



DEVARIM

Eikev

Fake It Till You Make It

August 4, 2018

FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT: AUTO MECHANICS, AA, ARISTOTLE AND TORAH

ABSTRACT

What do you do when you are committed to something but are not in the mood of doing it? Say, a promise you made to your spouse, or an obligation you have to a loved one. Should you do it anyway – and risk feeling like a fake or a hypocrite or should you be “honest” to your feelings and simply not do it?

Is there any truth to the slogan made popular by Alcoholics Anonymous “Fake It Till You Make It”? Or the words of Aristotle: “acting virtuous will make one virtuous”?

Long before AA and even Aristotle, one seemingly simple word “what” (mah) in this week’s Torah portion – and one additional letter, changing mah to me’ah – teaches us volumes how to overcome one of life’s great challenges: what to do when you are not in the mood...

A strange interpretation by Tosafos on this verse, surprising insights from auto mechanics, a Chelm solution to problems – all come together in an inspiring and entertaining mix to offer us fundamental lessons in everything from jumpstarting a dull marriage to finding personal inspiration, from exciting children to reviving your soul.

1. The Old *Shamash* of *Chelm* (Humor)

The city of *Chelm* (the classic town of idiots in Jewish humor) was in turmoil. They called for a town meeting to discuss the issue at hand.

The *shamash* (caretaker) of the synagogue was getting old and could not keep up with his duties. Every morning before prayers, he used to make his rounds rapping on all the homes’ shutters to make sure that the community would not sleep in. But now that he was old and could not walk easily, he couldn’t make his rounds. Still, he had been doing this for the past 65 years and the community just couldn’t part with him.

They sat and talked until they came up with the perfect solution. They removed the shutters from all the homes and laid them next to his bed!

2. Hidden Wisdom

You are laughing and it does seem stupid, but there is hidden wisdom in this story (if a bit misapplied).

Have you heard the saying in Yiddish, “Oib der ferd kumt nisht tzum vasser, brengt dos vaser tzum ferd.” If the horse won’t come to the water, bring the water to the horse.¹

Or the slogan made popular by Alcoholics Anonymous? “Fake It Till You Make It”?

These are calls to be creative in impossible situations – tactics of making something happen when it seems it can’t be done.

For example, psychologists say that to get out of depression, you should act as if you are not depressed. If you don’t think you can walk around smiling, do it anyway. Eventually, it will come naturally.

Everyone knows that when you are calm and at ease, your breaths are slow and deep. When anxious, your breaths are quick and shallow. So what happens when you get angry or are in pain and feel yourself tensing up? The solution for laboring women is not to contemplate that everything is going to be okay and there is no room for worry! The answer is to breathe slowly and deeply. In other words, if you aren’t calm enough to breathe, breathe enough to calm yourself.

Perhaps the first and most famous source for this approach is Aristotle, who claimed, “acting virtuous will make one virtuous.”

But think again.

Would you be surprised to discover that the basis for all these innovative and creative methods of accomplishing what seems impossible comes from the Torah?

Long before AA and even before Aristotle, the Torah presents us with this methodology, amongst a wide range of tools, to take on challenges and to grow and reach the greatest heights.

¹ Frances Bacon coined a similar phrase (Essays, 1625): If Mohammad can’t come to the mountain, bring the mountain to Mohammad.” Bacon’s original is as follows: Mahomet cald the Hill to come to him. And when the Hill stood still, he was neuer a whit abashed, but said; If the Hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet wil go to the hil.” This was later shortened (and became the basis of the modern phrase) in a work by John Owen in 1643: If the mountaine will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will goe to the mountaine.

3. Parshat Eikev

We derive this novel and powerful approach from one seemingly simple word in this week's Torah reading – Parshat Eikev. That word is “mah” – which means “what.”

Let's take a look:

At this juncture in the Torah, Moses has just started a long inspirational speech – it's going to last forty days, to be exact – encouraging the Jewish people to serve G-d. But, instead of inspiring them to work hard, he seems to be complaining (we could even say “kvetching,” but that is not an appropriate word to use on Moses).

He says, “And now, Israel, what does G-d ask of you? Only to respect [revere, be in awe]² of the Lord your G-d”³ Or, to paraphrase, “Listen guys, what is G-d asking of you already? All he wants is a little bit of respect, and you've made him happy!” What's the big deal?

Now let me ask everyone in this room: Is *respect* all that G-d really asks of us? Does He not expect us to fulfill 613 commandments with infinite intricacies? How could Moses neglect all of these precepts and claim that all G-d wants is just a bit of respect or reverence?

On the other hand: Is respecting G-d such an easy thing that Moses simply says “what does go want of you already, nothing more than standing in awe of G-d!?” Indeed, the Talmud realizes the problem in this verse as it asks⁴: “Is awe, then, such a small thing?”⁵

² The Hebrew original is “l'yirah,” which many translate “to fear” (“to fear G-d”). Because fear has many implications, including negative ones (as in fearing a thief), we chose instead to use the word “respect,” “revere” or “awe” as a more appropriate word that captures the meaning of “yirah” in relation to G-d.

³ Deuteronomy 10:12.

⁴ *Berachos* 33b.

⁵ The Talmud goes on to answer, “yes, for Moses it is a small thing.” The Tanya (chapter 42) explains (because the statement in the verse is not talking about Moses but about every Jew, “What does He want of you”) that “Moses” here is referring not to Moses alone, but to the “Moses” which is found in every Jew, which imbues all Jews with the power to respect G-d. By accessing the “Moses” within it is easy for every Jew to be in awe of the divine. The explanation in this sermon follows a different track based on the answer in Tosafos as explained by the Maharsha. For a reconciliation between these explanations, see discourse *V'Atoh Yisroel* 5727 (*Sefer Hamaamorim Melukat* vol. 3, p. 253). For the general ideas discussed here, see also discourses *V'atoh Yisroel* 5728; 5737.

4. The Difference between *Mah* (What) and *Me'ah* (One Hundred)

The Talmud⁶ comments as follows:

Rabbi Meir used to say: a person is obligated to recite a hundred blessings a day, for it is stated, “Now, Israel, what (*Mah*) does Hashem your G-d ask of you?”

The obvious question jumps out at us: “Where does Rabbi Meir see an indication of a hundred blessings in this verse? It says nothing about a hundred and nothing about blessings!

Tosafos, the commentary on the Talmud, answers⁷ that instead of reading the word *Mah* (“what”), read it *Me’ah* (“one hundred”). In other words, the verse should be read not as a question “And now, Israel, what does G-d ask of you?” but as a statement: “And now, Israel, one hundred G-d is asking of you,” “G-d is asking you to make a hundred blessings a day.”

Does this answer satisfy you? Or do you suspect there is more to it? When our Sages make a play on words, are they just trying to be cute, or is there a deeper meaningful connection?

R’ Meir (according to Tosafos) changes the reading of the word “what” (*mah*) to the word “one hundred” (*me’ah*). But what compels him to make this change? What is missing in this verse that requires any new reading? Why is R’ Meir insistent on changing *mah* to *me’ah* in order to derive the law that one is obligated to recite 100 blessings each day?

And what relationship is there between these two things besides for their wording?

Indeed, when you think about it, “what” and “one hundred” actually suggest *opposite* meanings.

5. The Meaning of “What”

Let’s begin with the word “what.”

I looked it up in the dictionary and found that “what” has more definitions than probably any other word (29 to be exact). In the context of this verse – “What does G-d ask of you?” – does “what” imply something big or something small?

Before you answer, imagine that you’re getting a lecture from your employer, spouse or parent: “What am I asking from you already? Blah, blah, blah.” (Does that sound familiar?) The person is really saying: “It’s really not a big deal, why can’t you just do it?” According to this

⁶ Menachos 43b

⁷ Based on Rashi. See also Zohar I 179a. Oruch entry on *Me’ah*.

example, the word “what” implies something small.

By contrast, nothing small comes to mind when you hear the word “one hundred.” One hundred suggests a big number. [We think of a hundred as a lot bigger than ninety-nine. That’s why people are still falling for the age-old marketing ploy of \$99.99].

So how can Tosafos equate “what,” which implies something small, with “one hundred,” which suggests something large?

On the other hand, in context of our verse (awe of G-d) one can argue the other way around: To revere and respect G-d is quite an accomplishment (“Is awe, then, such a small thing?” in the words of the Talmud). In contrast, reciting a hundred blessings a day is relatively an easy (small) thing to do.

What we clearly see from all this is that the verse (“what”) and its Talmudic interpretation (“hundred”) are teaching us that there is something both “small” and “large” in this effort.

But what can be both “small” and “large” at the same time?

6. The Power of What

The great 16th century Talmudic commentator, Rabbi Shmuel Eidels, known as the *Maharsha*, opens for us up the deeper meaning of Tosafos (explaining the statement by R’ Meir), and in the process we discover the power of “what” – profound personal lessons in the one word “mah.”

What compels R’ Meir to interpret this verse instead of reading it literally (in place of “mah” read “me’ah”)? Explains the *Maharsha*: R’ Meir is bothered by the basic question posed by the literal reading of the verse: If “mah” (“what”) refers to “awe of G-d,” how can Moses speak about it in such trivial terms: Is awe of G-d such a small matter that Moses should be saying “Now Israel, *what* [after all] does G-d ask of you? *Only* to respect the Lord your G-d”?

To answer this question R’ Meir says that *mah* should be read *me’ah*: The word actually refers not to the awe itself, but to the hundred blessings one is obligated to recite each day, which are relatively easy to fulfill. And these blessings are meant to bring him to respect G-d.

Since Moses is not talking about the actual awe itself, which is difficult to achieve, but about reciting the hundred blessings, which are easy to do, he therefore can simply say “Now Israel, G-d is [only] asking one hundred [blessings] of you [whose purpose is nothing more] only to respect the Lord your G-d.” Paraphrased: Moses is saying “What is G-d asking of you already – nothing more than to recite one hundred blessings every day.” Something everyone is capable of.⁸

The addition of the one letter *alef*, explains the *Maharsha*, turns the small *mah* into a formidable force (*me’ah* – 100 blessings).

According to this explanation of the *Maharsha*, R’ Meir is teaching us much more than an obligation of reciting 100 blessings each day; he is conveying to us an awesome insight: How do we arrive at the big thing called “respect of G-d?” Reaching this level seems like a formidable challenge. How can one achieve that, especially if you are “not in the mood?” The answer is: Do. Act. Recite the hundred blessings – something everyone is capable of – and that will bring on the awe.

In broader terms, this illuminates for us a tremendous lesson in life: one arrives at the “big” things in life by doing the small things. If you are not able or feel you are not able, or if you are not in the mood, act as if you are, and that will create the mood and make you able.

7. Respect, Reverence and Awe

Let’s apply this to our lives by talking about respect a little bit – and all its corollaries – reverence, awe, fear.

Whom do you fear? Your boss? The IRS? Terrorists? How about letting down someone whom you respect? Does that fall into the same category?

⁸ Perhaps we can add, that R’ Meir is bothered by the abovementioned question: Why does Moses say that respect is all that G-d really asks for when we G-d actually want us to keep all the mitzvos of the Torah? Answers R’ Meir, *mah* really means *me’ah*, emphasizing that the “what” G-d is asking for is not one thing alone, but something quite big (“one hundred”). Perhaps this fits with the first explanation of the *Maharsha*, based on Rashi not according to Tosafos, that R’ Meir is saying (not that *me’ah* is replacing *mah*, “*al tikra*,” as in Tosafos’ explanation), but simply that the word *mah* in the verse should be read *me’ab*.

On the other hand: R’ Meir is teaching us that even though respect and awe for G-d is a daunting task, we can achieve it through our actions – through reciting one hundred blessings, as discussed in the sermon based on the *Maharsha*.

Yes, elementary fear is of punishment and pain – lightning bolts zapping people (which I haven't seen lately).

Mature fear/awe/respect implies commitment. When you are committed to your family, you make it work, no matter what. When you are committed to get a job done, you do whatever it takes to get it done. When you are committed to G-d, you do whatever it takes to satisfy Him.

By way of analogy, commitment in a relationship is similar to the engine in a car. A car is a very complicated machine. It has over 30,000 parts – wheels, tires, a radiator, a carburetor an engine, etc. Many of the parts are themselves intricate systems. And yet, the simplest people in society are able to operate these complex people movers. The obvious reason is that all you have to do is turn the key, and the car starts.

Once the engine is on, everything else magically works – the wheels turn, the radiator keeps everything under the hood cool, and most importantly for this time of the year, the AC works.

And that is the analogy: Just like an engine starts and keeps the whole car (no matter how intricate) running in synergy, awe of G-d – or commitment – is the engine that propels us to serve G-d in Judaism's many intricacies. Once you have awe and commitment, everything else follows. Armed with awe and commitment even the simplest person can keep the 613 commandments and not be overwhelmed by them. Indeed, they all then feel like one – many parts of one smooth running machine.

Likewise, our commitment to family guarantees that eventually things will work out.

This is what Moses was telling the Jews. What does G-d ask of you already? Forget about all the details! Are you committed to G-d? Are you committed to your family?

Don't get caught up worrying about all the intricacies. It all boils down to commitment. Are you committed to making it work? If you are, everything will fall into place.

In other words, just start the engine.

8. Car Joke (Optional)

And speaking of cars ...

A Texas rancher was visiting a farmer in Israel. The proud Israeli showed him around. “Here is where I grow tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash. Over there I built a play set for my kids, next to the doghouse.”

The land was tiny, and the Texan was surprised by its small size. “Is this all your land?” he asked.

“Yes,” the Israeli said proudly. “This is all mine!”

“You mean this is *it*! This is *all* of it?” the Texan asked, incredulous.

“Yes, yes, this is really all mine!”

“Well, son,” said the Texan, “back home I’d get in my car before the sun’d come up and I’d drive and drive and drive, and when the sun set, why, I’d only be halfway across my land!”

“Oh, yes,” replied the Israeli farmer, “I used to have a car like that.”

9. Lack of Commitment

But what happens if the engine is broken? What happens when commitment is missing?

We know that respect/awe/fear implies commitment, and commitment is the key to a healthy relationship with G-d and family. We don’t need to feel overwhelmed by the infinite responsibilities to our families, communities and religion. If we just have the commitment, everything will fall into place. But what if someone is not committed?

That person says: “I believe in G-d, I know my family is important, but you’re telling me to want even if I don’t want? I don’t want!”

In other words, the question becomes: How do we jump-start commitment?

Using the car analogy, let me teach you a little bit of mechanics (especially useful if your car has

manual transmission.)

If a manual transmission car stalls, try to get it to the top of a hill, or find strong people to push from behind while the car is in neutral. Once it is moving at 5 MPH, the engine will start automatically.

If all of the rules are too much, start believing (i.e. respecting G-d). If believing is too much, start doing. If you want the wheels to start moving, turn on the engine. If the engine doesn't start, get the wheels moving! If you aren't committed enough to be responsible, be responsible enough to become committed!

This is the brilliant answer Tosafos offers us on the verse: Respecting G-d is both a big thing and a small thing ("what"). It may initially seem difficult to attain respect of and commitment to G-d. But once you have this awe and commitment the engine will easily keep everything else going.⁹

But how do you get the engine to run? How do you achieve commitment when you don't seem to have it? If you cannot get the engine to run, get the wheels moving by acting as if you are committed. Recite the 100 blessings – something anyone can do – and that will get the engine rolling (as explained by the *Maharsha*).

Says Tosafos, instead of reading the word "*Mah*" read it "*Me'ah*" (one hundred). If you want to achieve the "one" thing (awe) and find it difficult recite the 100 blessings.

10. How it Works

Now let's talk about how this works on a day-to-day practical level.

Does anyone here ever have a bad day at work?

No?

Okay, so let's assume there is someone out there who has had a bad day. Upon opening the front door, his loving child embraces him attempting to engage him in fun and games. But, he's just not in the mood. He wants to lie in the recliner and relax with a beer.

Has anyone ever had a situation where your spouse is ready for intimacy, but you're just not in the

⁹ *Mah* (awe) brings on *me'ah* (hundred). See the previous note (8).

mood?

No?

Okay, so let's assume there is someone out there who has had this problem. And we are talking about nothing personal, nothing passive aggressive, just "I'm not in the mood."

So what does this person do if he/she is a sensitive and kind human being? How does such a person respond to gestures of closeness at the wrong time?

On the one hand, your spouse loves you, and you owe him/her the best – and your children for that matter as well.

On the other hand, if you're not in the mood, you're not in the mood. Or in the case of your children, you are just wiped out and have nothing left to give.

11. The Torah Solution

You aren't in the mood to play with your child? You just want to slump on the couch with that beer? The Torah solution is start playing, and you will get in the mood, because engaging in the physical motions of commitment jump-starts genuine emotions.

That's the bottom line. If you can't get to all the shutters, get the shutters to you. Fake it till you make it. Best is if you can be calm enough to breathe. If not, at least breathe enough to make yourself calm. If you want the wheels to move, turn on the engine. If the engine doesn't start, get the wheels moving. If you don't believe enough to do, do enough to believe. If you aren't committed enough to be responsible, be responsible enough to become committed!

If you aren't happy enough to dance, dance enough to be happy.

12. The Cancelled Suicide (Optional)

Which brings me to the following story told by the Chabad rabbi of Canejo about how his flopped party saved a man's life.

This man's wife was in an unfortunate car accident, which also killed the elder of his daughters and left the younger severely injured. As time went on, he divorced his wife, became depressed, and finally decided that it was time to end his life.

Before doing himself in, he decided to take his daughter for one last night out to the movies. In keeping with his mood, he chose the most desolate strip mall with a movie theatre.

Sure enough, the Chabad rabbi had also chosen that mall, but for something a bit more joyous in nature. He prepared a full Chanukah party with live music, latkes and doughnuts.

As the night approached, the rabbi realized, to his horror, that this mall was not the ideal location for reaching out to a lot of Jews. Only a small handful of people outside the rabbi's family and hired entertainment attended the party.

The suicidal man made an effort to circumvent the loud affair, but the rabbi's children noticed him with his daughter walking towards the theater, and they grabbed his arm, throwing him into a circle of dancing.

The man's night was ruined! He tried pulling himself away, but the kids would not let go. They danced, and danced, and danced and he had to keep up until he was sweating ... and smiling.

He ate latkes, doughnuts, and decided to give life one more shot on condition that G-d would give him a sign (which he got).

The rest is history, and this happy man still lives in the area and attends the synagogue there.

13. Bottom Line

And so this is the bottom line: If you aren't happy enough to dance, dance enough so that you become happy.

It would be ideal if we were all naturally enthusiastic and could make all of our responsibilities always pleasurable. Reality, however, is different. But we know what to do:

If the engine doesn't start, get the wheels moving. If you don't believe enough to do, do enough to believe. And may you be blessed to succeed, always. Amen.

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