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The Importance of Consistency

This week's Torah portion continues to discuss the service of the Kohanim in the Tabernacle. Although the service involves many details, if we look at the big picture, an important theme emerges that teaches us a crucial lesson about how people grow and change.

The service in the *Mishkan* - and later in the *Beis Hamikdash* - consisted of a clearly defined, daily routine. For example, each day the service began with the *terumas hadeshen*, the removal of the ash from the previous day's sacrifices. The Kohanim also placed wood on the Altar each day to ensure that the fire burned continuously, and the *korban tamid*, mandatory daily offering that was offered first in the morning and at the end of the day.

The activities in the *Beis Hamikdash*, the spiritual epicenter of the world, followed a daily schedule of acts that never changed. The Torah is showing us that genuine, sustained growth does not come from sudden bursts of inspiration; it is attained through constant, consistent, and continuous actions that require unwavering commitment and persistence.

How do we make our own actions constant, consistent, and continuous?

1. Constant

Imagine you're stuck in traffic and the driver next to you opens his window and throws out a dollar bill. A minute later, as traffic is inching along, he throws out another dollar bill. You can't believe it! Every minute that you're stuck in traffic another dollar flies out the window!

Crazy, right? You've probably never seen that happen, and you probably never will. But how often do we throw a minute out the window, daydreaming and staring at nothing in particular? And then another minute and another... just killing time. Calculate the number of minutes we throw away any given week and add them all up. We are throwing away time that is worth way more than money.

Truly living means using your mind constantly. Whatever you are doing at any given moment - watching the news, working on a business deal, talking to a friend, reading this article - give it your full attention. Decide that you are willing to take the pain of thinking, of being aware, all day long.

Life is precious. Use it; don't kill it.

2. Consistent

Consistency is the key to spiritual growth and learning Torah. Just as children crave structure in order to thrive, even though they kick and scream at bedtime, our *yetzer hara* behaves best when you give it structure and a consistent routine. Otherwise it will be throwing a temper tantrum and bouncing off the walls, making it next to impossible for you to focus on the mitzvah at hand.

So select your goal and commit to doing daily activities to reach that goal in the same time, at the same place, and in the same way, as

much as reasonably possible.

For example, say your goal is to learn Shas, the entire Talmud. Set aside a time to learn, preferably with a *chavrusa*, a study partner, and make that time "holy" – no matter what, rain or shine, sickness or health, you show up and learn at that time. That is the power of commitment. Hammering away day in and day out carves out the path to change.

3. Continuous

Whenever you pursue a specific goal, strive to do it without interruption. It is more effective to study for one hour straight than for two hours with interruptions. Interruptions break your train of thought and limit your ability to retain information. You cannot bring a pot to a boil if you keep taking it off the fire. You have to reboil it all over again.

This razor focus is very difficult for today's attention-deficit, multi-tasking generation. Concentrating for 20 minutes with no interruptions – no emails, no phone calls, no getting up to get a drink – requires real effort. But it is essential. Try it. Set aside a certain time when you block everything else out, where you will not budge from the activity you're focusing on. You are not endangering your life!

You can practice this while riding on the bus or waiting at the dentist's office. Set yourself a goal of 15 minutes to focus exclusively on one subject. It may be a problem you're having at work, a personal goal, or learning a text. Little by little, increase your time. First 15 minutes, then 30 minutes, then one hour, then two hours. Once you hit four hours, you're sailing.

The Vilna Gaon, the great 18th century Jewish scholar, said that the first three hours and 59 minutes is stoking the furnace. By the fourth hour, the pot is boiling.

Rabbi Akiva and the Fire of Torah

Aish HaTorah was founded on the concept that lasting change comes through persistent repetition. Avos D'Rebbe Nosson (6:2) recounts that Rabbi Akiva was a complete ignoramus who did not know the *aleph beis* until the age of 40. What changed Rabbi Akiva and launched him on the path to becoming one of the greatest sages in the history of the Jewish People?

Avos D'Rebbe Nosson tells us that Rabbi Akiva bathed by a particular waterfall, and one day he noticed a rock with a hole right through it. He looked to see what caused the hole, and noticed that a steady drip of water was falling exactly where the hole was. Upon seeing this he made the following *kal v'chomer* (*a fortiori argument*). If water, which is soft, can make a hole in a rock, which is hard, then all the more so Torah, which is fire, can make a hole in the heart of a man, which is soft. This insight motivated him to learn, until he eventually became the great Rabbi Akiva, teacher of 24,000 students!

What did Rabbi Akiva see in the rock that so dramatically changed the direction of his life?

If you would ask someone watching water drip on a rock if a particular drop of water made any impact, the answer would almost certainly be no, because to the naked eye the impact is not noticeable. But the fact that there is now a hole in the rock means that every single drop counted.

Rabbi Akiva, like all of us, yearned for greatness in Torah. But he gave up on becoming great in Torah because he did not see that his learning was changing him. The rock showed him that he was wrong, and that every word of Torah he learned must be affecting him. It just takes time and patience to see the transformation.

Furthermore, the drops of water only made a hole in the rock because they fell in the exact same place over and over again. This point is the basis of all of Yiddishkeit. Every day we say the exact same *brachos* and *tefillos*, and we do the same daily mitzvos. It is through persistent repetition that we change and grow, by steadily inculcating the body with the concepts and aspirations of the soul.

When we learn Torah we must always remember that it is not possible for the finite heart of man to make contact with the infinite word of God and remain unchanged; it just takes time for that change to become manifest. Those who take that message to heart will have the ability to sit and learn, because they will know it is worth it – they are changing.

Our generation, more so than any other in Jewish history, is challenged by the problems of impatience and lack of discipline. Why? Because our generation lives in the era of post technology, and technology, despite its achievements, has trained all of us to expect instantaneous results in everything we undertake. Technology has the power to dramatically speed up all physical processes, from food preparation to communicating with our relatives abroad, but spiritual growth, acquisition of Torah, refining our *middos*, and a relationship with Hashem all require patience and discipline.

The above quote from Avos D'Rebbe Nosson, incidentally, was the inspiration behind the name Aish HaTorah, the Fire of Torah. And the message of Midrash is the basis of a Torah education, because without understanding the need for persistence and consistency, one can mistakenly give up on becoming great in learning – just as Rabbi Akiva initially did – and remain ignorant of the beauty and depth of Torah forever.

So whenever you see the name Aish HaTorah, remember the message of the rock: Greatness

in Torah is guaranteed, as long as you don't stop the water from dripping – one word at a time.



Keeping the Fire Burning

Judaism views every activity in life as an opportunity to bring ourselves closer to God. Everything can be utilized as a means toward achieving a connection with the Almighty. What we do—and what we don't do—matters.

Nothing is neutral, trivial, or without value. We've been given specific mitzvot to raise up the seemingly insignificant parts of our lives, yet we can lose ourselves in the daily grind. One's true essence can become subsumed by the superficial.

The allure of counterfeit success beckons us. It's easy to mistake illusion for truth. Rather than clearly viewing one's endeavors as a means toward a higher end, the success and recognition for which we strive can morph into ends in themselves. Material achievements can become the sole goal of one's toil and efforts. Self-absorption literally can encapsulate one's spirit. The larger picture, the broader, more expansive vision, becomes blurred and out of focus. If work, as a means to provide for your family, morphs into an all-consuming demand on your time, thoughts, and energy, ask yourself this question: What am I living for? Without continual awareness of one's greater purpose, one's spiritual inner fire

will burn out.

Burnout is a real issue, both in the workplace and at home. It poses a threat, both personally and professionally. Burnout negatively affects productivity, morale, relationships, and personal success. Much has been written about how to prevent, recognize, and deal with it. These are the pervasive symptoms of burnout:

1. Feeling lethargic and depleted of energy
2. Feelings of negativity and isolation
3. Reduced productivity

In this week's Torah portion, the Torah provides a lesson in the prevention of burnout.

A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the Altar; it shall not be extinguished.

The constant fire on the Altar of the *Mishkan* symbolizes the union between God and the people. It sheds light on the spiritual cause, and means for prevention, of burnout. Spiritual depletion can contribute to burnout. If one's inner essence, the soul, isn't properly nourished, eventually one will feel the effects. Take an example from a plant. If it goes unwatered for a period of time, it will begin to droop—a signal that it needs to be nourished. So too, a depleted soul will signal a person's mind and body that something is amiss and lacking.

Let's look deeper into what the continual fire on the Altar represents in our lives. Fire can represent the soul's yearning to ascend, to be unified with its source—God. It also represents the exuberant love of life and one's inner desire. Rabbi Moshe Alshich explains in his Torah commentary that the "fire burning in the *Mishkan* symbolizes the love for God that burns within every soul." I'd like to suggest that, perhaps, this fire also represents God's

love and constant presence in our lives. Thus, this continual fire is a reciprocal love. We see on the Altar a blending of both Divine and human fires, synthesized as one.

The Divine fire within our hearts and souls is fueled by our enthusiastic desire to come close to God. Studying His Torah, revealing His Presence in the world, and fulfilling His commandments are the means by which to achieve this great end.

It is often noted that the Hebrew words *mitzvah* and *tzav* (the name of this Torah portion) share a common root that means "command." The root of these words, however, is also the root of the Aramaic word *tzavtah*, which means "connection." Creating a connection is at the root of each of God's mitzvot. The mitzvot act as connectors, creating a spiritual connection between the Almighty and His creations. They are imperatives, not suggestions. Of course, a person has free choice to ignore them or to pretend that they don't apply to him or her, but that doesn't change the fact that they are commandments, not just recommendations.

What would happen if you repeatedly ignored your electric bill or pretended that traffic laws didn't apply to you? Eventually these things would catch up with you, wouldn't they? Likewise, there are consequences to ignoring God's commands. Such consequences can manifest themselves spiritually and physically.

Chassidic thought and philosophy teach how to renew one's zest and enthusiasm for life on a daily basis. Without daily *rejewvenation*, most of us can become complacent and unable to move outside of our comfort zones. We may start to stagnate.

A story is told of the founder of the Chabad movement, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. When he was a young student, his teacher, the Maggid of Mezritch, repeated the following

verse from this Torah portion ten times: “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the Altar; it shall not be extinguished.” He explained that the Hebrew words “*lo yichbeh*—it shall not be extinguished” could also be read as “the ‘no’ [i.e., all negativity] shall be extinguished.” He went on to expand on how the deep teachings of *Chassidus* ignite and fan the soul’s natural tendency to light up with a passionate love for God. As this fire burns, it “extinguishes” all negative influences that try to derail the positive drive for holiness and the *burning* desire to be nearer to God.

This teaching can remind us that our inner flame must be maintained continually. We must provide our souls with spiritual fuel, so that the innermost sparks will ignite a flaming fire—a fire that will burn perpetually and not be extinguished. Such is the secret of ongoing vitality: the fire of faith and living with renewed purpose.

Remember: “A perpetual fire shall be kept burning on the Altar; it shall not be extinguished.” Studying God’s Torah, fulfilling His mitzvot, and revealing His Presence in the world are ongoing purposes. Yet somehow, one can become passive and complacent, without a sense of renewal. Our ongoing relationship with God and His Torah must not become merely intellectual or overly academic. This lacks emotion, warmth, and spirit. Torah study and observance should set our souls, minds, and hearts aflame. We should feel spiritually illuminated by its brilliant clarity.

The spiritual inner flame needs to burn continually. Should there be a lapse, negativity can fill the resulting void. During those times, life’s circumstances can cause us to feel pessimistic. We can find ourselves distant from the Torah’s refined and lofty expectations of us.

Even in times of struggle, we need to keep our fire burning. We must, as the saying goes,

“keep on keeping on.” Yet, when we are burdened with negative spiritual baggage, it may seem nearly impossible to live up to the Torah’s imperatives and ideals. But it’s just the opposite! Being overcome by negativity and self-doubt are the real obstacles to overcome.

The Divine flame may be dormant in some of our hearts, but the embers are still there, awaiting to be reignited. Gradually, you can overcome every impediment, eventually reclaiming and *rejewvinating* that holy spark within you. Only this time, because of, not in spite of, your struggle, you’ll attain an even greater spiritual vantage point than ever before. Your inner flame is waiting to be reignited.

Making It Relevant

1. Keep in mind that everything you do—including “small” things like what you say and what you eat—has significance.
2. Mindfully acknowledge any signs of burnout. Rather than being reactive, be proactive, before these signs become overwhelming to you. In addition to exercise and proper nutrition, reach out to any and all true Torah sources for a boost and spiritual nourishment.
3. Remember that we become what we repeatedly do. Select a mitzvah and commit to performing it with a positive attitude each day. Use it to keep the fire burning and then transfer the flame to other mitzvot and other people.
4. Keep a set schedule for daily prayer, Torah study, and self-reflection.



The Sacred Art of Giving Thanks

After a near-death experience, time seems to slow down. Every breath feels precious, every moment more vivid. But rather than keeping this heightened awareness to ourselves, the Torah commands survivors to do something unexpected - throw an epic celebration.

Among the many offerings detailed in this week's Torah portion, there's one that stands out - the Thanksgiving Offering (*Korbon Todah*). Those who encounter miraculous deliverance—be it from perilous journeys across seas or deserts, liberation from incarceration, or recovery from life-threatening illnesses—must bring a *Korbon Todah*. This offering consists of an animal alongside a whopping 40 loaves of bread, split equally between chametz (leavened bread) and matzah (unleavened bread). And here's the kicker: the full roasted animal and all its breads must be consumed BY THE NEXT MORNING!

This unique offering raises some fascinating questions:

1. Why such an overwhelming quantity of food?
2. Why the rush to eat it all in one night?
3. And what's the significance of the equal amounts of matzah and chametz?

No other Temple offering has these features. Finally...

4. How do all these features add up to the perfect expression of thanksgiving for a life-saving miracle?

The Divine BBQ Party

To answer the first two questions: if you had to finish enough food for a small village in one night, what would you do? You'd invite everyone you know - friends, family, and maybe even a few strangers! The Thanksgiving Offering is a divine invitation to throw the ultimate barbecue!

Why does the Torah mandate hosting a massive party to express thanks? Because when you almost die, you can't help but feel overwhelmed with gratitude and suddenly understand how fragile life really is.

I learned this firsthand while hiking in the Indian Himalayas. A poor calculation sent me hurtling headfirst off a 25-foot cliff. Miraculously, I walked away with nothing but a giant bruise on my backside. When I realized that I had not only survived but came away essentially unscathed, my whole perspective shifted. I didn't believe in God back then, but I couldn't shake the feeling that a force from beyond reached out and caught me mid-fall. For the next few days, everything felt different - from spending time with people I loved to just eating breakfast - it all felt more meaningful, more precious.

At the time, I was not aware of the Torah's prescription for one who experiences such miraculous salvation. But from the *Korbon Todah*, we clearly see that God wants us to reciprocate the gift of life by sharing our experience with others. God reached out and saved you. Now do your part and reach out to share that miracle with others. Host a massive barbecue, feed your guests, and inspire them with your miraculous story!

The Bread of Freedom and

Humility

Now, let's tackle the matzah-chametz conundrum. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch reveals a profound insight into the *Todah's* equal measures of chametz and matzah: When God saves us from danger, we regain our freedom - our ability to live and choose as we please. This independence is symbolized by chametz - the fully risen dough represents our ability to fully stand on our own. But that's only half the story. We didn't earn this freedom - God gave it to us. That's why we bring matzah alongside the chametz - the flat, unleavened bread reminds us Who really lifted us up.

The *Todah* requires equal amounts of both because they represent two sides of the same miracle: our complete restoration and our recognition of its Source. Together, they reveal the true richness of our independence - our new lease on life becomes more precious precisely because we understand it as a gift from God.¹

Using this understanding of chametz and matzah, we can now answer a puzzling line from the Passover Seder. In the *Ma Nishtana* our children ask, "Why on all other nights do we eat chametz and matzah, but on this night only matzah?" Ever wonder which other nights they're referring to? When do we eat chametz and matzah together? Most of us just eat bread - chametz!

Rabbi Shaul of Amsterdam offers a fascinating explanation: The questions of *Ma Nishtana* originate from Temple times, when every child would recognize the Seder's striking similarity to a *Todah* celebration. Think about it - a sacrificial meal, family and friends gathered around the table, lots of bread accompanying the feast. And, as the Vilna Gaon points out, the Exodus contained all four experiences that require a *Todah*:

1. We crossed the sea [to put it mildly!].

2. We traveled through the desert.
3. We were rescued from hazardous slavery.
4. We were released from bondage.

Everything you'd expect at a *Todah* celebration is there on Seder night. Except for one thing...

Where's the chametz?

Using Rabbi Hirsch's explanation for the role of chametz and matzah in the *Korbon Todah*, I think we can answer the child's question: On Passover night, we weren't truly independent. Yes, we were physically free from Egypt, but without purpose or direction except following God - like utterly dependent newborns. That's why on Passover, we eat only matzah.

When did we gain true independence? Fifty days later at Mount Sinai, when receiving the Torah gave us our mission in the world. On Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah, we bring an offering the Ramban also calls a *Todah*. And what does it contain? Massive loaves of chametz! These loaves represent the completion of our independence. Together with the matzahs of Passover, they form the perfect *Korbon Todah*.

Sharing Our Blessings

The Thanksgiving Offering reveals a profound truth: gratitude, by its very nature, demands to be shared. While dramatic brushes with mortality certainly command attention, they're not the only miracles worthy of celebration. Every day brings countless moments that deserve recognition - the "chance" encounter that changes life's direction, the birth of a child, the friend who reaches out right when we need them most - our lives are filled with these everyday miracles.

While we may not have the Temple today, the *Todah's* Offering's blueprint for thanksgiving remains our guide. Every Shabbat table can

become an altar of gratitude, every gathering an opportunity to share stories of divine providence. Your experiences - whether dramatic tales of survival or quiet moments of grace - carry within them sparks of the divine. Don't let them fade into private memory. Gather your loved ones, share your stories, and recognize together how God's presence fills every moment of our lives.

When we recognize and share our blessings with others, we transform our entire existence into a constant celebration of the miraculous.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

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1. The word "*Todah*" shares its root with "*modeh*" - to admit or acknowledge. A person bringing a *Toda* isn't just saying thank you; they're acknowledging and admitting that their salvation came from God.