



IDENTITY CRISIS

CHANIE WOLF



Hypocrite.

It's not worth trying because I'll never be perfect.

Being chassidish means being out of touch.

If people only knew what I struggle with.

There are no trusted adults.

These values are unrealistic.

If I had a dollar for every time I've heard one of these comments, I'd be rich. Was it always like this? Or does our generation struggle more than ever with black-and-white thinking, with the all-or-nothing mentality? We expect perfection of ourselves and of everyone around us—our parents, teachers, and community leaders; our spouses, bosses, and colleagues. And then we are horrified to discover the truth: humans have serious faults. They are full of contradictions and inconsistencies. No-one, with the exception of *tzaddikim*, is perfect.

In trying to make sense of this confusing reality, it is tempting to go to extremes.

Either we whitewash our struggles so that we can retain the desperately needed status of “perfect”: If I'm not very

good at this or didn't grow up with this standard, it can't actually be an important value. The Rebbe didn't say it; if he said it he didn't mean it; if he meant it he changed his mind (*chas v'shalom*); I'm perfectly fine as I am and there is no need to try to change. I can't apologize; I must be right.

Or we condemn ourselves or others as irredeemable failures: If I make a mistake, I'm a failure; if you make a mistake, I can never trust you again. We call ourselves all kinds of names and drown in a cesspool of self-loathing. We compare our insides to everyone else's outsides and determine that we're hopeless. At the same time, we hold deep grudges against those we believe “let us down” by being anything less than paragons of perfection.



A WORLD OF TIKKUN

As a *bachur*, Rabbi Zalman Gopin, today a *mashpia* in Kfar Chabad, asked the Rebbe in *yechidus*¹ regarding the mood changes he often experienced. Sometimes he felt joyful and expansive, while at other times he felt down and withdrawn. He was frustrated with the lack of consistency and worried about the challenges to his *avodas Hashem* that he experienced as a result. What should he do?

The Rebbe responded that changes are a normal part of life in this world of *tikkun*; the world of *tohu*, by contrast, is one of extremes, rigidity, and absolutes. And the Rebbe guided him to look for ways to utilize each situation in the service of Hashem.

A black-and-white, all-or-nothing mindset belongs to the world of *tohu*, which was unsustainable and therefore shattered. In this world of *tikkun*, of functionality and order, our moods vary, as does our performance. We are not wired to be perfectly functioning robots.

And that's okay. Because that's what creates space for true growth.

NOT IN THE HEAVENS

After the awesome revelation at Har Sinai, when Hashem spoke to Am Yisroel and betrothed us as His holy nation, Moshe Rabbeinu ascended the mountain to learn and receive the complete Torah so that he could transmit it to the people.

But when he arrived in the heavenly realm, the *malachim* staged a massive protest. How could Hashem's greatest treasure be entrusted to lowly mortals? How could the ultimate in spirituality be transmitted to limited, physical, flawed beings? *Tnei Hodcha al hashamayim*, they cried. Grant Your Glory upon the Heavens, Hashem! Leave the Torah with us!

Upon Hashem's instruction, Moshe Rabbeinu responded to the protesting angels: "What is the Torah to you? ... The Torah says to honor your father and mother. Do you have parents? The Torah says to rest on Shabbos. Do you have work that you need to refrain from? Do you have a *yetzer hara*?..."

The angels immediately conceded his point and sent Moshe Rabbeinu off with gifts and blessings.²

If Hashem had wanted perfection, He would have left the Torah with the *malachim*. In fact, He would never have created humans, and this physical world! But perfection

was never the point. Yes, the *malachim* stand all day in holy unison, singing Hashem's praises. It's beautiful. A lot prettier than our messy human performance. But it's boring. Angels don't go anywhere. They don't change, they don't grow, and they don't accomplish. They're not as impressive as they seem. Because they don't struggle. They can't get angry or depressed; they don't have the option to be distracted, addicted, or confused.

Hashem wanted a physical, imperfect world with physical, imperfect people. A world of dichotomy and confusion; a world of conflict and free choice. He wanted humans who possessed the basest instincts and engaged with most material aspects of existence to create a home for Him within those lowest realities. Not because they would be programmed to do so, but because, fully capable of the opposite, they would choose to recognize and serve Him. There, only there, would Hashem truly find the home He yearned for.

IS THE GENERATION WORTHY?!"

This paradox,³ of the ultimate holiness being revealed specifically within the lowest realm, is particularly relevant in our generation.

For thousands of years, the world has been on a tumultuous journey towards *Geulah*. In this pursuit of a home for Hashem on earth, there have been high points of revelation and growth, as well as periods of concealment and setbacks to the Divine mission. Yet overall, there have been two parallel, seemingly contradictory trajectories of change over this time:

On the one hand, there has been continuous *yeridas hadoros*—a decline in spiritual sensitivity from one generation to the next. There were times when *nevuah* was commonplace—thousands walked around receiving and transmitting messages from Hashem—yet over time *nevuah* was largely taken away. There have been great *tzaddikim* and *chassidim* in all generations, yet there have been distinct eras within the transmission of Torah, with each successive era considered more "removed" from the revelation at Har Sinai. Because of this, the Amora'im of the *Gemara* would never contradict the Tana'im of the *Mishna*; Acharonim would not argue with any of the Rishonim who preceded them.

And then there's us. Plain, lowly us. Spiritual revelation and awareness are not exactly our thing; we find the

1 See chabad.org/4199232

2 Shabbos 88b

3 Yevamos 39b

In the words of a timeless song by Avraham Fried: ***And we will do it, brothers After us, there'll be no others You and I will do What giants wanted to!***

material world very real and very tempting. In the words of our *chachamim*: “If the former generations were like angels, we are like humans; if they were like humans, we are like donkeys...”⁴

Yet we are taught that it is precisely our generation that will merit to finally bring about the complete Redemption. We, the generation referred to as *ikvesa diMeshicha*, the heels of Moshiach. We are compared to heels, the part of the body most removed from the more sensitive, spiritual organs. But we will make it happen.

YOU CAN'T MEAN ME

Wait, what? How? All the big *tzaddikim*, *chachamim*, *neviim*, *chassidim*... they couldn't bring the *Geulah*, and we will? We, who can barely tear ourselves away from our smartphones?

Yes, precisely. While we may be simple heels, we are also the beloved seventh generation, possessing unparalleled strength and power. Specifically because we are lacking in spiritual depth and sensitivity, our actions carry so much more weight. We don't see it, we don't get it, we may not even feel inspired; but we plow ahead with *mesiras nefesh*. We are a generation of soldiers.

Our contradictions don't make us hypocrites; they make us real. Because of our weaknesses, challenges and failings, our successes —each and every one of them— matter immeasurably more. In a dark room, a small light makes the greatest impact.

As the Rebbe teaches⁵:

of all previous generations to fruition. In the words of a timeless song by Avraham Fried:

*And we will do it, brothers
After us, there'll be no others
You and I will do
What giants wanted to!*

LET'S REFRAME

We all have two *nefashos* battling within.

I may never be perfect, and that's okay. Hashem values my effort and growth.

That role model I consider too *chassidish* to be relatable —I'm sure she's human just like me and will understand.

We may each struggle differently, but we all struggle. And that doesn't discredit all I do right.

The adults in my life may have made some mistakes. I too have made and will make mistakes. But there are so many wonderful, caring people to respect and connect with.

I may not be able to fully implement the values I am learning, but I can take one step closer.

And one step at a time, one victory at a time, we will walk over the threshold into the days of Moshiach. ❄️

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⁴ Shabbos 112b

⁵ *Likutei Sichos*, Vol. I, p. 203