Breaking Bad Habits

The highest level of Teshuba (repentance) is when one regrets the mistake he or she made, immediately, before repeating it. In this way, a person will be preventing that incorrect behavior from becoming a habit. When someone does not repent of his mistake immediately and repeats his wrong behavior, he faces a different and perhaps greater challenge, which Rabbi Abohab calls: the second level of Teshuba: changing bad habits. How are habits formed? When someone persists in a certain behavior, this attitude is normalized –however wrong it may be– and the habit is formed. Once installed in the brain, habits are difficult to change. We get used to doing something wrong to the point that we no longer evaluate it. And when a behavior becomes a habit and we want to change it, **it is no longer about changing what we do, but about changing what we are**.

The first time I say a bad word or a vulgarity, I would notice it, realize my mistake immediately, repent (apologize if I use this language towards another person), and make the decision not to make the same mistake again. But when this process does not happen, when I ignore the first warning of my moral conscience (which is the most important one!) and I repeat the same bad words over and over again, I get used to my new vocabulary, and little by little I tolerate it more and more, to the point that I no longer realize that it is wrong. And at some point, this fatal transformation happens: the bad words become part of me. And from being "a decent person who uses bad words", I become a "unpolite individual"

Psychologists explain that habits, both good and bad, are formed when our brain learns something new and, through repetition, the brain becomes "comfortable" with it and stops evaluating or judging the new behavior. This happens to us in many areas of our daily lives: eating or drinking excessively, smoking, etc. and also in more subliminal areas that affect

our spirituality and morality. “Man is an animal of habit,” said the famous English writer Charles Dickens. When an immoral value becomes routine, the conscience no longer awakens by itself. It falls asleep and requires an external stimulus to wake up.

In the Hebrew calendar, the month of Elul is precisely when we dedicate ourselves to this type of deep repentance, that is, to evaluate not only our wrong actions but also our bad habits, which have been “normalized” because we did not do Teshuba on time, that is, when we were wrong the first time. Identifying my own bad habits is not an easy task. Because it’s not enough to look in the mirror. I have to be able to see myself as others see me, from the outside, “from the balcony”, in order to identify the bad habits that are already part of my personality and put all my effort into changing them.