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PARSHAS
SHOFTIM 5777

בְּשִׁיטְיָחָה

BY RABBI NETANEL NAAMAT
RABBI NAFTALI ZIONS

Harnessing the Power of Habit

The first mitzvah that we encounter in this *Parshah* is the *Mitzvah* of setting up courts¹, which will enforce Torah law throughout the land. Though the reason for such a directive would seem obvious – you can't have a proper governing system without courts enforcing the law – the *Sefer HaChinuch* offers a deeper appreciation for this *Mitvah*.

He writes that by setting up a system in which people will choose to follow the Torah, out of fear of the courts, in time they will habituate themselves to following the Torah, and eventually, the natural love all Jews have for Torah and *Mitzvos* will come out, and people will then follow the Torah out of love.

There are amazing points that can be found explanation by the *Sefer HaChinuch*. The first is in regards to habit – when our brain has learned a 'bad habit' it can range from being annoying to destroying lives. The good news is that we can harness the power of habit for good things as well. By repeating thought patterns and actions, we create positive habits that enhance our lives.

Beyond that, the *Sefer HaChinuch* points out the natural connection and love every Jew has for *Mitzvos*. We were created with an unbreakable relationship to Hashem, and we crave that contact. Though many of us may not feel that on the surface, every Jew delights in that bond. By habituating ourselves to follow Hashem, we remove the temporary impediments and barriers that hamper our growth, and foster a sense of calm and happiness.

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Mind the Gap - Taking the Next Step

While we don't have the presence of *Shoftim* and *Shotrim* to provide that external reinforcement to help us establish positive habits, there are still other effective systems that we can put into place. A system of rewards for personal goals and accomplishments can help smooth the rough road of growth. We can start by setting (very) modest goals for a *Middah* we'd like to improve. When we reach that goal, we reward ourselves. Over time, we habituate ourselves, and have the capacity to begin to stretch our goals.

For example, if one has a hard time getting up for *Shacharis*, a goal may be something like being on time to *Shacharis* once a week. After four weeks, it's time to collect the reward. The process continues, constantly being tweaked as needed.

¹ *Sefer HaChinuch*, *Mitzvah* 491

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Michael had a problem. It wasn't a big problem, he thought, but it was a problem nevertheless. He just couldn't get things done on time. The truth is, he could, and he actually did. But he was always up against the clock, racing against a deadline. It didn't matter if it was coming on time to Minyan, or delivering a report his boss asked for, whatever it was, it was always done the last minute.

After learning about how our brains form habits, and how difficult it is to change a habit, Michael decided to create a new habit, a habit of being early. He knew he was against decades of procrastination, but he was determined. He created a complex reward and point system, and went to work. Every morning after *Davening*, and every evening, before going to bed, he reviewed his goals, and his reasons for wanting to accomplish those goals. And every week, he tallied up his points, and rewarded himself.

Over time, he found that the feeling of being on time, or even early, was itself rewarding. In fact, he found that he had less stress, felt better and more accomplished, and wasn't afraid to tackle new projects. By pushing himself to be on time, not only to he habituate himself, he even started to enjoy it!

**Based on a true and ongoing story.*

DID YOU KNOW?

- In certain circumstances doing an action just once can create a new habit.¹
- It is not possible to keep the Torah & *Mitzvos Beshlaimus* without having fear of punishment.²
- The only thing that brings our *Neshamah* - the part that makes up who we really are - joy is learning Torah and doing *Mitzvos*.³

*Habitually happy**

¹ *Koheles Rabbah* 3:11, *Chidushei HaLev, Sefer Bereishis*, Page 37

² *Shaarei Ohr*, 1

³ *Radak on Tehillim* 19:9, *Mesillas Yesharim Perek* 1

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