

Breaking the Chains of Habit

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It's been almost 25 years since the Shawshank Redemption was released in theaters, yet it left a pretty big imprint on me and most of the people who have seen it. The movie is a masterpiece of American cinema. Although it is a story of life in prison, it's reach extends much further into a profound exploration of freedom that resonates even with those of us who've never spent time in lock up.

For those who missed this film, the basic plot arc follows an innocent man, Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) who is falsely accused and convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. He is imprisoned and becomes friend with a man named Red, played by Morgan Freeman. That friendship is a key component of Andy's time in jail.

There's this one poignant scene that's stuck with me all these years. Brooks is a long time inmate of 50 years. On the night before he's to be paroled, he attacks another prisoner, all in the hopes that he won't actually get released. Red explains why this went down to the other prisoners:

Brooks ain't no bug.

He's just...

He's just institutionalized...

The man's been in here 50 years, Heywood. 50 years.

This is all he knows.

In here, he's an important man.

He's an educated man.

Outside, he's nothing.

Just a used-up con with arthritis in both hands.

Probably couldn't get a library card if he tried.

You know what I'm trying to say?

You believe whatever you want, Floyd.

But I'm telling you, these walls are funny.
First you hate 'em... then you get used to 'em.
Enough time passes... you get so you depend on 'em.
That's institutionalized.

Those lines jumped back to mind this year when I encountered a long-forgotten moral parable about teshuvah from the 13th century. It's short, so here goes:

Our sages tell of a band of robbers who were thrown in prison by the king where they languished for a while till they dug an escape hatch and fled.

One of them, though, decided not to escape.

And when the jail keeper arrived and turned one way and caught sight of the escape hatch, then the other way and noticed the remaining prisoner, he said to him, "Fool! There's an escape hatch right before your eyes and you're not using it?" (Kohelet Rabbah 7:15)

For the ancient author, this parable speaks of our reluctance to let go of our destructive behaviors and embrace teshuvah, which is here depicted as an escape hatch. For Red, the reason prisoners don't seek freedom is because they've become so accustomed to the way things are, so institutionalized, that even when there's a way out, they don't take it.

Most of us haven't served time. Most of us aren't prisoners—yet when it comes to our bad habits—these two stories perfectly portray the resistance many of us have to change.

Maybe we've tried to kick a habit—checking email too frequently, eating too much, biting our nails, cutting ourselves, surfing pornography, playing videogames, smoking, drinking, gambling, ignoring our spouses or family—maybe we've tried to kick a habit and never had much success.

We probably read somewhere that if we can just stop doing something for three weeks—or three months—that the habit will be gone. Or if we tell others that we are going to stop, then that public admission will empower us to change. Or if only we ask God to help us stop...

Some of us may have had some success doing one of those things—and if that is you, *yashar koach!* You've done well. If it works for you, then you've found your path to *teshuvah*.

Too often though, people relapse or are never able to stop in the first place. Maybe after a few such failures, they've given up, thinking they can't change. Perhaps they think there's something wrong with them. But that's not how I think of God's world. What's really happening is that we've been taught wrong or ineffective ways to overcome these habitual stumbling blocks.

Thankfully, we now have a clearer view of what's required. One of the most powerful methods I know to change our

lives comes out of the modern science of habits. Over the past year, I read Charles Duhigg's best seller, "The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do In Life and Business." He dug into all we know about neurobiology and the science of habit to provide a concrete way we can change. The key is to recognize what Duhigg calls "the habit loop." These habit loops are a feature of how the brain saves energy by developing routines to avoid constantly having to make decisions. Up to 40% of our activities are habit-based.

Every habit has three parts: cue, routine, and reward. The "routine" is the habit we'd like to change, whether that is phone addiction, eating junk food or engaging in far riskier behaviors. Each of these routines is initiated by a cue and driven by a craving for a reward.

If we engage in a four-step process, we can reshape our bad habits by replacing them with productive habits. We create the habit we do want rather than stop the habit we don't want.

1. Duhigg says we first need to identify the routine. The first step is to recognize you've fallen into a pattern. In our tradition, we are urged "l'fashfesh et ma'aseinu" — to carefully examine our deeds. In his book, Duhigg uses the example of recognizing he's put on weight by eating a cookie every day.
2. Second, we need to experiment with different rewards. We have to discover the craving filled by the cookie by experimenting with other rewards, such as a cup of herbal tea or talking with a friend.
3. Third, we need to identify the cue. This is often the hardest part of breaking a habit. We have to learn if our habit-triggering cue is a location, time, or emotional state.
4. Fourth, we need to develop a plan. Habit change occurs when we substitute a better routine that is triggered by a known cue and delivers a reward you're craving. For Duhigg, he discovered that around 3 pm each day, he would get up from his work desk, walk to the cafeteria and eat a cookie. After experimenting

with different rewards, he discovered that what he really was craving was a break from work and a short social distraction. He substituted a talk with a friend. If he couldn't find a friend, he'd still walk to the cafeteria to find someone there, but now he would have a cup of tea instead of the cookie..

To recap: In order to change a habit, there are four steps we need to take.

Identify the routine.

Experiment with Rewards

Isolate the Cue

Have a plan

If you can't remember all the parts, don't worry. The ushers will have a handout of these steps in the Isaak Foyer when services end today.

What's compelling about this model is that it explains equally well how an inmate like the character Brooks

becomes institutionalized and how a high functioning author gets hooked on cookies. It also shows us a practical way to experiment so that we can rid ourselves of negative habits.

It's good to give up junk food. It's great to overcome a gambling addiction. Yet let's be real here for a minute. We only have so much time in a day. Yes, we now know the science of habit change, but if we want to turn our lives around, we need to find our keystone habit, that one habit change which will cause a cascade of other good effects in our lives. A keystone habit is sort of like a multiplier. For example, quitting smoking can be a keystone habit change. So a keystone habit is foundational to many of our other habits or behaviors.

All this got me thinking. We spend so much time focusing on what we've done wrong. Yom Kippur is considered by much of our tradition to be the happiest day of the year. Rather than focussing on our negative traits, what might a positive keystone habit look like?

I called my friend Mitch in Cleveland. It had been too long since we had spoken, and I knew he'd have a good story about the power of habits—because he's a self-aware guy who operates quite successfully in both the outer world and the inner realms.

Mitchell, you see, is a successful real estate developer. His company has built numerous high quality shopping centers, and recently finished a mixed-use high-rise condo in downtown Cleveland. Mitchell is a family man. A committed Jew. A solid *darshan* or sermon giver. He's also a ba'al tzedekah, someone who understands that philanthropy is an expression of gratitude for the God-given abundance that people like him are particularly tuned to tap into. It's all about the flow for him. In fact, one of the keystone habits he shared with me is that he practices "an attitude of gratitude." Abundance doesn't come from him, it all is an emanation from God, and so he has to let money flow through him to the next person as well. He's someone, in other words, who's successfully

navigated the spiritual dangers that money presents. It doesn't cause him to isolate himself away among those in a similar wealth category. It's just a part of his life's story, the way mahjong, a knitting circle or a writer's club, is to others. It's an important part of his identity, but it is only a part.

Mitchell, in other words, is one of the good guys. So I called him up with a question. "Mitch," what are some habits that you have cultivated that contributed to your success, or that helped you to overcome personal limitations?"

"That's a good question." He paused for a moment. "When I was 16, I was on the wrestling team. I wasn't really much good at it. One day, the coach stopped practice to speak with us about the importance of breath. He explained how powerful and centered you become when you can regulate your air intake, and with it your heart rate and blood pressure. He talked about how breath control can improve your performance. All of that

from breathing? It totally captivated me, and breath awareness has become a big part of my life.”

“So did it help your wrestling?”

“No, it didn’t actually, not really. Wrestling and I were going our separate ways soon enough. But it’s helped in the rest of my life ever since.”

Mitchell got pretty lucky in that he developed a positive habit before a negative one. When he discovered breath control at the age of 16, he wasn’t replacing a bad routine. Nonetheless, he taught himself early how to address his anxieties and distractions by breathing in a slow and controlled manner. Whenever he noticed his cue—feeling anxious or nervous or ill-at-ease—he adjusted his breath. That became his routine. And anyone who has meditated knows the reward of such habitual, measured breathing. You become calm and focused and experience a sense of inner strength and an awareness of your own competence to handle your challenges.

That habit, begun early, is known as a positive Keystone Habit—one upon which a host of other positive behaviors can cluster. Mitchell is certain that along with his “attitude of gratitude,” breath control has been an essential factor to the very successful life that he’s had. Ultimately, I suspect that deep down we all want and deserve a life that is equally successful on our own terms.

I also suspect that most of us play the fool and stay imprisoned by our bad habits even when there’s an escape hatch right before our eyes. There are ways we’ve all allowed our minds to become institutionalized by routines we barely pay attention to. One of the goals of the high holidays is to carve out time and space so we can take a look at our habits and consciously decide to continue them or correct them.

There’s something countercultural about all of this. Even though the self-help section of bookstores remains quite large, more and more you can hear pundits and

neurobiologists claim that humans don't have free will—and that free will is itself an illusion. Could there be any worse prison than that idea?

The science of habit restores our God-given freedom. We may not have choice in a given moment. That much is true. Our impulses, our habits control 40% of our actions. But that doesn't mean we aren't free. There's the other 60%. And, when we set new goals and adjust habits, we express our freedom by steering that habitual 40% of our lives.

Will we be like Brooks in the Shawshank Redemption? Will we let ourselves be caged and institutionalized? Will we remain locked in a cell of our own making? Or will we steer toward our best selves and our best lives?

I challenge you to change one bad habit in this coming year. I suspect that you will find that one positive change to be deeply empowering. It will shift your own sense of self. Imagine if everyone in our community overcomes

one bad habit! That would be profound, ground-shaking *teshuvah*. As Neveh Shalom marks our 150th anniversary, I can't think of a better way to celebrate.

One habit.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

What will you choose?