

Achieving Change Through Torah: In Raritan Valley, ACTT Is Personal, Communal, and Global

SINCE ITS FOUNDING in 2006, the Raritan Valley-based organization Achieving Change Through Torah (ACTT) has devoted itself to a monumentally ambitious goal: facilitating meaningful and lasting character improvement.

Its methodology is equally impressive. The group encourages Torah learning, performance of mitzvot, making commitments, and sharing motivational material.

To avoid frustration and lack of confidence, ACTT's secret is to focus on incremental changes, encouraging its members to do what is possible without expecting complete character make-overs in a limited amount of time.

To do this, ACTT focuses on a single midah, or positive character trait, at a time, usually for a period of two-to-six months. Employing modules, ACTT has encouraged members to become involved in issues such as loving kindness (ahavas chesed); judging others favorably; concentration during prayer (kavanah during davening); gratitude and recognizing when we have received a good turn (hakaras hatov); anger management for positive results; guarding one's tongue (shmiras haloshon); telling the truth (emes); recognizing the "six constant mitzvot" (know there is a G-d, not believing in any other power, recognizing G-d is one, love G-d, fear G-d, and not being misled by hearts and/or eyes); happiness; forgiveness; and acting with zeal and alacrity (zerizus).

Dealing with the issue addressed by

the module, members of ACTT attend a kick-off event to discuss the subject and then engage in a daily personal learning program (typically for as little as five minutes a day), leading to a commitment to implementation. Members receive an ACTT module packet which contains the goal, the duration, a suggested to-do list, resources, a commitment form, and a daily activity log focusing on the module's topic.

Bitachon

Starting on February 17th, the group will focus on the value of trusting in G-d, or bitachon, in Hebrew. The source book for this module is "Chizuk: A Primer on Bitachon, Coping, and Hope" by Rabbi Eliezer Parkoff.

The kick-off event will be held on motzei Shabbat, February 16, at Congregation Ahavas Achim in Highland Park at 9pm. Rabbi Sam Ash, a fellow of the Wexner Smicha Honors Program at Yeshiva University and the rabbinic intern at Congregation Ohr Torah in Edison, will deliver the kickoff lecture, entitled "When the Going Gets Tough, How Do We Respond to Adversity?"

The February 16th evening is ACTT's 28th event. There has been either a kickoff or a "booster" event for each of its modules since 2006. Membership and admission to ACTT events is free. All ACTT-developed materials are freely available on the group's website, <http://www.actt613.org>.

Online Members

While the group's membership has consisted primarily of members of the

Orthodox community in Highland Park, Edison, New Brunswick, and East Brunswick, ACTT's presence on the Internet has netted the organization members across the country and abroad. There are ACTT members in 11 towns in New Jersey as well as in California, Illinois, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, Ottawa and Toronto, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, and Montevideo, Uruguay.

According to ACTT founder and Edison resident Phil Rosen, members represent Jewish adults of all ages and backgrounds as well as high school and college.

Long-distance members can participate in ACTT's programs by listening to the various speakers on the website's audio pages, accessing the materials on ACTT's module pages. Source books can be purchased from local bookstores or online.

Adapting Methodology

ACTT members who attend events in person or online receive emails that provide chizuk (positive encouragement), website update notifications, and event-related information.

"We seek to provide a Torah-based approach and create an environment that supports an individual's efforts by assisting with challenges and celebrating successes," said Mr. Rosen, who is Leadership Committee coordinator and current chairman of ACTT's Programs and Events Department.

ACTT was born in the summer of 2005 as the result of a discussion between Mr. Rosen and his rabbi, Rav Yaakov Luban, spiritual leader of Cong Ohr Torah. According to Rabbi Luban, Mr. Rosen was looking to do something meaningful to help his own spiritual needs and growth as well as that of the local community. Rabbi Luban was familiar with programs run by the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation dealing with ending gossip, and he thought that the ideas and methodology of that group could form the basis to help Mr. Rosen realize his goals.

"People make all sorts of commitments before and immediately after Yom Kippur, but, all too often, these good intentions dissipate quickly. We needed something that would help us focus to achieve lon-



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ger lasting results," said Rabbi Luban.

Keeping Records

One of ACTT's major tools is its daily log. Rabbi Luban noted the example of the American colonial leader Benjamin Franklin: in 1730, while still in his twenties, Franklin suggested keeping a record of one's goals, noting how well or poorly the goals were met. Franklin believed that over time, the record would help to change one's character.

Seventy years after Mr. Franklin listed his thirteen personal and social character traits, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Satanov (better known by the title of his chief work, Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh) mentioned the same idea.

"I don't know if the Cheshbon Ha-Nefesh was familiar with Franklin's writing, or if he came up with it on his own, but the point is, a personal log is an effective tool. It promotes awareness and is motivating," said Rabbi Luban.

Mr. Rosen agreed. "Our philosophy is to take baby steps that will lead to gradual change that will be lasting," he said.

Raising Awareness

Rabbi Luban said he has noticed an improvement in himself since becoming involved with ACTT. "When you focus for three months on the same midah, reading about it and keeping track of what you have accomplished, it sensitizes you to the quality and prompts you to think about it," he said.

Mr. Rosen recalled that when the module was based on "loving kindness," for example, members were encouraged to commit to reading a short amount of Torah-oriented material, perhaps for only five minutes a day, and then to perform at least one act of kindness every day.

"Some people ran errands for friends, others greeted people cheerfully, or remembered a birthday, or simply called someone going through a difficult time," said Mr. Rosen.

Overcoming "Inertia"

According to Rabbi Luban, such actions are often taken for granted in the Orthodox-Jewish community; however, "inertia" often takes over, and the halachically mandated behavior is forgotten.

"ACTT helps us utilize the power of Torah to overcome inertia in our behavior. If a person makes a small commitment every day, it may not change the world, but the individual will be learning something powerful," he said.

Mr. Rosen believes the "beauty of ACTT

Is that it creates a continuous awareness for those wanting to work on middos-improvement and there is something in ACTT for everyone."

"One person might choose to come to an event or download the audio from the website to hear an inspiring speaker talk about a topic that interests him or her. Someone else might read a source book that is used for one of the modules because it is very engaging and helpful. Others might find that actively participating in the entire program on a consistent basis is what helps them the most. The key is that a person can pick and choose what is best for him or her," he said.

On its website, ACTT emphasizes two

main goals. In addition to providing tools and a support system to foster success for those who want to make "meaningful and lasting changes in their lives," another impetus for the program is to "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 the current crisis in Israel and world-wide antisemitism."

Unity

By encouraging all members to work on improving the same character trait at the same time, the program has also helped to achieve another of ACTT's goals: to promote community unity.

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Video Shows How to Escape Mass Murder: Run, Hide, Fight

JUST AFTER THE tragic mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut last month, in which twenty young children and six adults were murdered by a crazed gunman, Arutz Sheva in Israel publicized a video to prepare citizens to take action if confronted by a mass murderer.

The free 15-minute video, entitled "Run. Hide. Fight: Surviving an Active Shooter Event," was produced by a Houston city government agency, and is available at <http://tinyurl.com/RunHideFight>.

The video is a Department of Homeland Security grant-funded project of the Regional Catastrophic Planning Initiative. It was produced by the City of Houston Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security.

"The Houston Region is the kind of place where big ideas typically become larger-than-life realities. Throw any challenge our way and we meet it head on. But are we really ready for anything?" asks the site.

Start with a Plan: Run

The video opens with scenes of

everyday activity in a normal office, while the voice-over narrator explains that "occasionally life feels more like an action movie than reality."

All of a sudden, an armed intruder bursts into the building, rips a rifle out of his bag, and starts shooting, killing the building's guard and then a woman standing next to him. The gunman then starts wildly shooting at random.

The video's first suggestion to survive this active-shooter event is to have a plan. "The plan doesn't have to be complicated," says the narrator.

First and foremost, those confronted with the reality of such an event should run. "If you can get out, do," says the narrator.

"Always try to escape or evacuate, even when others insist on staying. Encourage others to leave with you, but don't let them slow you down with indecision. Remember what's important: you, not your stuff. Leave your belongings behind and try to find a way to get out to safety. Trying to get yourself out of harm's way needs to be your number one priority.

Once you're out of the line of fire, try to prevent others from walking into the danger zone, and call 911," says the narrator.

Hide

If escape is impossible, the video suggests those inside the building try to find a place to hide. The video shows people in the building's lunchroom who have heard the shots and realize they are under attack. They shut the lunchroom door and put a table against it. In another room, a woman hides and drags the copy machine in front of the door to secure it.

"Act quickly and quietly. Try to secure your hiding place the best you can. Turn out lights, and, if possible, remember to lock doors. Silence your ringer and vibration mode on your cell phone. If you can't find a safe room or closet, try to conceal yourself behind large objects that may protect you. Do your best to remain quiet and calm," says the narrator, adding that the hiding place should be out of the shooter's view, provide protection if shots are fired in your direction, and not be a

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The spiritual leaders of seven Orthodox synagogues in Highland Park, Edison, and New and East Brunswick comprise ACTT's Rabbinic Advisory Committee. In addition, six members of the community have served on ACTT's Leadership Committee since the group's inception.

In addition to Rabbi Luban, the rabbis and their shuls are: David Bassous, Congre-

gation Etz Ahaim; Gedaliah Jaffe, Congregation Ahavas Yisrael; Eliyahu Kaufman, Congregation Ohav Emeth; Steven Miodownik, Congregation Ahavas Achim; Abraham Mykoff, Congregation Poile Zedek; and Jay Weinstein, Young Israel of East Brunswick. All encourage membership and active participation in ACTT.

A Major Organization

Despite the organization's success, Mr. Rosen harbors hopes that ACTT's goals and methodology will be adopted by one of the major Jewish organizations whose mission would be to take the program to the next step.

"We would like to see ACTT brought to the next level, which can happen if a major Jewish organization with the resources to develop the program further from both content and audience perspectives can take over," said Mr. Rosen, making it clear that ACTT's leadership would gladly contribute all its materials to such a group.

He said he would be happy to discuss any ideas to broaden ACTT's reach. He can be reached at info@actt613.org.

"ACTT is similar to a Broadway revival, a modern-day Jewish character-improvement program with the flavor of the Mussar Chaburah of yesteryear," he said.

Theoretically, he said, ACTT could be compared to the Daf Yomi program. "In the right hands, ACTT would be to meaningful and lasting changes in Jewish lives as Daf Yomi is to the widespread learning of Talmud," he said. S.L.R.

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