

# Introduction



There is a light that is soft and embracing. It allows you to live where you genuinely are and to move from there. It illuminates your ever present *neshamah* (soul) connection to Hashem (G-d) and helps you remember it as the core of who you are. It gently reveals whatever stands between you and your Creator. It helps you handle the challenges Hashem gives you and appreciate that they are designed to enable you to become who He created you to be.

The source of this miraculous light is within us – in the vast, virtually infinite capacity to love with which Hashem blessed us. It exists only in potential, however. Hashem made it our job to draw it out, and gave us Torah to show us the way. To further help us, He gave each of us a complex set of life circumstances through which we face the challenges needed to transform ourselves into beacons of this powerful light. It's a light that reveals the essence of who we are and of the world we are to repair.

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## The Inner Light of Love

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As he was originally created, Adam *HaRishon* (the first man) was light, a pure spark from Hashem. His body was a light body. *Chazal* (our sages) say he viewed the entire creation, from one end of the universe to the other, with a Divine light. When Adam disobeyed his Creator and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which Hashem had instructed him not to do, all of creation plunged into darkness. Yet the light within Adam and the world was not extinguished. It was hidden away. And one of the hiding places is within us. To find and reveal that light, we need, among other things, to learn how to love.

The Torah commands us, “love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18). Rabbi Akiva (in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 9:4) declared this a great principle of the Torah. Hashem is asking us to learn to love, to open our hearts. For loving is the heart’s domain. While the head can help, it is in the heart that love flourishes. We are to circumcise our hearts, to remove barriers to love. This is important, holy work.

It starts with the love you cultivate for yourself, the benchmark the Torah sets for loving others. Loving and caring for yourself develops your ability to give and receive. It teaches you to treat your own needs, limitations, and vulnerabilities with respect and kindness, which prepares you to do the same for others. Otherwise, consciously or not, you’re likely to resent and even judge them.

So take a moment and ask: Do you love yourself? Do you even like yourself? Do you treat yourself kindly? Do you take care of yourself? Do you understand your own life story? Have you learned and integrated its lessons? For many people, the answer to these questions is “no.”

Even people who lavish love and affection on infants and young children often cannot love themselves, their older

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offspring, their spouses, their fellow Jews, or even Hashem. I remember observing a group of women chatting in the summer twilight, babies and toddlers arrayed around them. “I love you sooo much!” cooed one woman, kissing her baby’s cheeks. “You’re so cute,” another woman said to her neighbor’s little girl. “I love how you take care of your baby brother.” “How’s my sweet girl?” a mother asked as she planted a kiss on her daughter’s head. While appreciating these displays of love and affection, I wondered, where does it all go? Why, for many adults is it so lacking when dealing with parts of themselves – or others – that crave precisely this type of nurturing?

In my years of working with women and couples who are striving to heal, grow, and become more of who Hashem created them to be, I’ve observed that love is often the ingredient missing from all their efforts. So many people have difficulty opening their hearts to all the parts of themselves they discover on their inner journeys, which in turn makes it hard for them to open their hearts to others.

Granted, not everything we find in ourselves is to be encouraged or approved of. Not by a long shot. Some parts of us definitely require education and rectification. We all have aspects of ourselves that need to be developed, elevated. We all need guidance, direction, and help moving away from attitudes and behaviors that don’t align with what the Torah asks of us. We’ve all done, and continue to do, things that require *teshuvah* (repentance). We all have a lifetime of learning to complete. In short, we’re works in progress.

The question is how we treat ourselves as we journey from potential to, G-d willing, actualization. Do we approach ourselves gently, kindly, respectfully, lovingly? Or do we attack, berate, and

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condemn ourselves? Unfortunately, what I've observed is that many people do the latter, sometimes without even realizing. They call themselves names they would never call someone else, at least not to his face. They speak harshly to themselves, make endless demands, offer constant critique, reject aspects of themselves outright, and provide little if any appreciation and encouragement. It is painful to witness this brutality. In some cases, it could actually be called abuse.

Sometimes this behavior is learned. It is how they were treated, or how they saw a parent or other adult treating others. Sometimes it comes from an unwillingness to accept that they're only human, like everyone else, with strengths and weaknesses, and with a mandate from Hashem to work on themselves. That means, of course, that there will be areas where they are less than perfect, less than what they'd like to be. Sometimes it comes from a fear that if they "befriend" a part of themselves that's not up to par, that part will take over their life.

Overeaters, for example, are terrified of the part of themselves that wants to eat. They believe that, left to its own devices, this part would eat nonstop for eternity. They treat it like a monster housed in their bodies that must be kept chained and leashed. They forget that it too needs love, needs someone to pull up a chair beside it, maybe give it a hug, and say, "I'm here with you. I understand that right now you desperately want to eat. It doesn't make you bad or wrong. It doesn't change who you were a minute ago, before the urge to eat overtook you. Something going on inside you is driving you to reach for food now. Let's see if we can look together at what that might be and find a better way to take care of you."

Do you feel yourself relax when you hear such words? Can you hear how they affirm your existence and essential value

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while acknowledging the issue that requires attention? There's no contradiction. You can be nice to yourself *and* deal with the matter at hand. You just need to develop the skill of holding the tension of opposites, containing two seemingly contradictory realities simultaneously. You're a good person, a unique spark from Hashem, *and* your thoughts, feelings, and/or actions need to change. You can treat yourself lovingly *and* insist on that change. Circumstances beyond your control may have contributed to your current state, *and* you're responsible for yourself and your thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

There's so much paradox in life. Therein lies the heart of holiness, the constant movement toward oneness, toward recognizing that Hashem is One and His Name is One. Our everyday lives and relationships – with ourselves and others – give us ample opportunity to appreciate and work with these seeming contradictions that are meant to coexist.

In tackling this challenge, it helps to remember that we all do what we do for a reason. No matter how it looks on the outside, internally what we're doing somehow makes sense. Something inside – again perhaps in need of rectification – is driving us. It might be buried deep in our unconscious, or sitting on the surface in plain sight. The connection between the action and what's driving it might be understood or not even realized. For our purposes, it doesn't matter. What's important is the recognition that this driving force is part of us, and as such, it deserves to be related to in a loving, caring way.

Look at the many wonderful organizations dedicated to helping children at risk and off the *derech*. They approach their charges with love, working hard to win their trust, build them up, and guide them back to the Torah path. Any wayward part of

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you deserves the same treatment. Most likely this part is hurting, just as these children are. It's acting out in response to something inside. It needs help, not condemnation; caring, not contempt.

“But I can't stand that part of myself!” I hear people say, along with: *She's a neb. He's a loser. She's ugly. He can't do anything right. She's stupid. He always gets in trouble. She's fat. Nobody likes him. I wouldn't want to be seen with her. I hate him. She makes my life so miserable. I just want to get rid of him. She never knew what was going on. He was so pathetic. She didn't have any friends, and now I have so many; I want nothing to do with her. He's a wimp. All she knows how to do is cry.*

I cringe when I hear such sentiments expressed, knowing that inside these people the part they can't stand hears every word and is hurt all over again. Derided, disrespected, and sometimes even wished dead, this part in a sense is innocent, struggling under the weight of whatever it's dealing with and doing its best to survive. It's simply being itself, with all its strengths and weaknesses, living out the impact of its life experiences in the only way it knows how. Rather than more condemnation, it needs loving help.

The people saying such things don't realize they're abandoning part of themselves, fragmenting their inner realities in a way that keeps them pitted against themselves. And then they wonder why, after they've lost weight, made friends, built a family, held important jobs, and succeeded often beyond their wildest expectations on many fronts, they still feel so bad about themselves, still try to prove themselves, still constantly look for validation and appreciation from others. Having banished parts of themselves that, sometime along the way, they deemed unacceptable, they consigned themselves to a life of inner misery. External accomplishments can't touch this place within.

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Only a person himself can go back into the darkness and make contact with this hurting part. Only a person himself can create an inner environment in which this part of him can feel that it is safe to emerge, that it will be met with kindness and care and offered a helping hand. Only a person himself can extract from whatever has happened the spark of light that Hashem intended to be retrieved through this experience. Only a person himself can discover and integrate the essential part of him who was meant to be revealed through this ordeal. And only a person himself can release all that is now extraneous. This is the path to *sheleimus* – to wholeness and holiness – that Hashem is asking each of us to walk. This book is an effort to help light the way.<sup>1</sup>

You might ask why such a book is needed at a time when it seems that so many people are overly self-absorbed and selfish, when there seems to be diminished focus on the well-being of others because of too much focus on the self. Isn't our goal as Jews to become selfless, to surrender to Hashem's Will, to reach the level known in Chassidus as *bittul* – a place of self-nullification in which one understands that nothing exists but Hashem, that He is all there is, that we have reality only as expressions of Hashem's Will? It is!

AND ironically, in yet another twist of paradox, self-love can help us get there. For unlike self-absorption and selfishness, which are contracting, making us and our worlds smaller, genuine love of self is expansive, its embrace naturally extending to others, and ultimately to Hashem. A well-loved self can let go of its own reality and make room for others. A well-loved self is better able

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1 The stories included are based on actual situations. Names, certain identifying details, or other features have been changed to protect privacy, and some stories are composites.

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to surrender to Hashem. A well-loved self is a fuller vessel with more to share and more to give. The Torah reflects this truth when it commands us to love our fellow as ourselves.

The selfishness and self-absorption rampant today actually signal a dearth of genuine love. People who are wounded, who feel unloved, unseen, and unappreciated, are constantly busy shoring up their sense of self. Their very sense of existence, let alone self-worth, feels threatened if they focus elsewhere for too long. They're so busy artificially sustaining themselves that they barely even register other people's realities. They feel as though all their energy and effort is needed just to survive. There's often little left to give to others without feeling burdened, resentful, overwhelmed, dissociated, taken advantage of, or otherwise troubled.

At the same time, they often try to squeeze out of others the love, care, and attention that, but for their wounds, they could receive from themselves and from Hashem, leaving others to give what, when, and however they can. In fact, others frequently become nothing more than puzzle pieces in their own pictures. They feel entitled to demand that someone else live his life in a way that suits their sensibilities, meets their needs, fits their image, or otherwise conforms to their idea of how things should be. They forget that everyone is a world unto himself, that others are not just actors in their plays, but creations of Hashem sent into this world for their own purposes. It is often a stunning revelation when they realize just how narrow their horizons are, and how much they're missing.

For Hashem gave us each other as a gift, to make this journey together, with each helping the other in his unique way. To do that, we need full hearts, overflowing with the love Hashem implanted in us when He made us in His image. Hurting hearts need to be healed, hearts that are barricaded behind protective walls need

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to be freed, and closed hearts opened. Hashem gave each of us the key to his own heart. We know better than anyone what we've been through, what has shut us down. We're better equipped than anyone to reach deep inside ourselves. Yet it's not something we can expect to happen automatically. We need tools, and a willingness to invest energy and effort. Sometimes we might need outside help. Whatever it takes, if we truly want to get there, we can excavate our hearts, unlock our infinite potential to emulate Hashem's love, and light up the world. We owe it to ourselves – and others – to at least try.