

Last spring my friend Portlyn talked me into lifting weights.

At first I said no.

I am not a gym person and it is so far out of my comfort zone I can barely see it from here. I do not enjoy exercise, I don't get that endorphin rush that even casual athletes talk about, but I know it is good for you and Portlyn persisted and so I eventually gave in and called the gym.

The first time I walked in the door I wanted to turn around and walk out again. It seemed that everyone around me knew exactly what they were doing: what to wear, what kind of water bottle to have, where to stand and how to move... Everyone looked like they had a purpose, whereas I had no clue and I was sure everyone could tell that I didn't belong.

I was so uncomfortable that I could feel it on my skin, that sense of unease that everyone was staring at me and finding me lacking. I did, in fact turn around, and there was my friend, blocking the door and reminding me that nobody was looking at me or even cared about what shoes I was wearing. It was awkward and I did not like it, but I *did* go back and kept going back.

I still don't really enjoy it. It's still outside my comfort zone, and I still feel awkward, but I am getting stronger so I keep going. But every time I start to get a bit more comfortable, every time I start to feel like I'm getting the hang

of it, someone hands me another weight and I am shoved right back out of my comfort zone.

I'm pretty sure we've all heard that phrase: the "comfort zone." It was first defined back in 1907, when two psychologists — Robert Yerkes and John Dodson — discovered that there is an "anxiety neutral" zone where one has very little anxiety and very steady behavior: the comfort zone.

It's not surprising that humans are most comfortable in the absence of anxiety, there is a whole industry dedicated to relieving anxiety and stress. And while there is nothing wrong with feeling at ease, staying in your comfort zone leaves you with no reason to grow or change. And the longer you stay in your comfort zone the more challenging it is to get out of it; it can lead to a state of inertia.

What Yerkes and Dodson discovered through experiment is something we instinctively know: to grow we need to try new things. To change we need to be disturbed. We need to push ourselves to do things we're not quite sure about.

Sometimes we're forced out of our comfort zones — we lose a job, we suffer an injury, or we lose people we love. Sometimes we choose to leave the comfortable behind by taking a risk and discover we are capable of far more than we thought.

The Torah is filled with examples of people who could only achieve greatness once they stepped outside of their comfort zone.

Adam and Eve could not stay in the Garden of Eden, as comfortable as it was; there was no chance to become fully human until they left and were forced to find a new way. Judaism teaches that leaving the Garden was necessary.

Abraham and Sarah had to leave their home to connect with God and to parent a nation. And when they got comfortable — when they finally had a son who would be the first of descendants as numerous as the stars — God demanded that Isaac be sacrificed, testing Abraham's core beliefs.

Jacob, too, had to leave home in order to create his new family — and along the way he wrestled with himself to forge a relationship with God. He also had to deal with what was assuredly an awkward confrontation, meeting face-to-face with the brother he had tricked out of his birthright. Without these trials Jacob would not have grown from a spoiled, favored boy into a man and the father of a nation.

Moses was uncomfortable with his role as leader of the Jewish people, but he had to stretch past his discomfort before he could lead them out of slavery to freedom. And as terrible as slavery was, the Israelites had become comfortable there; once free, they constantly complained about the

desert and even asked to go back to Egypt. But the path to freedom in the promised land could only be found while wandering in the desert.

I could go on and on with examples in Torah — not just because it is our tradition, but because it is in my comfort zone. But to really understand what it means to push ourselves and why we need to do so, we need to get out of my comfort zone and into mussar.

Mussar is relatively new for me. I can admit that I am not as versed in it as I am in Torah and I have to also admit that saying in front of all of you that I don't know something is way out of my comfort zone.

The word "mussar" means instruction, but we understand it as self-improvement that focuses on living a more conscientious life and heightening our awareness of the world and our responsibilities in it. In short mussar is about "becoming more of a mensch."¹

Our examples in the Torah teach us why it is important to make a change, but mussar tells us exactly how to do it — it is a step-by-step action plan. Most of our days are taken up by doing just what we have always done; mussar challenges us to recognize these moments and to make better choices so that our actions align with our values.

¹ <http://www.reformjudaism.org/musar-discussion-and-study-guide>

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, an early 20th century philosopher considered one of the great mussar teachers, had a method for improving and changing behavior. He taught about the concept of a *bechirah* point, or a “decision” point. We all have one, and for each of us it is different.

Most of our decisions are habits, things that we don’t necessarily even think about — it is obvious to us, says Dessler, how we will respond in the majority of situations. A *bechirah* point is different — it’s a moment that gives us pause and makes us question our values — a choice we’ve never had to make before and possibly will never encounter again. Everyone’s *choice* point is unique, and it changes as we mature and change.²

How do we change? Jewish wisdom understands that we each have two impulses which pull us in different directions. The *yetzer tov* — our good inclination — is the voice that reminds us of the truth; some people call that voice our conscience. The *yetzer ra*, also called our evil inclination is our selfish impulse, our greedy impulse, or jealous reaction; it encourages us to see the world as if it exists only for our personal benefit. When faced with a choice we may know what’s right, but our self-interest can lead us astray. These two forces are constantly at odds with each other, but we can train our *yetzer tov*, our good inclination to be the stronger force.

And as we make decisions about our actions the balance between the *yetzer tov* and the *yetzer ra* changes. The more we listen to our good

² Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, translated by Rabbi Aryeh Carmel, pp.53-56

inclination, the better choices we make and we can change our habits for the better and become our best selves.

Mussar is a way to do this. We know that one-time resolutions are not the path to change — how many of us are still making the same promises we made last year, still asking for forgiveness for the same things as last year? We can't expect to become new people overnight, to wake up tomorrow on Rosh Hashanah morning transformed — but we can make better choices. You *can* remain content in your comfort zone... but if you do, you will never realize your full potential. Real change is in the details.

The details are often easily overlooked and our slide into sin can be so slow and subtle that we do not even notice our own bad behavior. If not held in check our moral compass will shift and we will no longer recognize when we are wrong.

That is why we come here on Rosh Hashanah: to determine where we have gotten off-track. To shift the battle line between our *yetzer tov* and *yetzer ra*. When our habits and behaviors are more ethical, the territory controlled by our *yetzer tov* gets larger and we become more virtuous.

One of the places your *bechirah* points come into play is when you have to decide, do you speak up when a friend tells an offensive joke or do you laugh it off? Do you look the other way when someone is being harassed

because it's none of your business? Do you remain quiet when a colleague says something derogatory because everyone has their own opinion?

When we avoid speaking out because it is uncomfortable we not only move ourselves toward our *yetzer ra*, our evil inclination — we move our whole culture in that direction as well.

Over the past few weeks the National Football League has been an example of what happens when our cultures moral compass slips. A video came to light of an unconscious woman being dragged from an elevator by an NFL player. Minor charges were filed and the offender was suspended for two games... but these reactions were minor and perfunctory, and passed nearly without comment. We did not reach a collective *bechirah* point until a more graphic video surfaced — of this player punching the woman so hard he knocked her unconscious. The circumstances had not changed, but it was not until faced with the images of that kind of violence, the NFL and the public could no longer ignore it.

But the sad truth is that our culture can tolerate knowing that women are victimized; we acknowledge it's wrong, and yet we don't do anything to change it. Violence against women on college campuses is almost a given. The "yesallwomen" campaign of the summer showed just how common misogyny and harassment of women is. It shows how far off course we are that we need to see graphic violence before we say that we are upset by it.

We know it exists, but it takes video footage to really make us uncomfortable.

When it comes to cultural change, it often takes huge violations for us to recognize that we need to change. As Jews we must not shrug our shoulders and say, “that is just the way things are; it is too big to fix.” There are some things about which we must never say “boys will be boys.” As Jews we are called to stand up for the vulnerable and to notice when our society is drifting toward our collective *yetzer ra*. When the Torah says we have to take care of strangers, widows and orphans, that is our call to stand up for all who are suffering from an imbalance of power. We are obligated to get out of our comfort zones, to say the unpopular thing, to shine a bright light on injustice and to demand change when change is so clearly needed. How we treat the weak, the disenfranchised, the minority populations, and those not in power is a barometer of how we are doing as a society. In addition to personal reflection on Rosh Hashanah we need to reflect on what needs to change in the world around us, we should not be comfortable with the way our society treats the marginalized.

If we have become complacent about a little misogyny or a little homophobia — if we are not offended because it is just a little bigotry, a little racism — if we don’t speak out about a little anti-Zionism, a little anti-Semitism — then we surely need to get out of our comfort zones.

Judaism requires that we have to go beyond what *feels* good to what *is* good. We have a higher purpose: to be God's partners in creating a more perfect world, to spread justice, to care for others, to find meaning in our lives.

Over the next ten days your task is to think of all the ways you have become comfortable and complacent...and ultimately that kind of introspection can lead you to take new risks and stretch beyond your limits. By being aware of our personal *bechirah* points, our decision points and how they shift as we evolve, we can see a path to righteousness. By being aware of what is happening in the world around us we have a chance to bring cultural change. At Rosh Hashanah we are reminded to think of the trajectory of our lives, we are reminded to think long-term, to think about who we are and who we want to be and the kind of society we want to live in — we are challenged to grow and change. We are also challenged to make a difference — to remember our role in the world, to work to create a more just society.

May this New Year be a year of growth and change for us. May our worship here together inspire us to move beyond what is comfortable to what is challenging. May you recognize all the moments you are faced with a choice and may you find the strength to make good choices. May your *yetzer tov* always speak louder than your *yetzer ra*. May all the little steps you take in this New Year lead you to a life of increased meaning and holiness.