

On the Honest Work of Becoming



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“Today I am 120 years old” (Devarim 31:2)

As each year comes to an end and one reaches Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a person gets a little older, has more experiences in life, meets new people, and sees more of the greater world. There is an old Jewish custom to wish a person “*Ad meah ve’esrim*”—may you live until 120 years old. What is the source for this custom?

There are some commentators who say that it comes from a verse in the beginning of the Torah describing the mortality of human beings. “Then God said, ‘My Spirit will not struggle with human beings forever. They are mortal and their days will be a hundred and twenty years’” (Bereishit 6:3). However, there are other commentators who say that the source comes from a description of Moshe Rabbeinu at the end of the Torah. “And Moshe went, and he spoke the following words to all of Israel. He said to them, ‘Today I am 120 years old. I can no longer go or come’” (Devarim 31:2.).

One of the lessons we can learn from this is that we are not only wishing a person to live until one hundred and twenty years old, but also that they should grow older in the path of Moshe. How did Moshe grow old? A few chapters later, there is a similar verse stating Moshe's age, yet this time it adds a description of how he grew older. "Moshe was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone" (Ibid. 34:7). In other words, as each year passed by, not only did Moshe become older, but he also became stronger, developed more inner strength and discipline, and continued to strive toward higher spiritual goals.

Never Stop Growing

According to Rav Kook, one of the signs that a person is truly holy is that they never stop growing and developing their personality. Such a person continues to find more and more things to fix inside of their soul. In *Orot HaKodesh*, Rav Kook writes:

The call to purify one's character never ends. One may have already purified it when on an intermediate spiritual level; however, after growing further, new mysteries of life that have not yet been exposed emerge from the depths of chaos for one to refine and clarify. There are holy people who never cease growing. They go from strength to strength, always engaged in practical repentance, of which purifying and refining one's character is a vital ingredient (*Orot HaKodesh* 3, p. 233).

For Rav Kook, the goal of a spiritual life is not to reach some abstract perfection (which is impossible in Rav Kook's eyes), but rather to develop a passion for growth. For example, a person inclined towards worry and anxiety makes a conscious effort to find ways to become calmer and less anxious. Or a person inclined towards anger makes a deliberate decision to find ways to become less reactive, frustrated and irritated.

To use Rav Kook's language, one of the reasons why Moshe Rabbeinu is such a role model is because he never stopped growing and purifying his character. "There are holy people who never cease growing. They go from strength to strength, always engaged in practical repentance, of which purifying and refining one's character is a vital ingredient" (Ibid.). Indeed, even until the age of 120 years old Moshe continued to strengthen his personality and rid himself of any new flaws or imperfections he discovered. "Moshe was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone" (Devarim 34:7).

This principle is not only true on an individual level, but also on a national level. The Jewish People are over 3,000 years old and as of 2025, the State of Israel is 77 years old. We as a nation must never believe that we have reached ultimate perfection. The nation must continually strive toward becoming a better version of itself—on a physical, ethical, and spiritual level.

Therefore, as we reach the end of each year and go through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, this is the question we must ask ourselves: How can we follow in the pathway of Moshe Rabbeinu—of growing older in a way that continues to develop and push ourselves in matters of individual and national growth? How can we walk in Moshe's footsteps—of reaching the age of 120 yet never stopping to grow stronger and strive toward higher spiritual goals?

A Yearly Spiritual Exercise

In his book *Tzav VeZiruz*, the Piaseczna Rebbe recommends that a person do the following spiritual exercise each year.

If you want to serve God and to elevate yourself, if you want to make sure that you are not standing in the same place in your 70th year as in your 13th year, do this: make for yourself a goal each year. Imagine in your mind, whatever your name is, what type of self you want to be in the upcoming year. What will be your achievements, spiritual work, character traits, and general schedule? This imagined self should be a way of measuring yourself. How much is lacking until you reach this imagined self? Will your daily spiritual work and self-growth achieve this imagined self for the upcoming year? (*Tzav VeZiruz* #2).

In this piece, the Piaseczna Rebbe warns a person against growing older and staying in the same place as they were in last year. In his eyes, it is not enough to grow older and collect more experiences, meet more people, and see more of the world. Instead, a person should be challenging themselves to develop new parts of their soul and personality, deepen their connections to people, and work on strengthening their relationship with Torah and God.

As a way of doing this, the Piaseczna Rebbe recommends that each year a person do the following exercise: create an imagined version of oneself in one's mind and then envision what type of person one wants to be in the upcoming year.

In the Piaseczna Rebbe's opinion, it is not enough to have a general vision of oneself. Instead, one should ask themselves difficult and direct questions. Is there a specific negative character trait that I am struggling with and want to uproot? Is there an unhealthy habit that I continue to do over and over again that I want to change?

Once a person has identified the problem they want to fix, the Piaseczna Rebbe says the next step is that a person should imagine what schedule and tasks one will need to follow in order to change this negative trait or habit. "What will be your achievements, spiritual work, character traits, and general schedule?" (Ibid.).

Lastly, a person should try to envision what this imagined and ideal self will look like. How will this new version of myself treat other people, how will this new version of myself pray to God, how will I study Torah? "This imagined self should be a way of measuring yourself" (Ibid.). In the Piaseczna Rebbe's eyes, this "imagined self-exercise" can have an enormous benefit on one's self-growth and service of God. A person will be able to judge oneself and be honest about one's successes and failures in the upcoming year. A person will be able to say, "Yes, I am on the right track and should keep going in this direction." Or, "No, I am failing my set goals and need to correct myself."

The Piaseczna Rebbe's "imagined self exercise" can also be applied on a national level. As we reach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur each year, we should try to imagine who we want to be in the upcoming year. Moshe Rabbeinu imagined an upcoming year whereby the Jewish People would enter the Land of Israel. "Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, 'Be strong and courageous, for you must enter, with this people, the land that God swore to their forefathers to give them'" (Devarim 31:7).

Theodore Herzl imagined an upcoming year whereby the Jewish People would have a sovereign Jewish state. In one of Herzl's journal entries, he writes:

I am taking up once again the torn thread of the tradition of our people. I am leading it to the Promised Land. Do not think this is a fantasy. I am not an architect of castles in the air. I am building a real house, with materials that you can see, touch, examine. Here are the blue prints (*The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*).

And in our current time period, in the aftermath of October 7, what is our national vision of the upcoming year? Do we want another year of anger and unconditional hate toward each other? Or, would we prefer a politics of respecting our legitimate differences? To use the language of Rav Kook: “The great love that we have for our people should not prevent us from critiquing its flaws. However, even after the freest critique, we discover that its essence is totally clean of any dirt” (*Shmoneh Kevatzim* 3:345).

Being Honest with Oneself

To be clear, visualizing who one wants to be in the upcoming year is not always easy. It takes a real sense of honesty, vulnerability and willingness to critique one’s imperfections. In his book *Tzav VeZiruz*, the Piaseczna Rebbe gives a clear description of how he does this honest examination in his own life.

Thank God, I have already entered my fortieth year of life ... My years of descent have begun and I have already started to get old ... What task should I now take upon myself? Perhaps to study more Torah? Perhaps I should not walk around wasting my time? But it seems that I do not waste time. Perhaps I should distance myself from materialistic lusts? But if I am not deceiving myself, I am not enslaved to materialistic lusts. What do I lack? Simply being a Jew. This is what I truly lack. On the surface it seems that I am the type of person who has everything. Yet I lack one thing: soul. Master of the Universe ... what I truly want now is to convert and be a Jew (*Tzav Ve-Ziruz* #19).

In this piece, the Piaseczna Rebbe is brutally honest about himself growing older. He does not want to simply grow old in age without growing deeper in his soul. In order to accomplish this goal, he goes into detail, one by one, through the specific spiritual goals and character traits that he thinks he needs to work on. On the one hand, he is honest enough to be able to acknowledge that there are things that he has indeed achieved and does not need to focus on as much in the upcoming year. “Perhaps to study more Torah? Perhaps I should not walk around wasting my time? But it seems that I do not waste time” (Ibid.).

On the other hand, the Piaseczna Rebbe is also honest enough to be able to admit that there are other things that he is deeply flawed and imperfect in. At the end of the day, he will not lie to himself; he is aware that there are character traits and spiritual goals that he has not yet succeeded in accomplishing; there are parts of his inner connection to Torah and God that he is lacking and needs to invest more time during the upcoming year. “What do I lack? Simply being a Jew. This is what I truly lack. On the surface it seems that I am the type of person who has everything. Yet I lack one thing: soul” (Ibid.).

The Piaseczna Rebbe, much like Moshe Rabbeinu, does not want to grow older each year and simply “let himself go,” making excuses and allowing himself to become weaker. The truth is, it is difficult to blame a person who at the end of a hard year says to themselves on Yom Kippur: “That was a really difficult year, and it is not my fault if I wasn’t always my best self and didn’t behave in the proper way.”

And yet, there is something inside of the soul of the Piaseczna Rebbe that refuses to make excuses for his negative behavior in the previous year (even if they could be justified). There is something inside him that wants to encourage people to follow in the footsteps of Moshe, to push himself to grow and develop each year (even when there are so many reasons to justify taking it easy and forgiving oneself of bad behavior).

To apply this on a national level, Yom Kippur could be a day of making excuses and justifications, a day of explaining to God why it is really not our fault why we as a nation didn’t behave so well in the previous year. Indeed, perhaps a Jew might give the following rationalization to God: “We are currently in a national war against our enemies; it is not our fault that war brings out the worst in how we treat each other.”

Or, on the other hand, we as a nation could make a “*hachra’ah*,” a strong decision that this Yom Kippur will not be a day of excuses, but a day of honesty (not only honesty to God but also honesty with ourselves). On Yom Kippur, we could ask ourselves hard and direct questions such as, “Who are we right now and who do we want to become in the upcoming year?” “How do we react right now in stressful moments and how do we want to react in the upcoming year?”

To Grow Old in the Spiritual Path of Moshe Rabbeinu

This, therefore, is one of the deeper meanings of the blessing “*Ad meah ve’esrim*”—may you live until 120 years old. It is not simply a blessing to grow to the old age of 120, but also to grow old in the spiritual path of Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe was brutally honest with himself each year and continued to grow and push himself even until the old age of 120 years old. He was able to look himself in the mirror, stop and reflect about who he is right now and who he wants to be in the upcoming year. “Today I am 120 years old” (Devarim 31:2).

In a similar way, the Torah wants to challenge each person not only to grow older each year, but also to push oneself to grow deeper. As said above, according to the Piaseczna Rebbe, one very concrete way of achieving this goal is to do the exercise of an “imagined self” each year, to close one’s eyes and imagine the ideal-self and ideal nation we want to become in the upcoming year. A person must not simply have a general vision, but also be honest about what type of schedule and practical commitments one would need to follow in order to achieve this.

Ultimately, the goal is that a person will be able to stand at the end of each year on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and say “Today I have turned this age.” Or in Moshe Rabbeinu’s words, “Today I am 120 years old” (Ibid.). Moshe was not satisfied with growing older each year, but also made sure that he did not “let himself go” and become weaker in spiritual growth. “Moshe was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone” (Ibid. 34:7).

An individual person specifically and the Jewish People in general should challenge themselves each Yom Kippur and say, “This year we are this age, yet we will not become weak but will continue to grow and push ourselves to be stronger and stronger.” A person must learn to be honest with themselves each year. Yes, there will always be a gap between our present self and our ideal self. Closing the gap completely may be beyond one’s grasp, nonetheless, making the gap a little smaller each year is certainly within a person’s reach.
