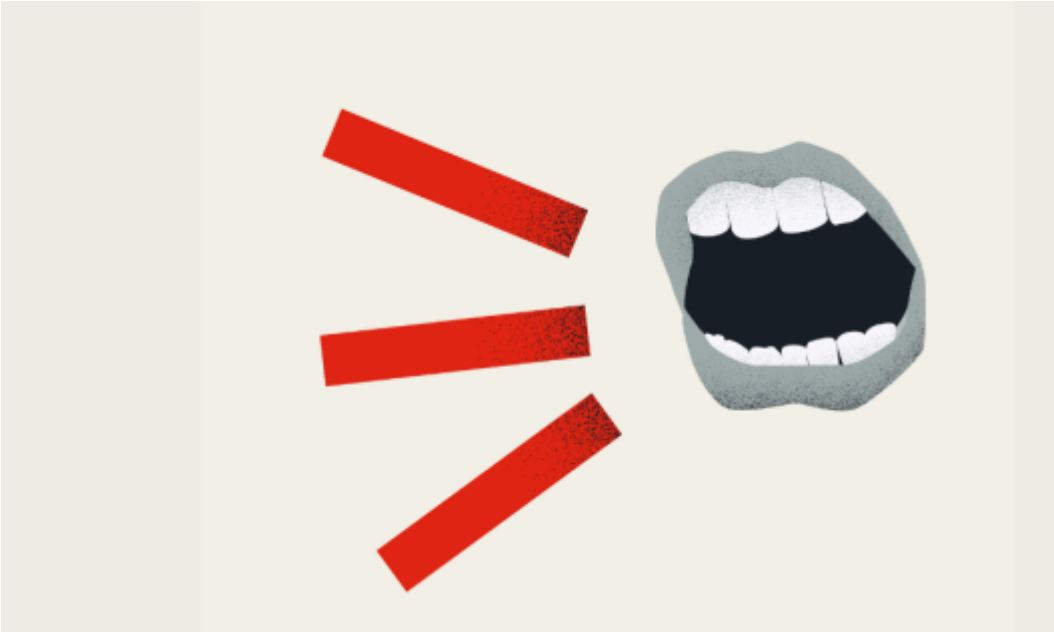
Avoiding Bad Advice and Unhealthy Change



Is change good or bad? Teshuva sounds like great change, a process of reinventing self for the better. That sounds like good change. In Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, salesman Gregor Samsa changes into a huge insect. That change doesn't sound so good.

All this is to say that just because we change—or want to change—does not mean that the change is good. We can develop bad habits, harmful beliefs, or destructive behaviors. And that can all happen under the guise of "growth" and "positive development."

As we journey forward toward better versions of ourselves, we turn to 18Forty guests for their wise words on avoiding bad advice and unhealthy change.

When Miriam Gisser's first husband relapsed into his drug addiction, it weighed heavily on her marriage, her family, and her life. While seeking guidance and direction, she learned that not all well-intentioned people are qualified to offer assistance—even if they're quite knowledgeable elsewhere.

David Bashevkin:

Tell me, I just want to frame one point in this. I want you to unpack a little bit about why you felt… You had mentioned that you didn't feel comfortable reaching out to rabbis or your typical mentors. Was that because of your own insecurity in the trajectory of your religious journey? Was it because of the sensational way that your religious journey was structured and what you were dealing with? Why wasn't it that your story could be solved or fixed by just the normal… I don't know, speak to a rabbi?

Miriam Gisser:

I don't want to make a generalization, because a lot of rabbis do understand addiction, but rabbis don't understand addiction. And so, when you go to a rabbi and say, and I'm going to be very blunt now, "I have to go to the mikvah tonight and I do not want to be with my husband because he is emotionally abusive," and they say, "Well, you have to go and you have to daven," I'm sorry, I don't want to go to a rabbi. Right? So, they meant well, like God forbid I would never, ever say anything bad about it, they meant well, but … they don't know addiction, they don't understand what it's like to be married to an addict, and they don't understand the emotions and the crazy that I was living. But when I called my sponsor in Al-Anon and said, "I don't want to be with my husband," she was like, "So don't. You need to be true to yourself. You need to listen to your gut, you need to pray about it, talk to your higher power, and then do what you know is right for you." So she didn't negate God. God was there. Pray about it. But then do what's good for you.

Even the brightest people cannot know for certain what you need. It takes acute self-awareness to tend to your individual needs, and sometimes, only you can know that best. For Alex Clare, his change in religiosity brought challenges, but with the right support, it balanced out well.

Alex Clare:

I think in my religious development, I did go in unhealthily. Teshuva is such a process that anyone who goes in perfectly, it's not really a teshuva. But the process of teshuva itself is not perfect. It's a very broken, bumpy road, where it really attracts extreme personalities. And I think there have been times, and I really have gone into things like, bang, let's learn 15 hours a day. Daven at netz every single day, I'm going to go to the ritual area and go to the mikvah everyday. Doing all these very, very heavy things. And a part of my teshuva process itself is actually to try and come back from a lot of those places which I don't think were very healthy. I really don't think they're very healthy.…You'd have to have good people around you and supportive people, and have the right role models. Because I know I've gone to certain extremes in my religious journey, and that's, again, part of the learning process.

Simply put: You need balanced, reliable mentors to guide you so you don't lose your way. Rambam writes about individuals who "taste the bitter as sweet and the sweet as bitter." Their whole conception of right and wrong—in terms of values, self, life—is off. The solution, Rambam says, is to "go to the wise who are doctors of the souls and they will heal their disease with tendencies wherein they will instruct them until they will bring them back to the right way" (Hilchot Deot 2:1).

Shifting gears, we turn to different droplets of wisdom gleaned from our guests. Here are some favorites:

Rav Judah Mischel spoke about the importance of respecting and not judging other's struggles or journeys. Responding to how he balances his expectations, as an educator, "with a couple or an individual figuring it out." His words were passionate and heartfelt:

When we hug someone, I'm not looking for tzitzis. Also, this implies again, a misunderstanding. The whole question is predicated on this misunderstanding of what it means to be someone who is a baal teshuva, what it means to be someone who is close to Hashem. We're all in process, and every day is another page in a chapter, in a book of our lives, and we're in the middle of the story. People are working through what they're working through. It's not anyone's job to be writing somebody else's story. …We're not the Ribbono Shel Olam's IRS agents over here, checking people's stubs, and looking through their papers, and going through their filing cabinets. It's not our place in the world. We're all on this journey together, we're all walking each other home. And teshuva is a lifelong process, a lifelong process. We have to be very patient with ourselves and with others, and focus on what's going right, and what's positive, and what's good.

… Myself, I mean, does anybody know, do we all know each other's internet history? Do we know what we're doing with our bein hazmanim in between activities on our off days? Does everybody know what goes on in someone else's bedroom, someone else's Shabbos table, when there's not guests there? No one knows anything. So why do we presume to know what a person's going through, or what another couple's going through, another family is going through? It's not our place. It's just not our place. It's not true. It's not real, and it's not appropriate. The opposite is true. The only thing we can see in other people is to try to find the things that are good, and that we have in common that we can grow together with.

Do we see people with eyes of compassion, a soft view? That is Rav Judah's message to us. Alex Clare builds off that note, reminding us to never deny or suppress our past; we should own it.

Alex Clare:

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, of blessed memory, he was very anti the baal teshuva movement in the conventional sense of the word, because he very much felt that people were unique and special. And often, when people are going through a process of change and a process of growth, they begin to resent some parts of themselves from their past, certain memories. And they want to divorce themselves from themselves completely, because it's painful to face and to deal with those things. And in the process, they end up white washing or deleting their personality, or the things that make them truly unique, which is traumatic. Not traumatic, it's really trying to deal with the trauma in a way of just throwing a bucket of sand over and being like, "Yep, this is fine. I'll move on now."

Miriam Gisser shared two particularly important insights with us. One on making responsible decisions, and the other on knowing our own limitations. When considering to divorce her first husband, she was told “Don’t make any big emotional decisions in the heat of the destruction you have to wait.” She thought that was brilliant.

Miriam Gisser:

And that is a piece that Al-Anon really gave to me. Don’t make any big decisions, sit and wait. And the best advice my sponsor gave to me was, don’t talk, just watch. And you’ll know what you have to do. And at that point, I watched. And I even told this to Meilech, I said, “It’s November. I’m going to give this six weeks. You get help, great. If you don’t, great.” And I didn’t say anything. Literally, I did not say anything, and I just watched. And it became so clear to me that this is what I had to do for my family. And I don’t think I could have done that after he relapsed the first time.

On that same note, she learned about the harm done to herself in trying to heal her first husband. Al-Anon guided her there, too:

Okay. So when you come into the rooms of Al-Anon, you’ll hear a lot, “I came to fix him, and I stayed because it made me better.” So, going into Al-Anon I believed that if I went to these groups, and I worked the twelve steps, then he wouldn’t use again. And the point of Al-Anon is not to fix your addict. The point of Al-Anon is to create a stronger person in you, a person that believes in themselves, a confident person, a person that recognizes they can’t control the addict, they didn’t cause his addiction, and they can’t cure it, and a person that can live in the world and be happy despite whatever their addict is doing.

This is all a lot to digest, but it’s important we give ourselves time to do so. We don’t just want change—we want good, positive change. Alex Clare’s parting advice is something we should let sink in:

The three Hs. You got to be healthy, happy, then holy. To tell someone, taking care of yourself physically, taking care of yourself mentally, is a prerequisite before you can do things in avodas Hashem, in being a spiritual person. …you have to make that some sort of a priority.