In the most recent survey by the Pew Research Center, it was found that 45% of American Jews are listed in the two categories for the least religious: "religion resisters", who believe in a higher power but have negative views of organized religion, or "solidly secular", those who don't believe in God and do not self-define as religious. The breakdown is 28% as "solidly secular" and 17% as "religion resisters".

In light of this most disturbing and alarming finding, I present the following CHIZUK.

Among the frightening maledictions listed in the Parsha is this: "Accursed is one who will not uphold the words of this Torah to perform them" (27:26). The Yerushalmi (Sota 7:4) attempts to unpack what this accusation really means. To wit: "One who learned and taught [Torah], observed and performed [mitzvot], but who [nevertheless] did not strengthen the Torah when he had the wherewithal to do so, is considered accursed."

The Chofetz Chayim dedicated an entire book to press upon people the need to outreach to others and thwart those forces threatening the future of Torah observance. Every Jew, he insists, has an obligation to employ whatever talents he has to influence his alienated coreligionists to adopt a more serious religious lifestyle and remain ever loyal to their sacred tradition (Chizuk HaDa’at 4:18-20).

This same Yerushalmi brings the story of Yoshiyahu HaMelech who, reared in a generation that had forgotten the Torah, had in fact never seen a Sefer Torah. When only a child, a Torah scroll is discovered in the Temple courtyard, rolled open to the very verse above. When the young king hears the words cursing "one who will not uphold (YAKIM) the Torah", he is shaken and he vows, ALAI L'HAKIM, I will assume the responsibility to sustain and strengthen the Torah!" (see Melachim Bet, 22:10-11). And so he does and thus merits the distinction of being one of Israel's greatest and most righteous kings (see Shabbat 56b).

In a remarkable and now famous responsum (Meishiv Davar 1:44), R' Naftali Tzvi Berlin (the Netziv - 19 cent) quotes this Yerushalmi and argues quite forcefully that just as Yoshiyahu HaMelech rebuked the kohanim and leviyim of his day and warned them against retreating into their private religious worlds so that they would be spared the spiritual perils and impurities of their surroundings (see Divrei HaYamim Bet 35:3), so too, in the 19th century, when Jews were assimilating in droves, the Netziv urges his religious contemporaries to reach out to the non-observant and bring them close. He highly praises the introduction of the Chatam Sofer to Yoreh De'ah (Pituchei Chotam) in which he contends that
there are times when a person is permitted to even reduce the time he spends on his religious studies in order to help those who are spiritually in jeopardy.

I believe it was the great Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, who once commented that just as there is a custom to give 10% of one's income to charity, so too should one dedicated 10% of one's time to helping other Jews grow in their religious commitment.

And should you maintain that given the escalating rate of assimilation, your efforts can hardly make a difference, I would ask you to reflect upon a story my brother often likes to tell.

Walking on the beach, a young man sees it littered with starfish. He then spies an older person throwing one starfish after another back into the sea. Somewhat incredulous, he asks, "There must be hundreds and hundreds of these starfish on the beach; what difference can it make if you throw a few back in?"

The elderly man responds as he is about to throw another starfish into the sea, "It'll make a difference to this one!"

In light of the Pew survey, our mission should be clear. There are many ways we can strengthen Torah in the Jewish world. From supporting Torah institutions and scholars, to inviting an estranged Jew for a Shabbat meal, from teaching Torah to the unschooled, to inspiring other less committed Jews by our personal example of piety and righteousness - in these and so many other ways, we can make a real difference - one Jew at a time! Every yiddishe neshama is a world unto itself, precious and holy. Rescuing even one is tanta-mount to saving an entire world!

The Yerushalmi we've been referencing does not end with its negative elaboration of the above verse. The text continues and promises that even if "a person did not learn or teach, did not observe or perform, and did not have the means to strengthen [Torah] and yet did, he joins all those who are blessed!"

In this week prior to a New Year, may we all be worthy of such a blessing!