One of the main and most fundamental contentions of all moralists of all ages is that it is human nature is not basically unchangeable. Ask any teacher of religion whether change is possible in Man, and his answer is inevitably "certainly". And yet, my friends, if you were to ask me that same question I would have to qualify that assertion. Is change possible? - Yes and No. If by "change" you mean the transformation of the entire character essentials, the metamorphosis of the basic qualities of the soul, the G-d - given talents and personality attributes, the answer is No. There are certain properties of the soul with which you are born, and which you cannot change, willy nilly.

Yet that is not the end of the matter. Because if by "change" you mean not the basic change of the "kochos ha'nefesh", the powers of the soul, but the salvaging of them; not the scrapping and subduing of the fundamental drives of Man, but their redirection and channelling, the answer is a resounding and wholesome Yes. A man may not be able to rid himself of the trait of stubbornness, but he can certainly direct his stubbornness to desired and beneficial directions. Simpler still, a man may not be able to cure himself from insomnia. But he can himself determine whether these waking hours be spent counting sheep or studying Torah.

The Jewish ethical literature has two names corresponding to these two types of change, and there are two schools propounding these opposing theses. One group claims that the highest goal is TIKUN HAMIDOS, the breaking and crushing of the evil drives of Man. The objectionable trait must be broken and destroyed. The other group believes this unnecessary and impracticable. Rather it proposes TIKUN HAMIDOS, the correction and re-direction of these dark forces, the channelling of them from the destructive ends for which they had been employed, to new and constructive ends. Redirection, not breaking and destruction, is the highest aim of ethical development. And Hassidim, who were great believers in TIKUN HAMIDOS used to object to the other school's theory and say that SHVIRAS HAMIDOS, the breaking of an evil trait, often results in two new evil traits.

It is a remarkable fact, that considering the contemporary emphasis on education, our parents and grandparents, who were probably more successful than us in this field, rarely mentioned that word. Education in Hebrew is CHINUCH. And that word was uncommon in the homes and academies of the most learned and devoted elements of European Jewry. Rather, the emphasis was always on HADRAGH. That word comes from "Derech" which means "way", and HADRAGH therefore means DIRECTION. There was never an attempt to break the backbone of a person's character. Instead, it was attempted to ever so gently bend it to its proper and healthy shape. It meant direction and guidance and channelling.

Take, for instance, that characteristic known as KINAH - jealousy or envy. In its usual manifestations it is a terribly destructive and anti-social expression. How many homes have been broken and how many reputations ruined all because of jealousy! And Solomon properly exclaims, "as hard and cold as the grave. And yet, surprisingly, it is the same Solomon who elsewhere exclaims with equal conviction, the jealousy of scribes increaseth wisdom. Well, which is leading to the grave or leading to wisdom? Obviously, it is a matter of direction. If you express it by envying your friend's Cadillac or his home or his wife's mink coat - then it is KASHES KA'SHEOL. If, however, you envy his learning, his piety, his sincerity or honesty then TARBEH CHACHMAH. The same jealousy, the same envy. Only the direction has changed.

The Talmud tells a remarkable story which is a sharp illustration of our theme. The great sage R. Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan one day when there suddenly appeared a man known and feared by the name Bar Lechaha, a man who was the head of terrorist gang of robbers. He was a man of uncommon strength and determination. With one huge leap he spanned the Jordan and came to the side of R. Yochanan intent upon either robbing or kidnapping him. When the sage witnessed this remarkable demonstration of power, he exclaimed,
"CHATIEICH LE'ORAISSA", meaning, "0, if only such power were used for the study of the Torah.
You see, this Herculean bandit subsequently turned to Torah and, as the student and later
the brother-in-law of R. Yochanan, redirected and channeled these extraordinary might so
that he ultimately became the great and beloved sage, Rashi Lakish, second only to R. Yochanan
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In more recent times there is also such a case. My teacher of Talmud at the Yeshiva,
the great scholar Rabbi Soloveitchik recently told of an interesting conversation between
his grandfather, the world-famous sage and eminent Talmudist, Reb Chaim Brisker, and his
son, Rabbi Soloveitchik's father, Reb Moshe. Said Reb Chaim to Reb Moshe, "My son, not
always was I the person you know me to be. I was born with mean and destructive tendencies.
I was granted diabolic powers, and I have had to struggle all my life to turn these very
powers to constructive ends, to redirect these urges and drives from the Evil to the Good."

And in a way, my friends, the holiday of Purim commemorates this very element of
TIKUN HAMDOS. Mordecai, the hero of the Megillah, was not heir to pink-cheeked angelic qualities. He was a hard, practical man, a man who had tasted exile, who was intimately
familiar with the intrigues of the court of Ahasuerus and who had a staunch, unbreakable spirit. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, his brilliant execution of the plan to ensure
the antisemitic tyrant and his adamant refusal to concede defeat mark him as a bold spirit.
Now boldness is a thing which is not always good. Mordecai's boldness was an inheritance
from his less illustrious ancestor, Shimi. It was Shimi who was the bold and disrespectful
insurrectionist who disparaged King David to his face and publicly accused him of being a
bloody murderer. It was boldness indeed, and a libelous, false, evil type of boldness,
for he besmirched the good name of the saintly author of the Divine Psalms. Yet this same
boldness which he transmitted genetically to his descendant Mordecai was used by Mordecai
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It was not the boldness of empty invectives, not the effrontery of disrespectful vituperation;
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of a persecuted people, in the altruistic service of a high and glorious ideal.
No wonder the Rabbis applied to him the verse from Job:

Mordecai was the unclean come from the clean, he inherited a certain set of dynamic
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Our national scene today could learn a bit from Mordecai's determined boldness in
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issues of Communism in government and Corruption in government. The main desire of our elected
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And, my friends, not only destructive urges, but also talents and gifts wasted unnecessarily must also be channelled, must also experience TIKUN HAMIDOT. Many of us, Thank G-d, are not possessed of exceptionally destructive tendencies. But many of us have been blessed with special natural abilities which we often allow to go to waste. These too must be captured and harnessed to productive ends. To our talents we must also say, as Rabbi Yochanan said, CHAILEICH LE'ORAISSA, this strength for Torah. Bertrand Russell tells that he never plays chess, because when he was a child he was fanatically devoted to the game, and he came to realize that if he were to pursue it he would eventually become the world's greatest chess-player. But then he pondered, and saw that his life would thus be wasted, for chess is, no matter how respectful a game, only a game. Harmless, - but of no great benefit to humanity. And so Russell stopped playing chess and instead went into mathematics and logic and philosophy and so was ultimately able to become the co-author of Principia Mathematica. Modern man, because of his increased leisure time, has taken to HOBBIES on a grand scale. There is no doubt a criminal negligence involved in the human genius utterly wasted on golf, football, canasta, crossword puzzles and bridge. A hobby is good up to a certain point. Then it becomes waste. Athletics is wonderful, hygienic. But after a certain limit it becomes a travesty. We must learn to channel and direct these forces and use them profitably and constructively.

The experience of MORDECHAI MI'SHIMI is a universal one, and an eternal one. Its message transcends the provincial borders of ancient Persia of that century and like a beacon whose rays are a blessing to those in the distance, we of today bask in the enlightening thoughts of yesteryear which prove an inspiration and lesson to us.
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