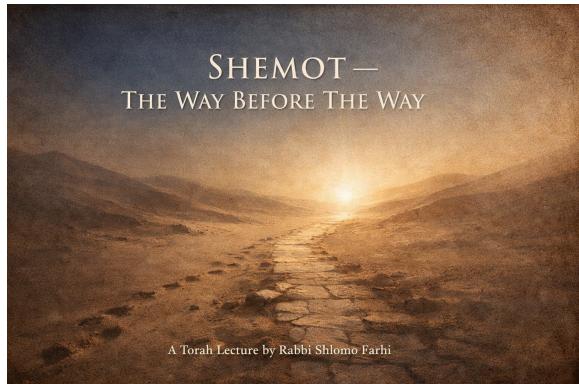


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SPREADING LIGHT AND
TORAH TO OUR AMAZING
BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN
AM YISRAEL



:

וְאֶלְהָ שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

And these are the names of the Bnei Yisrael.

Rav Shach said as follows:

מי שלא למד היטב ספר בראשית, אי אפשר שייהי לו
שייכות בספר שמות.

If a person did not learn Sefer Bereshit well, there's no way that he could have any connection whatsoever to the Book of Shemot.

Now some of you are thinking, well, I didn't come to all the Torah readings. Does that mean that I should just take a break from Shemot, come back for Vayikra, right, come back strong for Leviticus? Is that what's going on here?

So let me share what Rav Shach is actually communicating. Just a beautiful idea.

He says, what does Sefer Shemot have inside of it? Of course there's the process of the slavery, but somewhere after the slavery we find that the Jewish people are redeemed, they go through the desert, and it is in Sefer Shemot where we receive the luchot, where we receive the Torah on Har Sinai.

He says

כִּי הַלֹּא סְפַר בְּרָאשִׁית הָוּא כָּלּוּ מִעַלְתַּת הַמִּידּוֹת

In all of the stories that we read about from Adam HaRishon, through Noach, and Avraham, through Shera and the Shevatim, they are all about **מעלת המידות**—the elevation and importance of character traits, of how a person behaves.

וּבְלִי מִידּוֹת אֵי אָפֵשׁ לְהַגִּיעַ

And without middot, it's impossible to get there.

So let me share what I think we're learning about here together, because I think that there's something extraordinary hiding here in plain sight, but also just beneath the surface.

The question really is expressed so beautifully in the Mishnah in Masechet Avot. The Mishnah says: **מַה בֵּין תַּלְמִידִיו שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ לִתְלִמִּידִיו שֶׁל בִּילָם הַרְשָׁעַ**

What's the difference between the students of Avraham Avinu and the students of Bilam the wicked?

This is something that you kind of feel the Mishnah in Avot didn't really need to ask. Imagine I ask you, what's the difference between the biggest tzaddik and this horrible rasha?

What do you mean what's the difference? It's easier for me to tell you in what way they have any similarities. They're nothing like one another.

This person believes in Hashem, lives a godly life, prays, studies Torah, does kindness at—the other guy's mugging people, killing people, all sorts of terrible things, lives a completely selfish life.

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מַה בֵּין? What's the difference between this one and this one?

I don't know if you ever played the game Spot the Difference. Spot the Difference—you see two pictures, they look identical. Now you have to go find out that in his hand this guy has three wrinkles and the other guy has two.

That's מה בין.

This guy is wearing shoes that are tied with three separate laces, you know, three levels of a lace, the other guy has four levels of a lace.

That's Spot the Difference.

Imagine you have Spot the Difference, you see the beast and you see the beauty.

It's—what do you mean what's the difference? The whole thing is different.

So what is the Mishnah telling you when it says מה בין? What's the difference between?

They're different in every possible way.

But let's look at the answer of the Mishnah.

The Mishnah says:

The students of Avraham Avinu—they have עין טובה.

What's עין טובה?

עין טובה does not mean that you don't need glasses.

עין טובה means that when you look at somebody, you see the best in people. You see generosity.

And you know what else עין טובה is?

I recently had a conversation with someone, and the guy was doing an investment. So he said, listen, you know, I'm doing this investment with this guy, and the nice thing about him is—I never fight with him.

When I come to him and I tell him, here's a deal, and I tell him, look, this is how I want it, he always says okay.

He's not bothered. It doesn't bother him. He's not—you know—as long as he's making money, he doesn't mind.

Some people, they're fighting for every point, for every this, for every that. They want to kill the guy.

You know, I had a guy a while ago. Guy comes to me and says, listen, you know, I know that you're buying certain stuff in the city, in Manhattan, in the store. I can buy it for you cheaper somewhere.

I said, the guy over here is trying to have a kosher grocery store in the city. There's a kosher restaurant here in the city.

It's expensive to be open in the city. The margins are smaller than if you're in Brooklyn or if you're in Deal. The rent's more expensive. The labor's more expensive. The fines—everything's more expensive.

So who did I outsmart if I saved that money and I didn't give the business to the guy locally?

The guy closes, and then I don't have a store here for when you need a store.

So who do you hurt? Who do you hurt when you won?

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You hurt yourself.

You did a business deal. You think you did a great deal. You know why? Because you saved point one and a half percent on the deal for the guy.

Now you know what happens? The guy has another great deal.

You think he's bringing it to you next time?

So to save the point one percent, you cost yourself fifty percent on the next deal.

עין טובה.

Avraham Avinu welcomes everybody into his house. Even the guy who's not like him at all.

Avodah zarah guy.

"Wash your feet," Avraham says, before you come into my house.

שְׁחִיו מִשְׁתְּחֹווִים לְאַבָּק שְׁבָרְגְּלִיָּהּ

They used to bow to the dust on their feet.

So he's welcoming idol worshippers into his home.

Most of us, we say, not my type of guy. I don't invite the guy to my house.

Avraham was an עין טובה.

Everyone allowed everybody to step all over him.

That's Avraham Avinu.

Middot as the Hidden Engine of Belief

He has these three character traits. They are all middot—ways and means of interacting with the world.

Bilam, on the other hand, the students of Bilam, what do they have?

They have עין רעה, a bad eye.

רוח גבורה, their spirit is very high and mighty and entitled, looking down on everybody else.

And נפש רחבה, a very wide soul. It's never satisfied with anything that it's got. It needs to have everything. All the territory. Everything belongs to him.

I want to point out one thing, because to me this is everything.

What does the Mishnah say?

This is the difference?

One of them has Torah, one of them has God, the other one has nothing?

Why are we pointing out these differences?

So I saw a tremendous answer in the sefer **Ohel Moshe**.

He says what the Mishnah is saying is not *what* is the difference.

The Mishnah is asking *why* were they different.

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Not what is the difference, but why was there a difference.

So let's review.

Says Ohel Moshe—an unbelievable chiddush.

He says, look at the time of Avraham Avinu.

In the time of Avraham Avinu, what was in vogue?

Was it in vogue to believe in God?

No.

Avraham was the only one fighting for monotheism in the public arena.

So the Mishnah asks: how did Avraham get students in a climate which was anti-God?

How did they follow Avraham?

How did they learn the lessons and the messages that Avraham was teaching them?

And the answer is that even though the culture was not in favor, was not conducive to Torah growth, because they had these good middot—

דרכ ארי קדמה לתורה.

You know when people learn these words, **דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה**, you know how they translate it?

How do they translate it?

Character traits. Derech eretz.

Kadma—comes before Torah.

People think it means if you have Torah and you have derech eretz, derech eretz comes first.

That's true.

But it's much deeper than that.

דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה

You ever meet a guy, he tells you, "You know, it's going to rain."

You're like, how do you know?

What are you, meteorologist Craig Allen? What are you?

But why are you telling me it's going to rain?

No, I'm not a meteorologist.

Why is he telling me it's going to rain?

My father-in-law would tell me it's going to rain.

Why?

He could feel it in his bones.

He had a bad break on his ankle, and when it was going to rain, the moisture, the barometric pressure, he could feel it. The pain would come. He could feel it.

So he knew it was going to happen.

That feeling was something that preceded the rain.

There's actually a smell that comes before the rain.

And people who are obsessed with agriculture they can smell it.

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There's a smell that comes when it's about to start raining.

דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ קִדְמָה לִתּוֹרָה doesn't mean you should choose derech eretz before Torah.

Rather, it means if you find somebody that has derech eretz, you want to know what's going to come next?

What's going to come next is Torah.

In fact, one of the greatest statements I ever heard in my life was a beautiful concept expressed by Rav Elchonon Wasserman.

He says, we know that a person at the age of thirteen becomes obligated if they're a man, and at the age of twelve if they're a woman, they become obligated in the mitzvot.

He says that means at thirteen years old, not only do you have to honor your parents, not only at thirteen years old do you have to keep Shabbat, but at the age of thirteen years old you have to have emunah and faith in Hakadosh Baruch Hu—one of the mitzvot.

Asks Rav Elchonon:

You have philosophers that are eighty years old.

You have theologians that are seventy-five years old.

They haven't figured it out yet.

How could the Torah have expected a kid to go to bed one night, twelve years old, and wake up the next morning an erudite theological scholar?

How is that supposed to happen?

And he answers something unbelievable.

He says because the challenge of believing or not believing in God is not an ideological one.

It is not an intellectual one.

Not believing in God is a matter of middot.

Of bad character traits.

That when a person is self-absorbed, they don't believe in God.

And when they're not, then belief in God is natural.

It's easy.

It's something that comes even to a child.

With that in mind, I want to now revisit the statement of Rav Shach.

Rav Shach said to us: if you've not learned Sefer Bereishit with all of its middot, how do you want to come to learn Sefer Shemot with its Torah?

Impossible.

You can't do it.

So let's look at this idea with new eyes.

מָה בַּין?

How did the students of Avraham Avinu find God in a time where God was unfindable?

The answer is—they had the right middot.

And once they had the right middot, what happens?

It clicks naturally.

Avraham Avinu teaches the world about God.

Isn't it interesting that Avraham Avinu is also teaching the world about hachnasat orchim?

Yes, it's interesting if you don't understand the connection.

No, it's not interesting if you realize that the sensitization to chesed that Avraham Avinu was inculcating in his guests, in the people of his home, was the tool to bring them to emunah in Hashem.

That kindness brought about a faith in God.

It brought about selflessness.

It brought about tefillah.

It brought about tzedakah.

It brought about everything.

So Avraham Avinu starts by welcoming you into his house.

By the time you've finished breakfast, you're already saying Birkat Hamazon.

What a wild idea.

Two Generations, One Law: Middot Decide Everything

Bilam—his people live in the parallel opposite generation of Avraham. Diametric opposite.

My friends, Avraham's generation is a generation where you can't find God.

Bilam's generation is a generation where you can't ignore God.

Bilam lives through the time of the splitting of the sea—a miracle that everyone in the world heard of.

שָׁמַעַו עִמִּים וַיַּגְזֹו הָיָל אַחֲזִי יְשִׁבֵּי פְּלָשָׁת.

People are trembling in Kanaan.

In Timbuktu, the water split in their glass.

When God gives the Torah, the whole world goes silent, and everybody hears **אֲנֹכִי הָאֱלֹהִיךְ**, I am Hashem your God.

So Bilam's generation—asks the Mishnah—how could they not believe in God?

How could they choose to be students of Bilam HaRasha?

And the answer is:

It doesn't matter how obvious God is—you won't find Him with bad middot.

And it doesn't matter how hidden God is—you won't lose Him with good middot.

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If you learn Sefer Bereishit, it is immediately followed by Sefer Shemot with the recognition of Hashem.

דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ קָדְמָה לְתֹרָה.

It's not that it comes before—we have to choose it.

It's like you have an SUV truck, and it's pulling the trailer behind it.

Derech eretz pulls behind it religion.

That's why they were always so careful in the yeshivot to try and institute that there's a seder for mussar.

I learned that the Alter of Kelm, the elder, the sage of Kelm—when it would come time at the end of the learning period, they'd be learning in the afternoon or in the evening, and it would come time for the seder mussar.

So I remember this in my yeshiva.

Someone would go to the bimah where they would pray.

“Mussar!”

Everyone would close the Gemaras.

Whatever you're learning—Bava Metzia, Bava Kamma, Ketubot, Yevamot—whatever you're learning—close the Gemara, get up, go to the shelf, and get yourself a sefer mussar.

Bang you over the head about how you're too arrogant, or you're impatient, or you're self-absorbed, or you're greedy, or you're impetuous.

You operate too fast, or you operate too slow.

In either scenario, there's this balance of character traits that a person needs to work on.

They say that the Alter of Kelm, when he would bang the thing on the bimah to say mussar, he would shake.

He would say, “I'm to be responsible for taking two hundred, three hundred, however many hundred boys—and stopping their Talmud Torah?”

The minute you bang, what happens?

Everybody closes the Gemara.

“That's on me?”

Now, I always thought to myself—he's shaking from stopping the Gemara.

But what does he do every night?

He stops the Gemara.

Why?

Because you've got to learn mussar.

You don't have mussar—you don't have yeshiva.

You don't have mussar—you don't have Torah.

Now let me be clear.

What's the difference between mussar and Torah?

Aren't they the same?

Isn't the study of mussar the study of Torah?

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The answer is yes—of course it is.

However, there's one fundamental difference.

And let me, if I can, give you in a nutshell the difference between Torah study and mussar.

The Torah says that if a poor person comes your way and you have money to give him—money that's set aside for the poor—so don't withhold.

Give that tzedakah.

So there's a mitzvah in the Torah.

What's the mitzvah?

Reach in your pocket, pull out a dollar, and give the person a dollar.

Or more, if you can.

The mitzvah is the action of giving tzedakah.

But as we famously know, Rambam asks a question.

What's the question?

If a person could give one dollar to a thousand poor people, or a person could give one thousand dollars to one poor person—which should he do?

The one dollar is not really going to change the life of anybody.

The one thousand dollars will make a difference to somebody, at least.

Rambam writes—what should you do?

Give one dollar to a thousand people.

Now on the face of it, from the tzedakah perspective, you one thousand times did not make a difference in someone's life.

So it might be a bad idea from the perspective of a raw tzedakah act.

However, Rambam says that one of the purposes of giving tzedakah is not that you give to a person their needs, but that you should become a giver.

And what that means is—if you reach in your pocket one thousand times, you teach yourself to give, and to give, and to give, and to give.

The muscle memory of putting your hand in your pocket teaches you to give.

It breaks your greed.

It breaks your self-centeredness.

So whereas when you gave a thousand dollars it was hard—or a thousand times harder to do—but you only did it once.

What would be the comparison?

What is better—to go to the gym and one time lift two hundred, three hundred pounds?

Or to go in and do a thousand reps?

You can't compare.

You lifted a very heavy weight once—it means nothing.

You grew nothing.

You did nothing.

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Mussar as the Operating System of Life

Mussar says: I'm not concerned only with the actions that you take.

I'm concerned with the transformation of the human being's psyche.

With the operating system.

With the approach to life.

If you have that kind of psyche—if you've built **שין טובה, רוח נمواה, נפש שפלה**—if you've built that, you can't help yourself but find Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

You'll find your way home.

The opposite is also true.

Even in a generation where God is everywhere.

This is one of the challenges that we're facing today.

We have yeshivot that we never had before in the history of the Jewish people.

That means—and let me say this clearly and plainly—I don't only mean a yeshiva in Israel for people with hats and jackets, speaking Yiddish.

I mean the yeshiva day schools.

The elementary schools.

The yeshiva high schools.

Where kids were going to PS 103 and learning with a melamed on a Sunday—cheder one day a week.

You had a few people that were sending their kids to Jewish school.

Now Jewish schools exploded.

There are Jewish schools everywhere.

The default is that kids are sending their young kids to Jewish school.

This is a huge change.

The idea that kids would go for a year to Israel—how many people would do that back in the day?

Very few.

Only the most wise, the wisest, the most erudite.

Those were the ones whose parents were sending them to yeshiva.

Everyone else had to work.

They were starving to death on the farm in Poland.

Now—all of our kids.

So we have Torah on a level of accessibility that we've never had before.

If you live in Melbourne, Australia, you can hear the rabbi from the Sephardic synagogue in New York.

Every day.

You can listen to Breakfast with the Class.

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Good morning, good morning Rabbotai.

You don't like your rabbi?

No problem.

Ten thousand rabbis to listen to.

Choose your flavor.

Baskin Rabbis.

Once upon a time, you didn't have that option.

You know how much it costs to learn Torah now?

Take the best rabbi.

How much does it cost to learn from him?

Nothing.

Doesn't cost anything.

Understand that people in Eastern Europe were choosing between food and a melamed for their children.

So why is it—with so much Torah—that we are not developing?

And the answer is:

Because without middot, it doesn't matter how plentiful the Torah is.

How available it is.

It doesn't even matter how much Torah you learned.

Without Mussar—it all disappears.

Imagine you have a person who has these beautiful looks—like a beautiful vessel.

He's pouring all the Torah into it.

Filling up his cup.

But in between all the cracks of the vessel—at the top, along the sides, at the bottom—he hasn't sealed the edges.

Every drop that goes in disappears.

Only a question of how long it takes.

If you didn't put the caulk in the bottom of the shower—it could be made of the nicest marble in the world.

If you didn't put it in, it's dripping out the sides.

It's all disappearing.

It's not holding.

The bathtub is not going to hold the water.

Mussar is the element of the way a person lives their life.

So let's end with this.

There was a conversation that happened between Rav Chatzkel and Rav Yeruchem—two of the Mussar greats.

Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, who wrote the book **Or Yechetzkel**—one of my favorite Mussar books on earth.

His Or Yechzekel, specifically the volume on Elul—unbelievable.

So Rav Chatzkel is talking to Rav Yeruchem, the mashgiach of the great Mir Yeshiva.

And he asks him the following question:

What are we supposed to learn when we learn about the whole story of leaving Egypt?

What's the key message?

Or Yechzekel responds.

He says the key message is **emunah**.

The plagues.

Hashem taking us out.

Exactly midnight.

Jumping the houses.

Emunah.

Rav Yeruchem responds.

He says—you're right.

But there's another thing we also have to learn.

What We Learned in Egypt and Why It Never Leaves Us

He says—and the other thing is avdut, slavery.

It's true, God, when He took us out, took us out in the most miraculous way, and He instituted in all of us a faith that God could do whatever He wants.

But as important for the Jewish people as it was to get out of Egypt, it was also important what we learned and what we developed while we were in Egypt.

While we were in Egypt, we learned what it means to be a servant.

We learned what it means to be subservient.

We learned what it means to serve a master.

We learned what it means to say, “I don't make anything for myself. All of my work is for my master.”

Ask the master in the beginning of the day, “What are we doing today?”

“Wake up and go fishing.”

“What's on the agenda today? Bricks?”

“Oh. Bricks. So like yesterday, and the day before, and the day before.”

As important for the Jews as leaving Egypt was—to build our emunah—being in Egypt was as important to make us into a receptacle for switching our master and being proficient already in the nature of what it means to be an eved.

At the end of Sefer Devarim, we read about the best Jew that ever lived.

The most successful Jew at Jewing.

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And what do we describe Moshe Rabbeinu as?

ה'עבָר.

The servant of God.

He served his purpose.

His mission.

His God.

His godliness.

The divine plan on this earth.

My friends, understand this:

When you've learned a way to live, that way of living rises above the circumstances in which you learned it.

If we learned to be an eved while we were enslaved to the Egyptians, why would that matter when we left Egypt?

And the answer is—the way you learn to behave actually has nothing to do with the circumstances you're in.

If you're a person who is generous when you have money, you know what will happen if you lose it?

You will remain generous.

That is a learned behavior.

So every one of us has a challenge when we begin Sefer Shemot together.

And that challenge is this:

If I could make one thing be on autopilot—something that right now I'm struggling with, and it presents itself again and again and again—what is one thing I could change about the way that I think and the way that I behave?

It would get me into a lot less trouble.

My life would be a lot smoother.

My Judaism would run like clockwork.

What would that thing be?

I think the two rabbis are sharing two different huge perspectives that are complementary.

One is emunah.

A person lives with emunah—you're good always.

You know why?

Because, as an example—do I need to steal?

Do I need to be dishonest if I know that God is going to get it to me anyway?

No.

If something happens and I'm very angry at somebody, and I believe with emunah that Hashem decreed it to happen—because if it was not decreed, it wouldn't have happened—am I angry at the guy?

No.

Emunah.

When a person has emunah, they have a way to live.

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They have a way to be.

And nothing rocks their boat.

They're always calm.

The other rabbi is saying—from the other perspective—exactly the same thing.

If I've learned—if I've taught myself—to be a king, then in every scenario I need to be a king.

If I've taught myself to be an eved, then there's nothing that ever bothers me.

I always ask myself:

What could I do to serve another?

What could I do to serve a higher purpose?

They're describing the same thing from different angles.

One is—in whom do I believe?

And one is—how do I behave?

In Egypt, we learned to live a life of service.

We just had to switch the reason—and the thing—that we were living in service of.

But ultimately, when you see how generous the Jewish people are when it comes to giving charity of all types, you know where that happened?

In Mitzrayim.

How many mitzvot in the Torah does it say, "And you should do this—because you were once a servant in Egypt"?

And what the pasuk is telling you is—you learned this.

You know what empathy means.

You know what it means to not have anyone looking out for you.

You know what it means when someone hurts you and you're defenseless.

So don't treat someone who's defenseless that way.

The Torah is calling on a learned behavioral pattern that was developed while we were in Mitzrayim.

My friends, the whole of the Torah rests on developing these Mussar character traits.

And the crazy thing is—once you learn how to respond like this—nothing that life throws at you changes anything.

It's the best of times.

It's the worst of times.

I'm always behaving in the highest possible fashion.

That is the study of Mussar.

So I'm going to throw some things at you:

Anger.

Impatience.

Greed.

Self-centeredness.

Lack of humility.

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The Orchot Tzaddikim describes how a person's arrogance—or lack of arrogance—is not the same as being humble.

All of these things are ways of life.

Being stingy.

Having רעה.

Not being happy when someone else succeeds.

All of these things are processes that a person can build into their behavioral loops that ultimately get you to where you need to go.

May Hashem bless us to be able to have these learned behaviors.

May Hashem bless us to learn the lessons of Mitzrayim.

May Hashem bless us—ultimately—to have learned from that time, with the emunah that we've got, how to be able to survive any problem and live in the most exalted way.

A Takeaway from the Lecture

The beginning of Sefer Shemot is not a new story. It is the inevitable continuation of Sefer Bereishit. If I did not absorb the lessons of middot—how to see others, how to restrain myself, how to give, how to serve, how to live beyond ego—then Torah will not stay with me, no matter how accessible it becomes.

Avraham Avinu found God when God was hidden because he built the inner tools to receive Him. Bilam's students lost God when God was obvious because their middot made Him unreachable. Egypt was not only a place of redemption; it was a training ground. There, we learned what it means to be an eved, to live in service, to subordinate self-interest to something higher. That learned way of being did not disappear when we left Egypt—it became the foundation of Jewish life.

Torah does not sit inside information. It rests inside character. Mussar is not an accessory to Torah; it is the vessel that allows Torah to remain. Without it, everything leaks out. With it, emunah becomes natural, behavior becomes stable, and a person can live consistently—no matter the circumstance—aligned with Hashem's will.

Five Shabbat Table Discussion Questions

1. Rav Shach says that without learning Sefer Bereishit properly, a person cannot truly connect to Sefer Shemot. Which middot from Bereishit do you feel are hardest to internalize in your own life?
2. The Mishnah asks *why* Avraham's students differed from Bilam's students, not *how*. In what ways do you see middot—not ideology—shaping belief today?
3. The lecture explains that Egypt trained us in servitude before we could serve Hashem. What habits or behaviors in your life were formed under pressure but still define you today?
4. The Rambam teaches that repeated small acts shape a giver more than one large act. Which repeated behaviors in your life are shaping who you are becoming—positively or negatively?
5. If you could put one middah on “autopilot,” as described in the lecture, which one would most change your Judaism and your relationships?