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## Why Do We Go Within?

**W**hat brings a woman to the door of her own being? What beckons her to enter?

The escort to the door can be just about anything that taxes a woman's limits, creates a sense of imbalance, challenges her views, or otherwise upsets the status quo of her existence. The particulars are unique to each woman. Yet there are also general categories of experience that can be relied upon at least to get a woman's attention.

The most obvious is physical problems. Cancer, MS, and other significant illnesses, along with accidents, are the most dramatic calls to focus awareness on the self.

Chronic pain is the most persistent. Excess weight and overeating are constant prods which, if ignored, often resurface with a vengeance. Tiredness and low energy wear a woman down over time, as do sleeping disturbances, headaches, and other complaints that can be sloughed off for a while but eventually demand attention. Menstrual cycles also call women to task periodically, sometimes through abnormal symptoms and other times through the more normal changes associated with aging.

For some women it is a sense of being out of contact with the physical that brings them to look more closely at themselves. They feel disconnected from their bodies, out of touch with their own physicality. They long to feel more centered and grounded. Others are tense and unable to relax. Whatever the specifics, a physical condition that is not easily remedied often is an invitation to go within.

Emotional difficulties present the same opportunity. Feelings that persist and are disruptive to a woman's sense of well-being signal her to look at herself more closely. It could be any feeling. The ones I hear reported most often are depression, self-hate, unhappiness, boredom, fear, anger, loneliness, and emptiness. Women also describe feeling overwhelmed, fragmented, powerless, and unworthy. Some feel they have lost themselves in the demands and expectations of others. They feel unable to maintain healthy boundaries, to assert themselves. Others feel themselves to be false and inauthentic, as though wearing a mask. They speak of feeling unreal. For some, feeling itself is gone. They are numb or disassociated. Women know themselves enough to recognize when the joy has gone out of their lives, when their hearts are closed, when negativity is dominant. All of these emotional states, when protracted, wake a woman up to her own reality.

Age doesn't seem to be a factor when it comes to physical and emotional difficulties. A woman may be tapped through either of these avenues at any time in her life. Age becomes more significant when the stimulus to self-awareness is a life question. In this realm, each decade seems to present its own challenges, any of which, if not readily navigated, can turn a woman inward.

In their twenties, women are charting their life course. They can be confused about what direction to take in their studies,

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work, and personal life. For some, whether or not to live in Israel or return to their countries of origin is a major dilemma. Some are wary of their ability to make and implement decisions. Some are afraid that they are being overly influenced by others, including teachers, rabbis, friends, and parents. Some feel stuck and don't see any way to turn. Each of these predicaments asks a woman to stop and take stock. Life is telling her she may need to know herself better, to connect with Hashem more deeply in order to make the best choices.

In the decades that follow, a woman may again find herself facing basic life questions. She may need to change her initial choices, taking on new studies, switching to a different job, or moving to a new location. Again she may be confused, lack direction, feel stuck, or distrust her own decision-making abilities. In addition, she has to face the consequences of her earlier choices and the responsibilities she may have already assumed. Experience may have shown her that she lacks certain life skills, making it harder for her to reach her goals. The lack then gets her attention. She may find that she can't handle money, that she loses track of time, that she's disorganized, that she can't follow through, that she procrastinates, that she can't focus or concentrate, that she doesn't know how to balance competing demands, that she fears conflict. On a larger scale, she may lack a sense of purpose, a sense of her place in the world.

And then there are transitions that, though natural, can still be disruptive – marriage, motherhood, loss of parents, relocating, children leaving home. She may question whether she is realizing her potential, using her gifts and abilities, and expressing her creativity. As the years go by, these questions may spur far greater self-inquiry than the practical day-to-day limitations she discovers in herself.

In a category of their own are religious or spiritual issues. A woman confronts these issues throughout her life. They are, more often than not, her stepping stones to growth. Sometimes, though, she trips and finds herself in doubt, confusion, or despair. Other times she may feel ready to leap and intensify her efforts to reach a higher level. Either scenario can lead her to inquire more deeply into herself. A woman may be angry at Hashem, feel rejected by Hashem, feel far from Hashem. She may question what Hashem is asking from her. Women who are entering into observant life for the first time are uniquely challenged. To discover where they belong on the spectrum of religious observance, they often need to discover more about themselves.

At the other end are women who may have taken on a level of observance that ten, twenty, or thirty years later they question. They may have left behind parts of themselves in the process that they subsequently need to integrate or work through. These women want to feel whole and a sense of integrity. They want their outer lives to reflect their inner lives. They need to own and embrace the Torah observant life they have chosen to lead. Outer compliance is not enough. And so they question, investigate, and explore the teachings of Torah from Sinai and the teachings of their own inner Torah.

A relationship with Hashem is not the only relationship that can lead a woman to herself. Every other relationship in her life has that potential, with close family relations the prime candidates. Women are also lured within by the anticipation of a close relationship, doing the work to understand why they may be afraid to marry or remarry, why intimacy is difficult, how their prior relationship history may negatively affect the present. Women want to break unhealthy patterns that will keep

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them from successfully marrying and having a family. For many, self-scrutiny intensifies during dating, when trying to decide whom to marry. Once married, women often look to themselves to understand why they are experiencing marital difficulties, why they lose themselves in the marriage, why it's hard to communicate with their husbands, why their husbands are unhappy with them or demanding of them, how to improve *shalom bayit* (family harmony). They do the same when there are issues with in-laws and extended family.

For many women it is their children who wake them up to themselves. It doesn't matter if it's a stepchild, an adopted child, a natural child, a grown child, or a special needs child; a problematic relationship is troubling and often sufficient impetus for introspection. In the absence of particular problems, women also work on themselves in order to become better mothers. Motherhood is challenging and they want to be and do their best. The traumas some women experience in childbirth and the grief other women know in struggling to overcome infertility can also lead within. A woman who is denied the blessing of children entirely needs to come to terms with herself and her life in yet a different way. She too may be led to the inner road.

There seems to be no end to the life circumstances that ask a woman to grapple with herself. As I look at my own life and listen to the stories of the women with whom I work, I marvel at Hashem's creativity. Each woman is confronted with a different set of circumstances, uniquely tailored, it seems, to the needs of her soul to develop and grow in the way Hashem intended. No two stories, like no two faces, are the same. With endless innovation, Hashem opens portals through which each woman can enter into deeper connection with herself and with Him.

Whether a woman chooses to enter through a particular

portal is a different matter. A circumstance that may cause one woman to search within herself may be ignored by another woman and dealt with on a more surface level by a third. This is as it should be. There is no one right way to respond to a situation. Everyone has different coping capacities. Everyone has a different edge – that point at which it is necessary to go beyond the known in order to move forward. Timing also is significant. There are periods when it seems possible to open a window to oneself and other times when there is too much else going on. Some women need to feel that all other avenues of solution have been exhausted before they'll feel entitled to turn the lens inward. For them it feels like a luxury to get to know themselves. Others see it as hard, painful work that is a necessity in order to function in the world.

Typically, most women who embark on this path have reached a point where the status quo is no longer tolerable. Something needs to change. Any one of the many life circumstances they encounter may tip the scale and send them inward. In that situation, it's not so much the circumstance itself, but the cumulative effect of all that has gone before. Sometimes the nudge comes from without, from a parent, friend, or teacher. Occasionally there is an opening that happens of its own accord and piques a woman's curiosity. However and whenever she gets there, a woman who enters her inner world treads on holy ground. She is exploring Hashem's creation.