



For Jewish leaders, sustainable growth starts by looking inward

By: Chanie Chein
August 13, 2025

Religious leaders have long faced high rates of burnout and stress, with studies showing these professionals often lack the time or resources to invest in their own emotional, mental and spiritual health. In the Jewish world especially, the last few years have tested spiritual leaders' resilience as they help their communities navigate new challenges, like rising rates of antisemitism, as well as serve the growing number of Jews engaging with Judaism in the post-Oct. 7 world.

Now more than ever, Jewish communities and organizations need to prioritize renewal and care for their leaders. Indeed, many are doing so by offering programs that emphasize self-care and growth. While these initiatives are important, in my own journey as a Chabad shlucha (emissary) for more than 20 years, I have seen how real sustainable growth comes, more often than not, from inside of ourselves.

Most of us have been taught that growth and change means pushing ourselves to be different — to think differently, feel differently, act differently — until we become who we're "supposed" to be. We're told to power through resistance, override our instincts and force ourselves into new ways of being. It is part of the societal phenomenon of always striving for more: Be more present. Be more productive. Be more inspiring. But that kind of change often feels like a fight against ourselves. Over the years, instead of growth, it creates stress — a feeling that we are always somehow falling short of our potential.

It's a feeling especially familiar to those in roles of continual giving, including those serving as shluchim. We are constantly engaged in our roles, offering help, advice and dealing with challenges in addition to overseeing regular programming or official scheduled activities. People turn to shluchim, as they do with other Jewish educators and community leaders, for strength, answers and clarity. And we respond — relentlessly. We show up, run programs, solve crises and stay available at all hours. Over time, however, that steady outpouring begins to wear down our inner core. We slip into autopilot. Our identity becomes tied to action, and we lose track of what's happening inside.

When I began to notice the same signs in others — fellow shluchot whose sparkle had dimmed, who spoke about their communities in tones edged with exhaustion — it unsettled me. I realized how often the need to feel re-inspired was met with something external: a mentor, a podcast, a new idea or insight from a friend or a powerful text. It became clear to me that we were relying too much on outside voices to reignite what had once come from within.

That turning point led me to something deeper, something my Chabad Chassidic tradition has always taught but I hadn't truly internalized: change doesn't begin with willpower. It begins with awareness, especially about what is going on inside ourselves. Like many, I had long been aware of and even practiced avodah pnimis, or "inner work," but I began to use it more thoughtfully and intentionally, doing the difficult work of reflecting on my habits and acknowledging the burnout I felt. Through this inner work, I began to see that my patterns weren't signs of failure. They were systems I had developed to stay steady and survive. The resistance I felt wasn't laziness or weakness. It was a internal attempt by my mind and body to protect me from being overwhelmed. Real growth would mean working with my systems, not against them, with compassion, curiosity and even joy.

As Chassidic philosophy teaches, changing "the nature of one's attributes" begins with developing genuine appreciation and understanding of our current ways of being. Only through a process of honest self-assessment can we develop effective approaches to change that work with, rather than against, our existing systems. This creates what we might call dynamic homeostasis: sustainable transformation that honors our need for stability while allowing genuine evolution toward our highest potential.

At the heart of this approach are two powerful principles: insourcing and agency.

Insourcing is the process of learning to turn inward — to rely on our own values, our inner compass and our connection to truth — instead of constantly seeking solutions or validation from outside. Agency is our ability to make conscious, deliberate choices that reflect our deepest principles, rather than simply reacting to whatever life throws at us. Together, these form the foundation of avodah pnimis—a steady, honest way of growing that respects both our need for stability and our desire to evolve.

For leaders wondering where to begin, it starts with noticing: paying close, compassionate attention to the realities of one's life. The initial phase of inner work is about gathering data points without passing judgement: Where do I feel most stuck? What patterns keep surfacing? What am I avoiding? With honesty and curiosity, those dots begin to connect, revealing the deeper story. That clarity is what ultimately leads to agency: the ability to choose, to shift, to begin anew.

On a practical level, I suggest starting small. Track your feelings in a notebook. Ask yourself once a day, "What is this really about?" Take two deep breaths before walking into a room. Say Modeh Ani slowly. Make your bed. Or simply listen to a community member without rehearsing your response. These small shifts create the environment for enormous change — not just for us, but for the people we serve.

If we want our communities to grow stronger, we have to support the people holding them up. That starts by encouraging our leaders to do the work they so often invite others to do: to look inward, to build from within and to lead not just with output but with integrity, clarity and soul.

Because when a Jewish leader reconnects with their own inner voice, the whole world hears it more clearly.