtues, with their precepts, were:

1. TEMPERANCE.

Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.

2. SILENCE.

Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.

3. ORDER.

Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.

4. RESOLUTION.

Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.

5. FRUGALITY.

Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; *i.e.*, waste nothing.

6. INDUSTRY.

Lose no time; be always employ'd in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.

7. SINCERITY.

Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

8. JUSTICE.

Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

9. MODERATION.

Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

10. CLEANLINESS.

Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths, or habitation.

11. TRANQUILLITY.

Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.

12. CHASTITY.

Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dulness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.

13. HUMILITY.

Imitate...

My intention being to acquire the *habitude* of all these virtues, I judg'd it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone thro' the thirteen; and, as the previous acquisition of some might facilitate the acquisition of certain others, I arrang'd them with that view, as they stand above...

I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day.

*Form of the pages.*

| TEMPERANCE.                                    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| EAT NOT TO DULNESS;<br>DRINK NOT TO ELEVATION. |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|  | S. | M. | T. | W. | T. | F. | S. |
| T.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| S.   | •  | •  |    | •  |    | •  |    |
| O.   | •• | •  | •  |    | •  | •  | •  |
| R.   |    |    | •  |    |    | •  |    |
| F.   |    | •  |    |    | •  |    |    |
| I.   |    |    | •  |    |    |    |    |
| S.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| J.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| M.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| C.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| T.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| C.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |
| H.   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |