

What You
DO
Is Who You
ARE

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

What You Do is Who You Are

RABBI EFREM GOLDBERG

WHILE WE MAY NOT THINK ABOUT IT THIS WAY, EACH OF US SERVES AS our own public relations firm. We all pay a lot of attention to the way we are perceived. We make a point of communicating what we claim our values and priorities are, of showing what concerns us, and what is important to us. We talk about it, we post about it, we forward posts and videos about it. We want to make sure to appear to care about certain values and ideals. But, sometimes, we need to ask ourselves whether our actions match our words, whether what we do is consistent with what we say.

I cannot tell you how often people say to me, “Rabbi, I’m very spiritual in my heart. You don’t see me at *davening*, but you should know that in my heart, I’m a very spiritual person.” Or, “I know you don’t see my name on the list of donors, but in my heart, I’m incredibly generous.”

That might sound honorable and well-intentioned but we need to realize that **we are what we do, not what we say**. What determines who we are is not

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what we claim to care about, what we say we wished we did, what we post and share, but **what we actually do**, what our day looks like. This is who we are. This proposition might appear overly simplistic, maybe obvious to some, but our tradition reinforces this point over and over again, and it is instructive to explore why it is such a critical message.

Looking Taller

I recently saw an article about a controversial surgery that is gaining popularity among men who want to add an extra few inches of height, so they can do a slam dunk or hit the magical six-foot mark. The process involves placing something inside the leg that twists it to add about a millimeter each day. This procedure is unhealthy, and also comes at an exorbitant price, costing approximately \$75,000, but it's becoming increasingly popular.

When I first read about this procedure, I laughed to myself. What kind of person would feel such a need to add a few inches of height? Sure, some people require growth hormones during childhood because of a disorder. Once a person reaches his maximum height, however, why would he spend so much money and put something inside his bones just to grow a little taller?

But it then occurred to me that so many of us do the exact same thing. We find ways to sidestep growth. Instead of doing the hard work to actually grow, we resort to cosmetics. We try making ourselves look like a great person, rather than investing effort to actually be a great person. We try to give the appearance of being a devoted spouse or parent, being a committed *eved Hashem*, being a concerned member of *Klal Yisrael* – without actually doing what it takes to be such a person. We want to look taller without having to put in the work to really grow.

It's time to stop talking, to stop projecting an image, and to start doing; to stop talking about what we believe, and to start acting upon those beliefs.

עשו לפני כסדר הזה

During the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, and then during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*, we recite each morning the *Selichos* service which revolves around the "י"ג מידות רחמים – “thirteen attributes of mercy,” describing Hashem as ה' ה' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפיים ורב חסד ואמת נושא עוון ופושע וחסאה ונקה. This description

was first pronounced by Hashem Himself in acquiescing to Moshe's petition for forgiveness after the sin of the golden calf (*Shemos* 34:6-7). The י"ג מידות features prominently also on Yom Kippur, both at night and during the *ne'ila* prayer.

The source of the inclusion of the י"ג מידות in our prayers for forgiveness is a passage in the Gemara (*Rosh Hashanah* 17b):

א"ר יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר – מלמד שנתעטף הקב"ה כשליח צבור והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר: לו כל זמן שישאל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם.

Rabbi Yochanan said: If this verse had not been written, it would have been impossible to say [such a thing]. This teaches that the Almighty wrapped Himself as a שליח צבור and showed Moshe the prayer service.² He said to him: Whenever Israel sin, they shall perform this service before Me, and I will forgive them.

Hashem told Moshe that He was now transmitting to him the “secret formula” for earning forgiveness. When the Jewish People are defiant, and violate His commands, He would want to punish them severely – but they have a way out, a “formula” that they can use to change His mind, as it were, and earn His forgiveness. This is our escape route whenever we make a mistake and face the prospect of harsh punishment. We wake up early for *Selichos* before Rosh Hashanah and during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* for this reason – to use the “formula” that Hashem taught us to use when we are guilty of wrongdoing. He told us that when we fail Him, we just say these words, and all will be forgiven.

Many later writers raised the question of how the Gemara could make such a comment. Can we imagine somebody in a relationship who says to the other party, “No matter what you do to me, no matter how badly you hurt or insult me, just say these words and I’ll forget about it”? Imagine a father telling a child, “If you ever do something to get me angry, just tell me, ‘You’re a great dad,’ or, ‘You’re really good-looking,’ and then everything will

2 Incidentally, Rav Soloveitchik inferred from Rabbi Yochanan’s remark that a *chazan* wears a *tallis* when leading the *tefila* not in fulfillment of the *mitzva* of *tzitzis*, but because this is the *chazan*’s “uniform,” so-to-speak. It goes without saying that G-d is not obligated to wear *tzitzis*, and yet, when He wanted to show Moshe the way *B’nei Yisrael* are to *daven*, He wrapped Himself in a *tallis* – because this is how a *chazan* should be dressed as he leads the congregation in *tefila*. Rav Soloveitchik thus maintained that a *chazan* should wear a *tallis* even for *Ma’ariv*, at night, when the *mitzva* of *tzitzis* does not apply.

be fine.” What kind of relationship would this be? Moreover, throughout the generations, there have been Jews who recited these words and not everything was forgiven; they suffered terribly. How could the Gemara say that no matter what we’ve done wrong, we just need to pull out this “magic formula” and all will be forgiven?

The Maharal of Prague,³ Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, and others explain by taking a closer look at the Gemara’s formulation. G-d did not tell Moshe יאמרו הזה – that we should **recite** the מידות ל"ג to earn His forgiveness, but rather יעשו לפני כסדר הזה – that we must **do** the מידות ל"ג, that we need to perform them, put them into practice, that we are to emulate Hashem’s example of compassion and kindness. This is how we earn forgiveness – not by talking, but by doing.

Communication is important but talk is cheap. No formula can just erase all our mistakes and make everything ok. We need to step up and demonstrate that now we are going to be different, that we are committed to following G-d’s model. No matter how loudly we scream the *Selichos*, no matter how passionate and emotional we are, no matter how much *kavana* we have when we *daven* – if we don’t act upon the words, if we then go out and are ruthless in business, if we go around spreading gossip, if we don’t recite *berachos* with gratitude and appreciation, if we aren’t attentive to our spouse and children, then what did those words accomplish? יעשו לפני. *Selichos* isn’t about the words; it’s about the actions that come afterward.

אמור מעט ועשה הרבה – “Speak little, and do much” (*Avos* 1:15). Talking is easy, but acting and doing is what counts. Rabbeinu Yona, commenting on this Mishna, cites the Midrash as explaining that this principle was shown to us by G-d Himself, who formulated His promise of *B’nei Yisrael’s* redemption from Egypt very briefly, telling Avraham, דן אנוכי (“I will judge [the Egyptians]” – *Bereishis* 15:14). The actual, supernatural events that He brought, however, far exceeded the implication of the small word דן, and are described by Moshe in a 27-word sentence:

או הנסה אלוקים לבוא לקחת לו גוי מקרב גוי במסת באתת ובמופתים
ובמלחמה וביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובמוראים גדלים ככל אשר עשה
לכם ה' אלוקיכם במצרים לעיניך. (דברים ד:לד)

3 *Chiddushei Aggados*, Rosh Hashanah 17b.

Rav Saadia Gaon, as Rabbeinu Yona cites, derived from this principle that the final redemption will be much greater than even all the beautiful prophecies of the *nevi'im*. Hashem does far more than He says, and thus, necessarily, the miracles and blessings of the ultimate *geula* will far exceed everything He promised to do. And this is the example we must follow – talking less and doing more.

The Rebbe's Preparation for *Selichos*

Rav Moshe Leib Sassov was a revered Rebbe with a large group of *chassidim*. Once, a cynical *misnaged* named Yankel came over to the *chassidim* and ridiculed the Rebbe.

“What’s so special about the Rebbe?” he asked. “Why do you hold him in such high esteem?”

The *chassidim* explained that Rav Moshe Leib was an exceptional *tzadik*. Yankel decided he would check the Rebbe out and see for himself if he was really what they said he was.

One morning, before *Selichos*, Yankel came to shul to watch Rav Moshe Leib *daven*. He arrived just when *Selichos* were about to begin – and the Rebbe wasn't there.

“Ha!” Yankel jeered. “You say that your Rebbe is so righteous and holy – he’s not even in shul yet! Where is he?”

The *chassidim* replied that the great Rebbe comes late because he prepares for *Selichos* by ascending to the heavens in order to petition Hashem on behalf of *Am Yisrael*.

Yankel scoffed at them. He decided that the next morning he would arise early and go to the Rebbe’s house and watch what he was doing, so he could prove them wrong.

Sure enough, the next morning, Yankel woke up well before dawn, and secretly went to the Rebbe’s house. He hid behind a bush and peered into the window, assuming he would see Rav Moshe Leib sleeping, or relaxing and sipping his coffee. He was sure that the Rebbe was no different from the rest of us, who need to struggle to get up and make it to shul on time in the morning.

To his astonishment, the creaky front door opened, and the Rebbe walked outside. He was dressed like a peasant, and held in his hands an ax and a bag

of food. Yankel followed the Rebbe as he went out into the woods and began chopping wood and making small logs. He then carried the small logs to a small, dilapidated house that looked barely inhabitable. The Rebbe knocked on the door, and an elderly, frail widow opened it.

“Here, I’ve brought you firewood,” the Rebbe – appearing as a simple peasant – said.

“Oh thank you,” the woman said, “but I have no money with which to pay you.”

“Don’t worry,” the Rebbe said. “You can pay me when you can. I also brought you some food.” He handed the woman the bag.

Her eyes lit up. “Thank you!” she exclaimed. “I am so hungry but have nothing to eat.” She then asked the Rebbe if he could bring the logs to the fireplace, because she was not physically capable of doing so. Yankel watched in amazement as the revered Rebbe of Sassov carried the logs to the fireplace, bent down, and arranged them, piece by piece. As he carried and arranged the logs, the Rebbe softly chanted, *ה' ה' קל רחום וחנון ארך אפיים ורב חסד*.

Yankel ran to the shul, where the *chassidim* had begun assembling for *Selichos*.

“You’re right,” Yankel said to them. “Your Rebbe ascends high into the heavens – but much higher than you think.”

יעשו לפני כסדר הזה. Rav Moshe Leib Sassover understood that the power of the *מידות י"ג* lies not in the articulation of the words, but rather in our translating these words into action. It’s not enough to “talk the talk”; we have to “walk the walk,” and act upon the words, conducting ourselves with kindness, compassion and sensitivity just as Hashem does.

This concept underlies the custom of Chabad *chassidim* to recite *Selichos* only before Rosh Hashanah, but not during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuva*. The *Tzemach Tzedek* (third Rebbe of Lubavitch) explained: *עד ראש השנה מצוות עשייה*. *אמירה, ומכאן ואילך מצוות עשייה*. The days leading up to Rosh Hashanah are a time for words, for verbalizing our commitment, but the days after Rosh Hashanah are a time for action, for following up on the words, and showing that we meant everything we said. First we express our dreams and aspirations, we articulate our goals; and then we stop expressing and articulating, and start acting.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained this concept in a letter dated 7 Marcheshvan, 5722 (October 17, 1961):

On the question of the custom of Chabad to not recite Selichos after Tzom Gedalia, there is an illuminating statement by the Tzemach Tzedek to the effect that the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a time for action. The meaning of it is that the verbal prayers of Selichos should be reflected in actual deeds during these days, and in a growing measure, not only in quality but also in quantity. There is much more in the statement, which cannot be further expanded here, but essentially, the main purpose of the custom is to emphasize the need for action during these days.

יעשו לפני. Reciting *Selichos* is undoubtedly important, but the recitation must then be followed up by action.

The prevalent *minhag*, of course, is to continue reciting *Selichos* even after Rosh Hashanah, until Yom Kippur. But the message of the Chabad practice is no less relevant to the rest of us. We continue the *אמירה*, but our focus must be on the *עשייה*, on translating our words into action.

Carl Jung said: “*You are what you do, not what you say you’ll do.*” It’s not enough to want to do the right thing, or to talk about how we want to do the right thing. We need to do it. And the *teshuvah* process requires us to stop thinking and talking, and to start doing.

The story is told of a Rebbe who was walking outside with his *chassidim* when it suddenly began to rain. He turned to his *chassidim* and said, “You know how we know the sky wants to rain? Because it’s raining.”

The Rebbe later explained that if somebody truly wants to do something, then he won’t just talk about it; he’ll do it. If it’s not raining, then the sky doesn’t want to rain; if we’re not doing something, it’s because we don’t really want to do it. If we truly believe in our values and principles, then we act upon them.

“Your Intentions are Desirable...But Not Your Deeds”

One of the most important Medieval works of Jewish philosophy is Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi's *Ha'kuzari* which sets out to present Jewish beliefs and doctrines by relating the story of a foreign ruler, the king of the Khazars, who summoned representatives of different faiths. The king had a recurring dream in which an angel appeared to him and said: “*Your intentions are desirable to the Creator, but not your deeds.*” After beholding this vision repeatedly, night after night, the king brought a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, and a philosopher to present their respective views. Ultimately, the king was convinced by the Jew's arguments, and proceeded to convert to Judaism and have his subjects convert as well. By way of this narrative, Rav Yehuda HaLevi elucidates the philosophical differences between Judaism and other belief systems.

The philosopher summoned by the Khazar king articulates the belief that the king should not be troubled by the angel's message, because, indeed, all that matters is one's thoughts and beliefs. He says:

You need not concern yourself with which specific dogma, set of rituals and other actions, and choice of words or language you will follow. If you like, you can even fabricate your own religion which promotes humility, exalts the Prime Cause, [and] helps you correct your traits... But your ultimate objective should be purification of the soul [so you can perceive things more accurately]...

The *Sefer Ha'kuzari* is, essentially, a polemic against such an outlook. The Jew, in his response, affirms the priority of action over thought and belief, that good intentions are meaningless if they do not lead to action. He says to the king:

It is impossible to become close to G-d without the Divine commandments themselves. This is because G-d alone knows the proper measurements, weights, times, places, and all else that is tied into the practices [of these commandments,] which, when performed properly, lead to Divine favor and attachment to the Divinity.

We know this from our relationships. My daughter can tell me repeatedly that she loves me, but if, when I ask her to set the table, she starts making excuses and refuses to help, her “I love you” means nothing. Actions speak so much louder and more clearly than words. We show our feelings not only through the words we say, but, primarily, through the way we act. If a person speaks to Hashem about his love for Him in shul, but then after shul lives the way that suits him, that accommodates his interests, wishes and desires, without yielding to G-d’s command and submitting to His will, then his “I love You, Hashem” – no matter how many times he said it – is utterly meaningless.

Chazal expressed this idea in a remarkable passage in the Midrash (*Eicha Rabba, Pesichta, 2*).⁴ Citing the *pasuk* (*Yirmiyahu 16:11*), *ואותי עזבו ואת תורתִי*, *לא שמרו* (“And Me they abandoned, and they failed to observe My Torah”), the Midrash explains that G-d was saying, *מתוך שמרו, תתוך*, *הלוואי אותי עזבו ותורתִי שמרו*, *שהיו מתעסקין בה, המאור שבה מחזירן למוטב* – “I wish they abandoned Me but kept My Torah, for as a result of involving themselves in it, its light would bring them back to goodness.” Hashem prefers that we do what He asks of us more than even believe in Him! He would rather we observe His *mitzvos* as atheists, because eventually, we will come around. Just as I prefer that my child follows the rules without telling me that he or she loves me, Hashem would rather we observe His *mitzvos* without expressing our love for Him, than verbally expressing love without obediently fulfilling His will. (Of course, it goes without saying, the ideal is to do both.) The true measure of a relationship is not what a person says, but what a person does.

In *Parashas Nitzavim* (*Devarim 29:17-18*), Moshe expresses to *Benei Yisrael* his concern that there might be among the people a *שורש פורה ראש ולענה* – a toxic root, a person with dangerous ideas and thoughts. Specifically, there might be somebody who, after hearing the Torah’s warnings about the consequences of disobeying Hashem’s commands, *והתברך בלבבו*. The Rebbe of Kotzk⁵ explains that the “poisonous root” is when a person thinks that it suffices to have a good heart, to have the right emotions, to think the right thoughts. This is poison.

“Rabbi, I know you never see me volunteer, but I have a really good heart. I

4 A variation of this comment appears in the Talmud Yerushalmi, *Chagiga*, 1:7.

5 In *Emes Mi’Kotzk Titzmach*, 656.

really am caring and generous.”

“Rabbi, I’m not in shul that often, but I’m very spiritual in my own way.”

The Rebbe of Kotzk teaches us that this is poisonous thinking and a dangerous way of approaching Judaism. Of course, רחמנא ליבא בעי – Hashem cares very much about what we think and what we feel – but only if those thoughts and feelings are translated into action. It is not enough to be kind and generous in one’s heart without generously giving *tzedakah*, and without lifting a finger to help and get involved. This was the mistake of the king of the Khazars. His heart was in the right place, but it meant nothing because he did not act upon those values and those emotions.

It is because of the primacy of action over thought and emotion that Hashem often brings us tests and challenges that make us grow. Ramban, in his discussion of *Akeidas Yitzchak*, the unfathomably difficult test that G-d posed to Avraham Avinu (*Bereishis* 22:1), briefly explains the purpose behind the tests that Hashem presents to the righteous. He writes that Hashem tests a person להוציא הדבר מן הכח אל הפועל – to bring the individual’s potential into fruition. Hashem does not want our vast potential to go to waste; He wants us to maximize it, to use it to its very fullest. And this can only happen by being tested. People grow and develop new skills when circumstances force them to. So many people begin caring for their physical wellbeing when they face a health scare. People learn a new trade when they lose their job. Tests force us out of our comfort zone, and this is how we grow.

Ramban adds that Hashem wants our potential to materialize להיות לו שכר – so that we receive reward for our good deeds, and not merely for our good thoughts. לא שכר לב בלבד, מעשה טוב, –

Our כח isn’t enough. The key is to bring our potential into fruition, to translate our inner goodness and strongly-held values into concrete actions. This is why Hashem tests us – so that we act, produce, build, perform, and achieve.

The Real You

In an October 7, 1977 article in the *New York Times* entitled “What You See is the Real You,”⁶ psychiatrist Dr. Willard Gaylin rails against what he

6 Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/10/07/archives/what-you-see-is-the-real-you.html>.

calls “the prevalent tendency to think of the ‘inner’ man as the real man and the outer man as an illusion or pretender.” He laments that psychoanalysis, which probes people’s minds to uncover the reasons for their behavior, has led many to mistakenly identify a person based on his inner being, rather than his conduct, the way a person lives. Dr. Gaylin writes:

Few of us are prepared to substitute an X-ray of grandfather’s head for the portrait that hangs in the parlor. The inside of the man represents another view, not a truer one. A man may not always be what he appears to be; but what he appears to be is always a significant part of what he is. A man is the sum total of all his behavior. To probe for unconscious determinants of behavior and then define him in their terms exclusively, ignoring his overt behavior altogether, is a greater distortion than ignoring the unconscious completely....

I will not be told that the young man who earns his pocket money by mugging old ladies is “really” a good boy. Even my generous and expansive definition of goodness will not accommodate that particular form of self-advancement.

It does not count that beneath the rough exterior he has a heart – or, for that matter, an entire innards – of purest gold, locked away from human perception. You are for the most part what you seem to be, not what you would wish to be, nor, indeed, what you believe yourself to be.

Spare me, therefore, your good intentions, your inner sensitivities, your unarticulated and unexpressed love. And spare me also those tedious psychohistories which – by exposing the goodness inside the bad man, and the evil in the good – invariably establish a vulgar and perverse egalitarianism, as if the arrangement of what is outside and what is inside makes no moral difference...

I do not care to learn that Hitler’s heart was in the right place. A knowledge of the unconscious life of the man may be an adjunct to understanding his behavior. It is not a substitute for his behavior in describing him.

Dr. Gaylin proceeds to explain that a person's perception of himself, his self-definition, which often differs considerably from his outward behavior, is merely a fantasy:

The inner man is a fantasy. If it helps you to identify with one, by all means, do so; preserve it, cherish it, embrace it, but do not present it to others for evaluation or consideration, for excuse or exculpation, or, for that matter, for punishment or disapproval.

Like any fantasy, it serves your purposes alone. It has no standing in the real world which we share with each other. Those character traits, those attitudes, that behavior – that strange and alien stuff sticking out all over you – that's the real you!

So many of us walk around with a “fantasy” about who we are. We think we're an amazing parent, an amazing spouse, an amazing servant of Hashem, an amazing employee or businessman. Maybe, we truly even believe it. Nevertheless, these fantasies have no bearing on the real world if this is not how we are perceived.

הנסתרות לה' אלוקינו, והנגלות לנו ולבנינו עד עולם – *“That which is concealed is for Hashem our G-d; but what is revealed is for us and our children, forever”* (Devarim 29:28). Only Hashem sees what's inside our hearts, but everyone else – primarily our family, ולבנינו – sees our actions. Our thoughts and feelings have little value if they are known only to G-d and to nobody else. והנגלות לנו ולבנינו. Our children learn not from our inner thoughts and feelings, but from our actions. They cannot and do not feel our internal emotions of love, but only feel what we do for them, the time we make for them, the way we show them how important they are to us. Whether or not we are a good parent is determined not by our feelings for our children, but by how we act towards them.

Entering the courtyard of the *Beis HaMikdash*, on the way to the altar, one first encountered the *kiyor*, the basin from which the *kohanim* would wash before performing the service, and which was made from mirrors (במראות – *Shemos* 38:8). Rav Soloveitchik explains that before approaching the altar in an effort to draw close to Hashem, a person needs to take a good look at himself in the mirror. He needs to see who he really is, and not who he imagines himself to be. He looks into the mirror to see the person that

everyone else – his spouse, his children, his coworkers, his friends – sees, not the image of himself that he painted in his mind.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that the Hebrew verb for confession – התודה – is in the reflexive התפעל form. When we confess, we're talking primarily not to Hashem – who, quite obviously, already knows exactly what we did wrong – but to ourselves. Confession means repainting our image of ourselves, acknowledging out loud that we are not the person who we want to think we are. The process of repentance, which begins with *vidui* (confession), requires recognizing the real “you,” understanding and internalizing who we truly are, and seeing how we can be better.

What is Your Brand?

Renowned author Matthew Kelly, in his book *The Culture Solution*, includes a chapter entitled “Your Brand.” He writes:

Everybody has a brand. Some people's brand is “he is always late,” other people's brand is, “She is always so helpful” or “She is always the first to leave.” “He is such a hard worker.” “She is so committed.” The list goes on. Everybody has a personal brand, what do you want yours to be?

Some people overcommit and under-deliver, their brand becomes unreliable. Some people crush whatever project you give them. That becomes their brand. And every team has that person who wants the ball in those last seconds when it matters most, when one shot is the difference between winning and losing, the person who always comes through when it really matters. That's his personal brand.

Most people's personal brand is developed by default. It just happened. They didn't set out to create that brand, it just happened. What happens to companies that just let their brand happen? Right, they probably go out of business.

Businesses spend billions of dollars creating and perpetuating their brand. The least you can do is be intentional about it...

Whatever you want your brand to be, write it down, read it every day, and do at least one thing every day to demonstrate that brand.

What is your brand? What is your brand as a spouse, as a parent, as a congregant? What do the people around you think of when you come to mind? Is that the brand you want?

There is one place where you can reliably count on a person's brand being talked about at length. At every funeral I attend, I hear the family members describe the deceased's brand. When a grandchild says in the *hesped* that he never saw the grandparent get angry, that the grandparent always made time for the kids – this is the grandparent's brand. When a spouse talks about his wife's extraordinary acts of kindness, or a wife tells stories about how devoted to the sick and needy her husband was, this is remembering their brand.

A great way to determine your brand is taught by management guru Peter Drucker. He writes: *“Tell me what you value, and I might believe you. Show me your calendar and your bank statement, and I'll show you what you really value.”*

What we do with our time and money reveals much about our values and principles. Do we prioritize the body or the soul? Do we spend our time and money only on ourselves, or also on others? Looking over our credit card statement can give us a pretty good idea about who we really are.

Modern technology has given us another mirror showing us our “brand,” our true selves. Today, many phones have a feature that tracks how much time is spent on each app. If a congregant tells me, “Rabbi, believe me, I wish could attend more *shiurim*, but I just don't have time,” or, “Sorry, I'm too busy to help out in shul” – a quick glance at his screen time record will tell me whether he's being honest, or whether he is too busy because of all the time he spends scrolling through social media or watching Netflix.

If we review the amount of time we spend on our various apps, we get a good sense of our “brand.” And let us ask ourselves honestly, is this really what we want our “brand” to be?

Getting Into G-d's Wheelbarrow

The story is told of a tightrope walker who stood at the edge of a rope stretched over an enormous ravine, turned to the audience, and asked, “Who

thinks I can walk across this rope to the other side?” Around half the people raised their hands. He proceeded to easily cross to the other side.

He then turned to the crowd a second time and asked, “Who thinks I can walk across the rope blindfolded?” Around one-quarter of the audience raised their hands. He took out a blindfold, covered his eyes, and walked back to the other side.

He then asked how many people thought he could cross the tightrope with a wheelbarrow. By this point, few people doubted his abilities, and so nearly the entire audience raised their hands.

The tightrope walker then asked, “Who is willing to get inside the wheelbarrow as I cross?” Not one person in the audience raised his hand.

We talk about *emuna*, we affirm our belief in Hashem, but we must honestly ask ourselves, is this real or only lip service? Are we prepared to get into His wheelbarrow, to fully trust that He is taking us across the “tightrope” of life? Is *emuna* something we talk about or something we live with? If we truly believed that everything happens for a reason, that Hashem gives us precisely what we need and what is right for us, then we would never become angry, anxious, jealous or resentful. If we get flustered when things don’t go our way, then we need to consider whether our *emuna* is real, if it is something we live with, or something we just talk about.

קבעת עתים לתורה – Making a Plan

This can be applied in many other areas, as well. We talk about our commitment to *talmud Torah*, but do we make time for learning? When was our last *siyum*? Do we only talk about Torah learning, or do we put in the effort to do it?

The Gemara in *Maseches Shabbos* (31a) teaches that one of the questions we will be asked after we depart from this world is קבעת עתים לתורה? – whether or not we “set periods for Torah.” It does not suffice to talk about the importance of Torah; we have to be קובע עתים, build a schedule, devise a plan for when and how we will learn.

At the 12th *Siyum HaShas* in MetLife Stadium, Rav Yissachar Frand told a story about Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel זצ”ל, the revered Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva,

which made waves throughout the Torah world⁷:

An older *talmid* chacham Rabbi Nochum Stilerman had developed a personal study program for himself and sought Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel ztz”l’s endorsement for it. The program would have had Rabbi Stilerman completing two tractates of Talmud (*Brachos* and *Pesachim*) and the Sefer Tehillim by his next birthday, his 71st. Rav Finkel however sent Reb Nochum back to the drawing board.

“But what about the rest of the Torah?” the Rosh Yeshivah demanded. “Draw up a plan to finish kol haTorah kulah!” Reb Nochum went home and drew up a five-year plan to finish 12 *masechtos* (all of *Seder Moed*) all of Tanach and the *Sefer Mesilas Yescharim*. He brought a detailed printout to Rav Nosson Tzvi who reviewed it and said “But you’re not finishing *Sbas*!”

“Rosh Yeshivah,” Reb Nochum protested, “to finish *Sbas* according to this program I’ll need many many years.” “Go print out a learning program for the whole *Sbas*” Rav Nosson Tzvi insisted. “As well as Tanach the Shulchan Aruch and the machzorim of the Shalosh Regalim.” The Rosh Yeshivah himself intended to be Reb Nochum’s chavrusa for learning the machzorim.

Reb Nochum went home and with the help of his good friend Reb Meir Hellman developed and printed out the plan which also included the Lakewood Chazarah Program, a six-time review of each *sugya*. Some 2,500 pages later he had a program to present to the Rosh Yeshivah – a program that would take 23½ years to complete.

When Rav Nosson Tzvi saw the three-volume printout he exclaimed, “Now that’s a plan! THAT’S a plan!”

“But Rosh Yeshivah,” Reb Nochum objected, “I can’t do this! I’m already 70 and it would take me until I’m over 93 to finish this

⁷ Taken from *Mishpacha*, September 27, 2012, available online at <https://mishpacha.com/the-man-with-the-plan/>.

— at a pace of ten hours of learning a day! I hope to live to 120, but how can I undertake a plan that I can't possibly complete?"

The Rosh Yeshivah, who was battling Parkinson's, struggled mightily to stand up and while quivering in his place he said, "And do you think I can do what I'm doing? Look at me!"

Rav Nosson Tzvi then reached under his tablecloth and pulled out his plans for the Mir which included adding more buildings to the yeshivah and making space for even more *talmidim*.

"Do you think I can do this?" he asked Reb Nochum. "Of course I can't."

"But you and I have a great advantage," Rav Nosson Tzvi continued. "We both realize that we can't possibly do what we would like to do. Everyone else fools themselves into thinking that they can do what they want to do. You and I realize that we are in the hands of the *Ribono Shel Olam* and that we can't do more than commit ourselves to the task."

It's time to stop making excuses, stop telling ourselves, "I want to, but," and to start getting down to business. We need to draw up a plan, to make Torah learning a priority, and to get to work.

This is relevant to many other areas, as well. For example, *ahavas Yisrael*, love for our fellow Jews, is an ideal that so many people talk about, repeatedly and emphatically, but fail to put into practice. I have yet to meet somebody who professes to oppose *ahavas Yisrael*, who supports being nasty to Jews who aren't exactly like him. Yet, so many people who talk about diversity and pluralism do not hesitate to speak negatively about fellow Jews who dress differently, have different opinions or political leanings, or send their children to different schools. They talk openly about loving fellow Jews, but these are just words, which are not put into practice.

Torah values are lived, not just spoken about. Our words don't tell us who we are; our actions do.

The Transformative Power of Action

The *Sefer HaChinuch* repeatedly emphasizes throughout his book that אַחֲרֵי פְעוּלוֹת נַמְשָׁכִים הַלִּבּוֹת – our hearts are drawn after our actions. If we don't feel like acting a certain way, the best thing to do is to start, to do it anyway, to take the first step, to “fake it till you make it.”

The Lubavitcher Rebbe's outreach campaign was largely predicated on this concept. He understood very clearly how actions can change a person's heart. He would tell non-observant women to just light Shabbos candles every Friday, and instruct men to just put on *tefillin*. These actions led to other actions, gradually transforming people's lives.

This notion is reflected in the Rambam's famous remark in his commentary to *Pirkei Avos* (3:15) that it is preferable to give \$1 to one hundred different paupers than to give \$100 to a single pauper. The Rambam explains that each act of giving, regardless of the amount, has an effect on a person's character. The more frequently we act generously, the more generous we become. אַחֲרֵי הַפְעוּלוֹת נַמְשָׁכִים הַלִּבּוֹת.

An article appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on February 7, 2017 entitled, “Superhero Costumes Come to Parents' Rescue,”⁸ reporting on a remarkable study showing how children act differently when wearing a superhero costume. Wearing the costumes made the kids smarter and more responsible. One of the researchers explained, “Pretending to be strong and admirable can help a child take on those characteristics of competence and confidence.” Even if they did not at first feel competent and confident, the children began feeling that way once they wore a costume.

An earlier study, reported on by the *New York Times* on April 2, 2012,⁹ found that wearing a white coat which one thinks belongs to a doctor can increase attention span and concentration. Just dressing up as somebody we admire has an impact upon us, and enhances our ability to achieve. אַחֲרֵי הַפְעוּלוֹת נַמְשָׁכִים הַלִּבּוֹת. Even if we don't feel it, we need to do it, and then the feelings will come. Sometimes we need to start eating to build an appetite.

Whatever is inside our heads, no matter what we feel, we can and must act.

8 Available online at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/superhero-costumes-come-to-parents-rescue-1486482657>.

9 Available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/clothes-and-self-perception.html>.

This is true if, like the king of Khazars, our intentions are sincere and noble, and also if we feel unmotivated and uninspired. We are defined not by the נסתרות, by what we feel internally, but rather by the נגלות, by what we do.

No More Excuses

People reading this might, understandably, respond by thinking, understandably, that maybe it's true – that we want to, but we can't. What if we really cannot do all that we want to do?

The answer to this question is found in the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni, Nitzavim* 940), which relates the following remarkable story told by Eliyahu Ha'navi:

פעם אחת הייתי מהלך ומצאני אדם אחד היה מתלוצץ ומלעיג בדברי. אמרתי לו, מה תשיב ליוצרך ליום הדין? אמר לי, בינה ודעה לא נתנה לי שאקרא ואשנה. אמרתי לו, בני מה מלאכתך? א"ל צייד. ואני אמרתי לו, מי למדך שתטול פשתן ותארגנו מצודות ותשליכה לים ותעלה הדגים מן הים? אמר לי, בינה נתנו לי מן השמים. אמרתי לו, מה ליטול פשתן ולארוג מצודות להשליכהו לים להעלות בה דגים מן הים נתנו לך דעה ובינה מן השמים, לדברי תורה שכתוב בהם "כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאד" לא נתנו לך בינה ודעה מן השמים? מיד הרים קולו ובכה עד שאמרתי לו, אל ירע לך, שכל באי עולם משיבין תשובה זו אבל מעשיהם יהו מעידין בהם.

Once I was walking along the road, and a certain man who was jeering at and ridiculing my words found me. I said to him, "What will you respond to your Creator on the day of judgment?" He said to me, "I was not given wisdom or knowledge so that I could read and study." I said to him, "My son, what work do you do?" He told me, "A hunter." I said to him, "Who taught you to take flax, weave nets, throw them into the sea and pull fish out of the sea?" He told me, "I was given wisdom from the heavens." I said to him, "If you were given knowledge and wisdom from the heavens to take flax, weave nets, throw them into the sea and use them to pull fish from the sea, then for words of Torah, about which is written, "For the matter is very close to you" – you were not given wisdom and knowledge from the heavens?!"

He immediately raised his voice and cried, until I told him, “Do not be upset, for everyone in the world gives this response, but their actions will testify about them.”

If we don't think we have the capabilities to learn Torah, to perform *chesed*, to volunteer, to get involved – then we need to take a look at all the things we are able to do. If a person learned a trade and works as a professional, he clearly has the brains and ability to sit and learn Torah. If a person opened a business which he runs successfully, then he clearly has the drive and ability to get things done, to take on projects, and to make a difference. We just need to stop saying “I want to” and start doing it.

Let us start paying less attention to what we think, feel and say, and more attention to what we do and how we act. Let us take the vast reservoirs of *נח* within us and bring it *לפועל*, into fruition, so we can build for ourselves the lives of meaning and fulfillment that we want and ought to build.