Strategic Teshuva

By Rabbi Dr. Dovid Gottlieb

We all have some bad midos (character traits) and some bad habits. When we consider doing teshuva for them, we are apt to think as follows: “I am really out of control. Why do I do those terrible things? I should be stronger! How can I increase my self-control so that I can overcome those strains, temptations, etc.?”

That sort of thinking can be useful. But it is not the only helpful approach. Another attack is this: “When do I fail like this? What is there in the environment? What else has happened that day? Under which specific circumstances do I fail? And, ...what can I do to change those circumstances?” The technique of changing the circumstances in which we generally fail is what I call “Strategic Teshuva.”

Midos and habits generally have “triggers.” For example, certain people provoke an angry, aggressive response. Other people may not pose a problem. Or the “trigger” might be specific activities, such as driving in heavy traffic (“road rage”), caring for fighting siblings, waiting in lines at the bus terminal, filling out government forms, and so on.

The same is true for other temptations. Laziness comes naturally when one is surrounded by computer games, bad literature, inviting beaches and — most important — other lazy people. (A boy from Los Angeles told me it took him six years to get his bachelor’s degree because certain courses interfered with his beach schedule!) Illicit pleasures attract most strongly when they are readily available and when others in the neighborhood indulge.

Our first responsibility is for our actions. When the “triggers” of the bad habits and midos occur, it is extremely difficult to stop the habits and midos from acting. One solution is to try to avoid the triggers. Change the environment. Move your residence if you can. If you can’t, spend as much time in another environment which will provide respite from the temptation. (The most effective positive environment is doing mitzvos with other people: Learn in a beis midrash, visit the hospital with others, plan a chesed project with others, teach Torah in a school, etc.) Certain activities cause tension which triggers anger. If you cannot avoid those activities, alternate with relaxing activities.
A second solution is to **add** something to the environment which will make it easier to do the right thing. If you have trouble getting up for davening in shul, make a chavrusa for ten minutes before davening. Then, when the alarm rings and you reach over to push the snooze button, you will think: “But what if my chavrusa comes and I’m not there?! How embarrassing!” — and you will get up!

In many cases you can make a contract with yourself: If I succeed in overcoming the temptation (enough times) then I will allow myself something I very much enjoy. This is what psychologists call a “behavior contract.” Thus I have a personal incentive to do the right thing. For example: “If I get through the meeting without getting angry, I will allow myself to buy that picture for the wall/go to that restaurant/etc.”

**The key is to control the environment by avoiding some things and creatively adding others so that it will be easier to do the right thing.**

Now, some people think that this cannot be right. This means that we are only running away from our problems, not solving them! The problem is precisely this: I am not able to overcome those temptations. How do I solve that problem? By avoiding them, or by adding extra incentives?

There are two answers. First, who says that the only problem is to overcome the desire? On the contrary: Our first responsibility is for our actions. Suppose someone cannot control a desire to steal from Macy’s. If he shops only in Bloomingdale’s, or he rewards himself for not stealing from Macy’s, he has not overcome the desire — but at least he is not stealing!

Second, often we can only overcome the desire if we have a respite from the wrong actions. As long as the bad habits and midos are active it is very difficult to gain control.

Therefore, avoiding the triggers and adding payoffs may be the only way to gain control. Yes, the ultimate goal is to become immune to the temptations. But this may require two stages: First avoiding the triggers and adding payoffs; and then developing the psychological strength to resist. Trying to do without the first stage may make the second stage impossible.

Think of addictions. You cannot simply tell the addict: “Stop using that stuff!” He can’t stop, and all the therapy in the world will not help while he is still on the drug. But if he enters a sanitarium where the drug is unavailable, then the therapy can help him become immune to the temptation to use drugs.

Strategic teshuva may thus be the necessary first step to complete teshuva. But it is more than that. If that is all that you can manage at the moment, then strategic teshuva is enough to gain kappara (atonement). Hashem does not ask more of us than we can do. If you avoid the triggers, add incentives and start to work on immunity, then in the meantime you have kappara for all the past mistakes even before you achieve immunity. Isn’t that worth it?