

Atomic Teshuva:
How New Research on Old Habits Can Help Us Change for Good
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Atom: *noun* 1. the basic unit of a chemical element. 2. an extremely small amount of a thing or quality.

Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuva, Mishne Torah 3:2*

אדם שעונותיו מרבין על זכותיו מיד הוא מת ברשעו שנאמר על רב עונתו. וכן מדינה שעונותיה מרבין מיד היא אוכדת שנאמר (בראשית יח כ) "זעקת סדם נעמרה כי רבה" וגו'. וכן כל העולם פלו אם היו עונותיהם מרבין מזכותיהן מיד הן נשחתין שנאמר (בראשית ו ה) "וירא ה' כי רבה רעת האדם". ושקול זה אינו לפי מנן הזכיות והעונות אלא לפי גדלם. יש זכות שהיא כנגד כמה עונות שנאמר (מלכים א יד יג) "ישעו נמצא בו דבר טוב". ויש עון שהוא כנגד כמה זכיות שנאמר (קהלת ט יח) "וחוטא אהד יאבד טובה הרבה". ואין שוקליון אלא בדעתו של אל דעות והוא היודע היאד עורכין הזכיות כנגד העונות

If a person's sins exceed his merits, he will immediately die because of his wickedness as [Jeremiah 30:14] states: "[I have smitten you...] for the multitude of your transgressions." Similarly, a country whose sins are great will immediately be obliterated as implied by [Genesis 18:20]: "The outcry of Sodom and Amorah is great....In regard to the entire world as well, were its [inhabitants'] sins to be greater than their merits, they would immediately be destroyed as [Genesis 6:5] relates: "God saw the evil of man was great... [and God said: `I will destroy man....']"

This reckoning is not calculated [only] on the basis of the number of merits and sins, but also [takes into account] their magnitude. There are some merits which outweigh many sins as implied by [I Kings 14:13]: "Because in him, there was found a good quality." In contrast, a sin may outweigh many merits as [Ecclesiastes 9:18] states: "One sin may obscure much good." The weighing [of sins and merits] is carried out according to the wisdom of the Knowing God. He knows how to measure merits against sins.

Life Homework

Name three of your good habits.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Name three of your bad habits.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Which of the three bad habits is the most destructive?

How have you tried to change it?

How would changing that one habit improve your life?

Automatic Teshuva

Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (Random House, 2014).

“The Golden Rule of Habit Change: You can't extinguish a bad habit, you can only change it.” (63)

“This process within our brains is a three-step loop. First, there is a **cue**, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the **routine**, which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally, there is a **reward**, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future: THE HABIT LOOP” (19)

“Rather, to change a habit, you must keep the old cue, and deliver the old reward, but insert a new routine.” (62)

“Willpower isn't just a skill. It's a muscle, like the muscles in your arms or legs, and it gets tired as it works harder, so there's less power left over for other things.” (137)

“As people strengthened their willpower muscles in one part of their lives—in the gym, or a money management program—that strength spilled over into what they ate or how hard they worked. Once willpower became stronger, it touched everything.” (85)

Atomic Teshuva

James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (

“You don’t have to be the victim of your environment. You can also be the architect of it.” (84)

“Some people spend their entire lives waiting for the time to be right to make an improvement.” (71)

“Your actions reveal how badly you want something. If you keep saying something is a priority but you never act on it, then you don’t really want it. It’s time to have an honest conversation with yourself. Your actions reveal your true motivations.” (262)

“Professionals stick to the schedule; amateurs let life get in the way.” (236)

“All big things come from small beginnings. The seed of every habit is a single, tiny decision. But as that decision is repeated, a habit sprouts and grows stronger. Roots entrench themselves and branches grow. The task of breaking a bad habit is like uprooting a powerful oak within us. And the task of building a good habit is like cultivating a delicate flower one day at a time.”

“Goals are good for setting a direction, but systems are best for making progress.” (22)

“You should be far more concerned with your current trajectory than with your current results.” (18)

“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” (27)

“Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become. No single instance will transform your beliefs, but as the votes build up, so does the evidence of your new identity.” (41)

“True behavior change is identity change. You might start a habit because of motivation, but the only reason you’ll stick with one is that it becomes part of your identity...”

The goal is not to read a book, the goal is to become a reader.

The goal is not to run a marathon, the goal is to become a runner.

The goal is not to learn an instrument, the goal is to become a musician.

Your behaviors are usually a reflection of your identity. What you do is an indication of the type of person you believe that you are – either consciously or unconsciously.

Research has shown that once a person believes in a particular aspect of their identity, they are more likely to act in alignment with that belief.” (34)

Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuva, Mishne Torah 2:4*

מדרכי התשובה להיות השב צועק תמיד לפני השם בבכי ובתחנונים ועושה צדקה כפי פחו ומתרחק הרבה מן הדבר שקטא בו ומשנה שמו כלומר אני אחר ואיני אותו האיש שעשה אותן המעשים ומשנה מעשיו כלן לטובה ולדרך ישרה וגולה ממקומו. שגלות מכפרת עון מפני שגורמת לו להכניע ולהיות ענו ושפל רוח:

Among the paths of repentance is for the penitent to...

- a) constantly call out before God, crying and entreating;
- b) to perform charity according to his potential;
- c) to separate himself far from the object of his sin;
- d) to change his name, as if to say "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned;"
- e) to change his behavior in its entirety to the good and the path of righteousness; and
- f) to travel in exile from his home.

Exile atones for sin because it causes a person to be submissive, humble, and meek of spirit.

Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuva, Mishne Torah 2:8*

הודוי שנהגו בו כל ישראל אבל אנחנו קטאנו (כלנו) והוא עקר הודוי. עברות שהתנדדה עליהם ביום הכפורים זה חוזר ומתנדדה עליהן ביום הכפורים אחר אף על פי שהוא עומד בתשובתו שניאמר (תהילים נא ה) "כי פשעי אני אדע וחסאתי נגדי תמיד":

Sins which were confessed on one Yom Kippur should be confessed on another Yom Kippur even though one remains steadfast in his repentance, as [Psalms 51:5] states: "I acknowledge my transgressions and my sins are always before me."

Closing Thought

"In Judaism, sin is what we do, not what we are." Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Introduction to The Koren Sacks *Rosh HaShana Machzor*, p. xxvii.