

The Karate Rabbi

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A short while ago I read a very interesting article in the *Mishpacha* Magazine called “Power Rabbi.” This article details the fascinating life of karate master and champion Rabbi Fishel Jacobs. Fishel, or Flip as he was called, reached the level of eighth-degree karate master. What I found interesting was not that Fishel, at age 55 and sporting a long beard, *tzitzit* and *semicha*, can break through a brick with his bare elbow, but that the same techniques he used to become a karate master would later help him become a Rabbi.

When Flip was young, his family moved to a hick town in Vermont and he found himself the only Jewish kid around. As you can imagine, the local kids were only too glad to welcome him to their community, and one day he came home bruised and bleeding. A few days later the Jacobs saw an ad for a new Korean karate school. Every day for the next 13 years, Flip spent hours in training.

“They ran it like the Orient, where every move is broken down into tiny increments that need to be perfected,” he relates. “It’s all about repetition – punch, punch, punch, punch – ten thousand times the same move, each time trying to create more power, to bring up more power from your stomach, until you become super-focused.”

Flip would go on to become a karate master, winning many championships and trophies. About halfway through the eight-year U.S.Olympic training program, Flip decided to put karate to the side in order to learn about his religion. He joined a Lubavitch yeshiva in Kfar Chabad. But the athlete had a difficult time becoming the scholar and decided to use his old skills to help him through his difficulties.

“I broke it up letter by letter. I broke up every letter into its parts and engraved them onto my brain. I took the first letter, imagined it, drew it in my *kishkes* – the first letter took two days. It took me months to learn the first chapter.”

When I read this article, I was amazed at the amount of discipline that someone must have to become a martial arts expert. In Western society, we are so used to shortcuts and to measuring progress. Generally, if something doesn't come naturally to us, we avoid it completely. When we start a new project and things don't go the way we want them to, we tend to become completely despondent. The notion of breaking something down into little pieces and starting over and over again – thousands of times until we have perfected it – seemed foreign to me. I know that I am naturally very critical of myself and would probably eat myself up with negative thoughts had I had teachers like Flip had.

But on the other hand, is living a Jewish life not at least as complicated an “art” as karate? Certainly there must also be a learning curve. Can I truly expect to become a “perfect Tzaddik” overnight, or must every character trait and spiritual level be acquired after thousand of ups and downs? Does it really make sense to become frustrated so quickly, and is “throwing in the towel” ever truly justified? Our Sages teach that it is more difficult to create a planet than to change a character trait. Perhaps if we understood how complex it is to try to perfect ourselves, we wouldn't be so hard on ourselves and would find it a lot easier to maintain a steady level of self-discipline.

In [Rabbi Nachman's Wisdom](#) (#5 and #6), the life of a boyish and striving Rebbe Nachman is recorded. Amongst these fascinating anecdotes is the following story:

“When the Rebbe was involved in his devotions, he did everything with great strength and effort. No form of devotion came easily. Each thing required tremendous effort, and he had to work hard each time he wanted to do something to serve God. He had thousands upon thousands of ups and downs.

“The most difficult thing was to begin to serve God and accept the yoke of true devotion. Each time he would begin, he would find himself falling. He would then begin anew and stumble yet another time. This occurred countless times, over and over again.

“Finally the Rebbe resolved to stand fast and maintain his foothold without paying attention to anything else in the world. From then on, his heart was firm in its devotion to God. But even so, he went up and down many times. By then, however, he was determined never to abandon his devotion, no matter how many times he fell. No matter what happened, he would remain devoted to God to the very best of his ability.

“The Rebbe became accustomed to constantly begin anew. Whenever he fell from his particular level, he did not give up. He would simply say, ‘I will act as if I am just beginning to devote myself to God and this is the very first time.’

“This happened time and again, and each time he would start all over again. He would often begin anew many times in a single day. For even in the course of a day, there were many times when he would fall away from his high level of devotion. But each time he would start again, no matter how many times it happened, even within a single day.”

We learn from these stories that there is a fundamental difference between a *yeridah* (spiritual descent) and a *nefilah* (spiritual collapse). As Rebbe Nachman discusses at great

length, there is no such thing as constant spiritual growth. We must have up and down cycles, for God has created life in this way. But Rebbe Nachman teaches us that these descents should not in any way affect our devotion or desire for spirituality. Even if I am not “feeling” it, I must go on with what I can and never think for a second that God is not interested in me. I will do my best and pray for the rest. Until we have mastered this technique, we haven’t truly begun to fulfill our spiritual mission.

This Shabbat we will welcome in the Hebrew month of Nisan. The month of Nisan is called the “head of the months.” At this time of year, the Jewish People were taken out of slavery and over a period of weeks rose to the level of prophets to receive the Torah on Shavuot. This spiritual cycle repeats itself every year. Every one of us can merit to be freed from our personal slavery and suffering and go on to achieve great things. We must only remember to forget our past and begin anew. Every day, I should remind myself that no matter what happens, God loves me and will not abandon me. Despite life’s challenges, I will continue to try my best and always yearn for spiritual growth. In this way, I and the entire Jewish People will merit to be redeemed once and for all!

The summary and quotes from the [Mishpacha Magazine](#) article were used with permission. The full “Power Rabbi” article appears in issue 385 and was written by Rachel Ginsberg.