

Seeking Solutions / By Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

Hamodia invites readers who are facing challenges in their personal lives to seek expert advice from nationally known Torah scholar, author and psychiatrist Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. To assure anonymity, there is no need to sign your letter, although doing so will enable us to communicate with you privately if necessary. Do your best to present the situation honestly, including all relevant details. Fax your query to (718) 853-9103 or send to SeekingSolutions@hamodia.com. Due to heavy volume, we regret that we are unable to print all letters.

Q I found Rabbi Twerski's responses and comments in the July 22 Ten to One interview disturbing. To say that 99.9% of people don't like themselves is outrageous, for the reality and Torah sources directly contradict that.

Rabbi Twerski has infected the *frum* world with his secular worldview and projects his personal issues (such as his "discovery" that he doesn't like himself) onto the rest of us.

As he says himself, he is sure that he is tainted by his secular education and that what he says is not "daas Torah." We need more people like his father, *zt"l*, a wise counselor whose sage advice was not diluted by psychological trends.

I find it astonishing that a man immersed in the field of psychiatry for half a century, who witnessed and was part of the emergence of the field of mental health as a dominant force in our lives, does not know why there is an increase in psychological and general "acting-out" problems today. I would like to suggest that one reason for the increase is the mental health profession's anti-Torah and anti-*sechel* ideas in general, and Rabbi Twerski's in particular, that have infiltrated our media and Jewish bookstores.

For example:

- Professionals like Rabbi Twerski insisting that weaknesses we used to call listening to our *yetzer hara* are actually diseases that need to be treated by medical doctors instead of our spiritual mentors.

- In Rabbi Twerski's book, "I'd Like to Call for Help, But I Don't Know the Number," he writes, shockingly, "I do not mean to be harsh with religion because it has so much to offer. Yet I cannot deny that some of the principles of religion may find greater expression in AA" and "It is my hope to demonstrate that spirituality need not be dependent on religion."

These statements by a rabbi are a *chillul Hashem!* Furthermore, we have yet to see objective evidence that 12-Step programs, which Rabbi Twerski espouses, are the ultimate solution to our many problems.

- In that same book, Rabbi Twerski writes, "In my role as physician [in which he helps people with addictions], I do not have any interest in promoting religion."

All the more reason to consult with someone like his father!

- Rabbi Twerski says in his book that he stopped lying not because of Torah but because of psychology. He says that he learned that lying doesn't work. Where does the Torah prohibition of not lying fit in to his worldview?

- Rabbi Twerski maintains that toddlers have "negative self-esteem," i.e. less than zero, because they are little people in an adult world. When we observe little children, *sechel hayashar* tells us that this claim is absurd. The constant, insistent and persistent claim that we don't have self-esteem, not as children, not as young people, not as adults, has infected our thinking. This letter is not the place to expound on how detrimental spotlighting ourselves is and how it impairs our *avodas Hashem* and normal outlook on life.

- Rabbi Twerski promotes exposing children to "drug education" in "drug-prevention" programs in our schools. He says principals are resistant because of their denial of the problem in their schools. If you don't agree with Rabbi Twerski's assessment and recommendation, he will accuse you of being in denial, rather than accepting that people have another approach. (An article Rabbi Twerski wrote

on this subject in *Jewish Action* clearly shows how his approach is not Torah'dig.)

- We now live in a society where we have fraudulent diagnosing of children who do not behave as parents and teachers wish, and the subsequent drugging of these children, *R"l*, by psychiatrists.

By hosting Rabbi Twerski's column, *Hamodia* foists a secular view of life and the human condition on *frum* readers. How much more appropriate for a publication geared to the *frum* world to have a column written by someone untainted by secular ideas, someone like the Rebbe, *zt"l*, Rabbi Twerski's father, whose wise advice came from our holy *sefarim* and Torah wisdom.

A Your comments provide an opportunity for clarifying a number of points.

Your comment "to say that 99% of people don't like themselves is outrageous," is quite correct. It is 100%. People can emerge from this state only by serious work on their character traits. Let us see why this is so.

The Talmud says, "A person's *yetzer hara* grows stronger and renews itself every day and seeks to destroy him" (*Kiddushin* 30). Every person has a *yetzer hara* — you, I, and the greatest *tzaddikim*.

What is the *yetzer hara*? The Torah says, "A person comes into the world as a wild mule" (*Iyov* 11:12). In other words, we are born with all the character traits, impulses and desires of a wild animal. We are given a *neshamah* that enables us, if we put it to work, to transform these traits into *kedushah*.

The *Tiferes Yisrael* (end of *Kiddushin*) cites a *Midrash* that a desert king heard about the greatness of Moshe Rabbeinu, and sent his artists to the Israelite encampment to draw a picture of Moshe. When they returned, he submitted the portrait to his physiognomists, who could tell a person's character by looking at his face. They told him that this was a portrait of a man who was vain, selfish, murderous, gluttonous, intolerant and lustful. This was so contradictory to what he had heard about Moshe Rabbeinu that he decided to see for himself.

When the king met Moshe, he saw that the portrait was accurate to the very last hair. He confronted Moshe with the problem, and Moshe told him that the physiognomists were correct. What they can see in a person's face are the traits with which one was born. Moshe Rabbeinu explained that what they said about him was true, in that he was born with those loathsome traits. However, using the strengths of his *neshamah*, he was able to eliminate some of them and transform others into desirable traits, such as just for Hashem, hatred of evil, intolerance of injustice, etc.

We all have a *yetzer hara*, with the inborn traits of a "wild mule." Imagine what work it takes to deal with these. *Mesillas Yesharim* and *Tanya* say that we are engaged in a lifelong struggle with the *yetzer hara*. *Tzaddikim*, with their unrelenting work, succeed in defeating the *yetzer hara*.

In a letter to a young man who complained about his difficulty with this struggle, Hagoon Harav Yitzchok Humer, *zt"l*, said, "Do you think the Chofetz Chaim was born a *tzaddik*? Do you realize the intensity of his struggle and how many times he fell and picked himself up until he became the great *tzaddik* that he was?" Every night, the Chofetz Chaim would open the *Aron Kodesh* and pray

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tearfully that Hashem should remove his feelings of anger. The Chofetz Chaim never manifested anger, because he was in total control of his behavior, but he could not eliminate his feelings, and asked Hashem to remove his undesirable feelings.

So, you and I and every other person have this "wild mule" within us. I have not seen too many people cry into the *Aron Kodesh* for Hashem to help them eliminate some of these inborn traits. And if you were to tell people that they have these odious traits, they would be deeply insulted. I think that with the exception of our great *tzaddikim*, who achieved the transformation that Moshe did, most people have this "wild mule" inside of them. True, we don't behave like wild mules, because we have been disciplined and trained to control our behavior, but as all the *sifrei mussar* point out, the shoresh of these traits remain with us.

Harav Shlomo Wolbe, *zt"l*, whose understanding of human nature was profound, says that these feelings remain in our tat-hakarah, our subconscious mind. Because we are generally not aware of them, we cannot transform them, and lurking in the subconscious, they affect our behavior in ways we may not recognize. Not infrequently, they emerge into our awareness, and we quickly banish them into the unconscious. How much self-esteem can one have with any awareness that one has "wild mule" traits? Yet, it is only by allowing ourselves to become aware of them and transforming or uprooting them that we can get self-esteem.

So the *yetzer hara*, as the Talmud says, regularly seeks to destroy a person, and does so by utilizing one's "wild mule" components to give one a feeling of unworthiness. People deal with this in any number of ways. Rabbeinu Yonah says that a *baal gaavah* is a person who thinks himself to be superior in order to overcome his feelings of lowliness. The person who speaks *lashon hara* thinks himself to be a better person by berating others.

The *sifrei mussar* and *Chassidus* say that the *yetzer hara* tries to crush a person either by making him a *baal gaavah*, as Rabbeinu Yonah says, or by making him feel inept. "What's the use of my trying; I can't succeed anyway." Depression, they say, may be the result of *gaavah*, with the person feeling that he deserves more than he has, and is depressed by his feeling of being deprived of what he deserves. The person who seeks to control others, whether it is an abusive spouse or parent, tries to overcome the feeling of lowliness by controlling others, which makes one feel superior.

There should be no need to be a *baal gaavah*, to speak *lashon hara* or to control other people. We are all better people than we think we are, and this is clearly pointed out in the chapter on *hakaras atzmo* (self-awareness) in vol. 1 of *Alei Shur* by Rav Wolbe.

That listening to the *yetzer hara* is a disease is clearly described by Rambam in *Shemonah Perakim* as *cholei nefesh*, and is not an invention by psychologists. Ideally, the treatment of *cholei nefesh* should be by *talmidei chachamim*, and *Gedolim* such as Harav Eliyahu Dessler, *zt"l*, and Rav Wolbe have done so. The writings of the Steipler Gaon, *zt"l*, are a treatment for *cholei nefesh*. The Steipler's manual on OCD is an excellent example: "*Nerven is nisht frumkeit*."

There are, of course, some types of mental illness such as bipolar and postpartum that are the result of physical-chemical changes within the body that require psychiatric treatment.

Not surprisingly, many referrals to mental health workers are made by Rabbanim, who realize that the person's emotional problems are beyond what they can do for them. Some referrals come from *Roshei Yeshivah* and Chassidic Rebbes.

Insofar as lying is concerned, I wish that we all observed *midvar sheker tirchak* not only to avoid lying but also to distance oneself from lying. If one understands *lo teshakru* to mean "you shall not lie," one may find a reason to justify lying under certain circumstances. When the Rebbe of Kotzk, *zt"l*, was told that someone stole something, he asked, "How can that be? The Torah says, '*Lo tignov*,' which means 'you cannot steal.'"

Sadly, many people find rationalizations why it is permissible to lie under certain circumstances. The ideal understanding of *lo teshakru* is not "you shall not lie," but "you cannot lie." I was privileged to realize that *lo teshakru* means "you cannot lie," so I stopped justifying lying.

The book *I'd Like to Call for Help But I Don't Know the Number* was written for the non-Jewish alcoholic and drug-addict. The book *Twerski on Spirituality* was for Jews.

Yet, I must inform you that I have had fine, *frum talmidei chachamim* and *chassidim* who were in every way *chassidish*, some of whom could quote *Mesillas Yesharim* by heart, who fell into the trap of alcoholism, drug addiction, compulsive gambling and internet addiction. The reason for this is that their learning of *mussar* was superficial, not as Harav Yisrael Salant, *zt"l*, proposed.

What happens to them when they go to AA? First of all, they must recognize that, as the Talmud says, "A person's *yetzer hara* grows stronger and renews itself every day and seeks to destroy him, and without the help of Hashem, one cannot overcome it." One must pray diligently for *siyatta diShmaya*. Secondly, one must do what *Pirkei Avos* says (2:4): "Make Hashem's Will your will, and angul your will before His will."

One must realize that giving in to his own will was what brought him to disaster. Then one must make a regular *cheshebon hanefesh* and, as the Rebbe

Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, zt"l, says, reveal to a trusted friend every act one has done and even one's thoughts, because by doing so, one breaks the hold of the yetzer hara. One must, like the Chofetz Chaim, ask Hashem to remove those undesirable traits that one has been unable to eliminate. One must seek forgiveness from anyone one has offended, because even Yom Kippur does not forgive such sins. If one has done wrong, one should promptly admit it, and not try to justify one's mistakes, as the Navi says, "For this I will punish you, for your saying 'I did not sin'" (Yirmiyahu 2:35). And one must practice these principles in everything one does, as the Talmud says, "The one small verse on which the entire Torah depends is, "Know Hashem in all your ways" (Brachos 63).

This is essentially the AA program, and as one can see, it is straight mussar. Why, then, is AA or OA necessary for addiction? Because whereas we say *ki heim chayenu*, we generally do not walk away from a *mussar sefer* with the thought, "If I deviate from this, I will surely die." The person addicted to alcohol, drugs, gambling or food who walks away from a support meeting knows, from bitter experience, "If I deviate from this program, I will surely die." If one truly and sincerely felt that way about *mussar*, one would not need AA. But let's be realistic, not everyone reacts that way.

Religion is wonderful, but religion without proper middos is of little value. Harav Aharon Kotler, zt"l, said, "The Torah was given to *mentschen*. If one is not a *mentsch*, one's Torah is of little value." Harav Chaim Vital, zt"l, the chief disciple of the Ari Hakadosh, zt"l, says in Shaar Hakedushah that one must be even more careful about an improper middah than about an aveirah. The *baalei mussar* explain that as grave as an *aveirah* is, it does not become a part of one's personality, whereas a bad middah, such as *ka'as*, becomes part of one's personality and is much more difficult to uproot.

Unfortunately, some people think that one can be religious even with bad *middos*. It is possible to hear a statement, "He is a very *frum* person, but he has a bad temper," but no one would say "He is a very *frum* person, but he likes to eat *treife*." In truth, a person who loses his temper is no more *frum* than one who eats *treife*. Indeed, the Talmud equates losing one's temper with *avodah zarah*.

If you wish to believe that there are no problems of alcohol, drugs, gambling or internet among yeshivah students and *frum* people, you may do so. We, who see these people frequently, know what the facts are. These destructive habits are tragically rampant in our environment, and our children are not immune to them. It is important that parents and yeshivos provide the education that can help prevent a youngster from falling into these deadly ways.