



All of the service of Hashem is dependent upon the improvement of one's character traits.

Vilna Gaon - Even Shleima, Chapter 1

ACTT Welcome Kit

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Contact Information

For additional information, please contact us at:

ACTT e-mail: info@actt613.org

ACTT web site: www.actt613.org

ACTT postal mailing address: ACTT
48 Edgemount Road
Edison, NJ 08817

Use of Material

The material in this *ACTT Welcome Kit* is intended for the use of the ACTT organization’s members and any other individuals interested in creating and sustaining meaningful changes in their lives. If an organization is interested in using this material, the ACTT organization would appreciate your contacting us. Thank you.

Version 20220918

ACTT Introductory Letter

Dear Prospective Participant,

The ACTT (Achieving Change Through Torah) organization was formed in 2006 to help individuals succeed in their desire to create meaningful and lasting changes in their personal lives. This ACTT Welcome Kit contains the organization's mission statement, the impetus for the program, membership information, an overview of the organization and the program, and some general resources.

Throughout the year, ACTT participants will concentrate on working on a single character trait or other area of improvement for a specified period of time (e.g., 3 months). This constitutes a single module. Each ACTT Module Packet contains the goal, duration, to do list, resources, commitment form, learning schedule, activity and action ideas, and daily activity/action log for the module. When a module is completed and a new module begins, participants have the opportunity to renew their commitments to the actions associated with previous modules. This enables participants to sustain the changes that they have made and will continue to make in their lives.

To join the organization, please fill out and return the ACTT Membership Application that is included in this ACTT Welcome Kit or submit the online application on the Join page of the ACTT web site, www.actt613.org. Contact information is contained in this kit so that you can reach us to answer your questions and to process your requests.

Please visit the ACTT web site, www.actt613.org, which contains all of the ACTT program material, information about the upcoming ACTT events, the audio of the presentations from module kickoff events, and more.

ACTT membership is free and admission is free to ACTT events. You can remotely participate in the ACTT program by listening to the event speakers on the ACTT web site's Topic pages and by accessing the material on the ACTT web site's Topic pages. You can purchase the source books from your local Jewish bookstore or online (see the ACTT web site's Links page). As an ACTT member, you will receive e-mails that provide chizuk, web site update notifications, and event-related information.

We look forward to your joining ACTT and to your growing individually and collectively with the other members of the organization!

With warmest regards,

The ACTT Rabbinic Advisory Committee and The ACTT Leadership Committee

Achieving Change Through Torah (ACTT) Organization

What is ACTT?

ACTT is an organization that facilitates meaningful and lasting character improvement by using a methodology that includes:

- Learning Torah;
- Performing actions;
- Making commitments;
- Sharing motivational material.

ACTT creates an environment that supports an individual's efforts by assisting with challenges and celebrating successes.

Mission Statement

To provide a Torah-based approach and a support system that nurture spiritual growth and sustain enduring positive change.

Impetus for Program

Among the main driving forces behind ACTT are:

- To provide a set of tools and a support system that foster success for individuals who want to make meaningful and lasting changes in their lives.
- The need to take positive and concrete action that will serve as a merit for those who are sick or are experiencing other hardships in our families and communities, and as a merit for Klal Yisrael in the face of any crisis in Israel and world-wide anti-Semitism.

Membership

To become a member, please fill out and submit an ACTT Membership Application – see the Join page of the ACTT web site, www.actt613.org, or this Welcome Kit's Appendix. There is no cost to join. Sponsorship of events and general donations are welcome. Members will be able to purchase source material at a discount, when available.

Program Overview

As a participant in the ACTT program, you will be able to make meaningful and lasting personal changes in your life by:

- Making and renewing commitments to specific change(s);
- Focusing on the change(s) through daily action(s) and personal learning;
- Gaining satisfaction and a sense of achievement from reviewing your past commitments and achievements in your previous action/activity logs;
- Being motivated by shiurim, participant gatherings for sharing experiences, and a variety of inspirational material;

- Receiving, as well as giving, support to other members of the organization on an individual and/or group basis.

Program Modules

The participants in the ACTT program work on one character trait or other area of improvement for several months. This constitutes a single module. Among the modules are:

- Ahavas Chesed - Loving Kindness
- Anger Management for Positive Results
- Bitachon - Trust in Hashem
- Emes - Telling the Truth
- Emunah – Faith in Hashem
- HaKaras HaTov - Gratitude
- Judging Favorably
- Kavanah During Davening - Concentration During Prayers
- Kiddush Hashem – Sanctification of G-d’s name
- Shalom - Peace
- Shmiras HaLashon - Guarding One’s Tongue
- Simchah - Happiness
- Slichah - Forgiveness
- The Six Constant Mitzvos
- Zerizus - Acting With Zeal & Alacrity

The 8th year of the ACTT program (July 2013 - August 2014) adopted a different approach using Step By Step – A Weekly Program for Self-Improvement, a source book anthology. The character traits covered, one each week, are:

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Loving G-d | Judging People Favorably | Piety | Orderliness |
| Loving Others | Gratitude | Purity | Tolerance |
| Hurtful Speech | Punctiliousness | Fear of G-d | Humility |
| Responsibility | Being Content With Less | The Honor of Torah | Stubbornness |
| Cruelty | Divine Providence | Anger | Abstinence |
| Faith | Influence | Mockery | Jealousy |
| Truth | Being Forgoing | Discord | Mercy & Graciousness |
| Shame/Embarrassing Others | Influencing the Public for the Good | Self-Sacrifice | Drive |
| Trust | Remembering/Forgetting | Forbearing Affront | Peace |
| Our Responsibilities to Others | Alacrity | Growth Through Challenges | Happiness |
| Pride | Desire/Passion | Cleanliness | Silence |
| Worry | Flattery | Revenge | Reproof |
| Cleaving to Hashem | Kindness | Greeting Others Cheerfully | Return |

General Resources (note that each module has its own specific resources)

The following general texts and electronic resources can assist individuals with change:

- Life In The Balance - Torah Perspectives on Positive Psychology by Dr. David Pelcovitz and Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz; ArtScroll Mesorah Publications; ISBN: 1-42261-521-9
- Changes That Last Forever by Rabbi Pinchas Winston; Feldheim Publishers; ISBN: 0-96980-322-2;
- Growth Through Tehillim: Exploring Psalms for Life Transforming Thoughts by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin; Artscroll Mesorah; ISBN: 1-57819-402-4;
- Thirty Days to Teshuva: A mussar guide based on Ohr Yisrael by Rabbi Zvi Miller; Targum Press; ISBN: 1-56871-367-3;
- Inspiring Change - Torah Lessons on Expressing Your Innate Potential by Aba Wagensberg; Distributed by Feldheim; ISBN: 978-1-59826-804-1;
- How Can I Change For Heaven's Sake? - A Practical 10-Step Plan to Improve the ABC's (Attitude, Behavior, and Character) of Your Life by Rabbi Doniel Frank; Feldheim Publishers; ISBN: 1-59826-595-8
- Aish HaTorah web site's "Growing Each Day" by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski at: www.aish.com/spirituality/growing/;
- Aish HaTorah web site's "Pliskin's Daily Lift" by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin at: www.aish.com/spirituality/dailylift/;
- The Salant Foundation's web site, www.salantfoundation.org, and Daily Mussar e-mail list, e-Mussar – to subscribe, send e-mail request to Rabbi Zvi Miller at: miler23@netvision.net.il;
- TheShmuz, Rabbi B. Shafier of Tiferes Bnei Torah, web site: www.TheShmuz.com

Middot Series #1 - The Art of Character Perfection

Harvey S. Hecker Character Development Series: Improving ourselves is a tangible way to improve the world.

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons

Reproduced with Aish HaTorah's permission from:

www.aish.com/sp/pg/The-Art-of-Character-Perfection.html

The Challenge

We all dream of achieving personal greatness and of living in a world filled with beauty and wisdom.

Yet this seems so difficult to achieve. We lose our temper, creating strife. We overindulge and later regret it. We put down others – and lower ourselves. The result is a negative self-esteem that radiates negatively toward others and spews negativity into the spiritual atmosphere.

How do we get out of this destructive loop?

The Solution

The Jewish solution is *Tikkun HaMidot* – fixing one's character traits. The Hebrew word *midot* (character traits) literally means "measure," i.e. each of our traits needs to be meted out properly and within limits. For example, it is not "compassionate" to let a killer go unpunished and be a menace to society. Nor is it "kind" to allow a child to play with fire, however attractive and interesting it may appear.

Correcting one's defects is the very reason our soul is sent to this world.¹ We are each born with a unique mix of abilities, inclinations, circumstances and traits to correct.² Some of us are naturally more irritable, others more calm. Some are arrogant, others humble. Some are greedy, others generous.

By improving our character, we build ourselves into what no other human is capable of.

Golden Path

There is no such thing as an absolute "bad" or a "good" trait.³ The only question is how it's used. As a rule, a "good" trait is one used in proper balance with its opposite.

For example, the traits of kindness and strictness are neither "good" nor "bad." Weaning an addict from his addiction – by strictly denying that which he desperately seeks – is a good, even "kind" act.⁴

Any sailor knows the way to restore proper balance is to apply more weight to the opposite side. Someone who is cruel should act with extreme compassion. One who is impulsive should display unconditional patience.

The goal, according to Maimonides, is to achieve the "Golden Path," the midpoint of two extremes:⁵

- Courage is the midpoint between reckless risk-taking and meek cowardice.
- Self-respect is the midpoint between narcissism and self-deprecation.
- Contentedness is the midpoint between greed and laziness.
- Happiness is the midpoint between frivolity and melancholy.

The purpose of all this: to become *Adam Ha'Shalem*, "the complete human."⁶

The Source

Perhaps the most famous Torah verse is Leviticus 19:18: "Love your neighbor as yourself; I am G-d." In Judaism, our actions toward others – "Love your neighbor" – is of paramount importance.⁷

Yet a careful reading of this verse reveals three distinct elements: Others, Self, and G-d. Working backwards, the verse teaches us the essential and complementary nature of all three:

1. "I am G-d" – your role model.

Our first task is to appreciate the unique human virtue of "created in the image of G-d." G-d is the very definition of perfection, e.g. the ultimate balance of kindness and discipline.

As such, human achievement can be measured by our personal degree of "G-dliness" – i.e. how closely we emulate G-d as our role model.

The more we mold ourselves to resemble G-d – in biblical terms, to "Walk in G-d's ways"⁸ – the more perfect we become. The setting of our compass on that target is where it all starts.

2. "As yourself" – to strive for self-perfection.

As physical beings, we have base instincts that can "drag us onto all fours."⁹ Our distinction from animals, however, is the ability to control these baser instincts. For example, Rabbi Alexander Ziskind¹⁰ would break the Yom Kippur fast with fish containing many bones, to ensure he'd eat slowly and with discipline.

As we grow to more closely resemble G-d's perfection – bringing our own character into balance and alignment – we make the world a better place. These go hand in hand. You can't be a good person while ignoring the world, just as you can't fight the world's problems without turning a mirror on oneself.

Trying to "fix others" is typically easier than self-introspection. As expressed by Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, founder of the "Mussar" ethical movement: "I first wanted to change the world, but found it too hard, so I tried to change my city. I couldn't do that, so I tried to change my family. I finally realized I could only change myself."

Ironically, it is the act of self-repair which attunes us to assisting others and changing the world!

3. "Love your neighbor" – project positivity toward others.

This brings us back to the primary focus of our verse: "Love your neighbor."

Understanding this core value begins with the question of what "motivated" G-d to create our world in the first place. The kabbalists explain that G-d – who by definition has no lack – performed an act of pure altruistic giving.

Our mission, therefore, is to walk in G-d's ways by caring for others.

The quality of our interpersonal relations is the litmus test of Divine service. s symbiotic values, the commandments are only as good as they lead to perfection of character and striving to be like G-d.

The story is told of students en route to bake matzah before Passover, when Jewish legal stringencies abound to ensure the food is kosher. When asked which law to carefully observe, Rabbi Salanter told his students: "An elderly widow works at the bakery. Be careful not to hurt her feelings."

With Divine precision, this ideal of "Love your neighbor" generates an infinite connective loop of G-d, self and others.

Character Refinement Precedes Torah

The Talmud says: *Derech Eretz Kadma L'Torah* – "Refinement of character precedes Torah wisdom."¹¹

Intellect without proper character is destructive. Nazi Germany was known for its leading academic institutions, sophisticated arts, and impeccable social conduct. Where did it all lead? At the Wannsee Conference to formulate the "Final Solution" for extermination of European Jewry, 9 of the 13 participants were Ph.Ds.

Our character is always, on some level, influencing and impacting others. Even in private, our thoughts lead to words and actions, which either elevate or diminish the spiritual environment.

And this work of self-improvement cannot be faked. At the moment when a driver cuts me off, when I stub my toe, or when the meeting starts late (again!)... do I have emotional control?¹²

None of this is easy. Rabbi Salanter said that repairing one bad character trait is more difficult than learning the entire Talmud. Achieving practical results requires constant awareness and effort.

But it's totally worth it. Because (no matter what persona we may cultivate on Facebook) self-satisfaction is wholly defined by integrity of character.

Good character has many benefits. The Talmud¹³ speaks of *mida knegged mida* – literally "measure for measure." G-d deals with us in the precise manner we treat others. If we act with compassion toward others, G-d responds to us, measure for measure.¹⁴ A meritorious act below awakens the corresponding force above.¹⁵

1. *Shlah* – Leviticus 1:18

2. Maimonides – *Mishneh Torah* (*Deyos* 1:2)

3. One notable exception is arrogance. Of the arrogant, G-d says, "I and he cannot dwell under one roof." By contrast, humility is the good trait from which all other good traits stem. With humility, one's mind and heart makes room to let others in and removes all self-centered barriers. This manifests in someone who makes his [own goal](#) helping others achieve theirs. Indeed, "exceedingly humble" constitutes the Torah's loftiest praise of Moses (Numbers 12:3). Another exception is anger – one should go to the other extreme and never get angry (*Mishneh Torah* – *Deyos* 2:3).

4. The Sages warn: "One who has pity on the wicked, will in the end be wicked to the compassionate." (Midrash Rabbah – Koheles 7:16)

5. Talmud – Avot 2:1; *Mishneh Torah* – *Deyos* 1:3-4.

6. Kuzari 1:1

7. Jerusalem Talmud – Nedarim 9:4

8. Deut. 11:22, 28:9

9. Rabbi Zev Leff

10. 19th century Lithuania

11. Midrash – Vayikra Rabba 9:3

12. The Talmud (Eruvin 65b) says that true character is revealed *b'kiso, b'kaso, u'b'koso* – by how a person deals in money matters, how they manage anger, and their behavior when imbibed.

13. Talmud – Sotah 8b

14. Talmud – Shabbos 151b

15. Zohar – Emor 91b

About this Series

Aish.com is proud to present the Harvey Hecker Character Development Series. The series is dedicated in memory of Harvey Hecker, the former President of Aish International, who believed that changing the world begins with ethics and integrity. Mr. Hecker was a master at calmly and appropriately dealing with others, especially amidst challenging situations. He gave freely of his time and wisdom, showing honor and humility to all. His mantra: "Strive to do the right thing." We hope this series will honor his memory.

ACTT Welcome Kit Appendix



ACTT Membership Application

Please PRINT all information

Name (Title, First & Last Names): _____

Location (City, State, Country): _____

Cell phone: _____

Email: _____

Synagogue: _____

School: _____

I would like to receive the following information about ACTT:

I would like to help with developing material for ACTT

I would like to help with ACTT events

I would like to help with ACTT planning

I would like to sponsor an ACTT module, event, or other activity

I would like to learn and discuss the ACTT material with another member

Please email form: info@actt613.org or mail: ACTT; 48 Edgemount Road; Edison, NJ 08817

Privacy Notice

ACTT is committed to protecting your privacy. The personal information we collect is used solely by ACTT. We will not disclose your personal information outside of ACTT without your consent.

Glossary

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Ahavas Chesed |loving kindness |
| B’li Neder |without making a formal commitment |
| Bitachon |trust in Hashem |
| Chesed |kindness |
| Chizuk |moral support |
| Davening |praying |
| Emuna |faith |
| Hakaras HaTov |gratitude |
| Kavanah |concentration |
| Klal Yisrael |the Jewish people |
| Lashon Hara |evil tongue (speech) - any derogatory or damaging (physically, financially, socially, or stress-inducing) communication |
| Midah, Midos |character trait, character traits |
| Mitzvah |a commandment |
| Mussar |ethical teaching |
| Neshamah |soul |
| Nisayon |a test |
| Ona’as Devarim |causing hurt through the spoken word |
| Parnasa |livelihood |
| Rechilus |gossip-mongering - any communication that generates animosity between people |
| Refuah Shleimah |a complete recovery from an illness |
| Sefer |a book |
| Shidduch |a match of two eligible and marriageable Jewish singles |
| Shiurim |classes |
| Shmiras HaLashon |guarding one’s tongue |
| Siddur |prayer book |
| Siyata D’Shmaya |Divine Assistance |
| Talmid, Talmidim |student, students |
| Tefillah, Tefillos |prayer, prayers |
| Teshuva |repentance |
| Zechus |merit |