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The Inner (Torah) Dimension of *Teshuvah*

In the Inner Torah process, *teshuvah* has an important place. As one comes more fully into his/her adult self today and is able to be there for younger, vulnerable parts of him/herself in a meaningful way, prior transgressions are inevitably encountered. That's often a hard moment for people who are quick to judge their younger, vulnerable selves and feel consumed with guilt about whatever they did.

By the way, the term younger, vulnerable self has nothing to do with age. It could be you yesterday, a month ago, a decade ago, thirty years ago, or any time in your life other than the present moment. And the term adult self simply refers to you in the present moment at whatever age and stage of life you are. (See *The Inner Torah Workbook*, pp. 178–179.)

The first place to go from an Inner Torah perspective is to establish relationship between the you today and the part of you who did wrong in the past. The adult self today lets that part

know that he is coming back to look together with him at what happened back then and to help him get to the other side of it in the most meaningful, productive way possible.

The adult at this point is not coming back to judge or punish or condemn or do anything other than try to understand what was going on for the part of himself that made the misstep. This needs to be communicated from a place of care and compassion in order for trust to be established and for the younger self to feel safe opening up to the adult self.

For many people, this will be the first time they actually go back to be with the part of themselves that did wrong and to try to understand what was driving the behavior. Typically they attempt to banish this part of themselves or relegate it to a place inside that is walled off from their current self, leaving this younger self alone with an experience that remains troubling and not integrated into their life story. The experience also remains unaddressed spiritually. Without *teshuvah*, it continues to pollute even if it occurred in the distant past.

At the point where the adult self is able to come back and address head-on whatever happened, the behavior in question from the past often has stopped, with only the residue of the experience remaining to be dealt with. In other words, the person today is no longer in the grip of wrong behavior. There may still be lingering desires, thoughts, or ideas that are wrong but often there is no longer wrong action being taken as there was in the past.

Coming back then is an expression of the strength of the adult self today and his readiness to take responsibility for past wrongdoing on a deeper level. The adult self recognizes that the lingering feelings of guilt he carries are an indication that there is more work to be done to heal, clear, elevate, and transform

the wrongdoing. There is a younger, vulnerable self stuck in the past who behaved in a way that is not consonant with the adult self's present reality and who he would like to be. Rather than continuing to ignore this part of himself, the adult self wants to go back and redeem it, integrate it into his life story, and use the experience of what happened to come closer to Hashem.

If one is still in the grip of the wrongdoing, then the work includes not only identifying the wrong behavior, trying to understand the part doing it to see what's driving it, explaining to that part why the behavior is wrong and *teshuvah* is required, and determining what needs work and what might be getting in the way; it also requires motivating both the adult and younger, vulnerable self to make the necessary changes so it doesn't happen again.

For such changes to be meaningful, to have a chance to take hold, a person has to really want to return to Hashem, to be that person who lives in alignment with Torah and goes in the direction G-d wants him to go. That requires incredible honesty with oneself about intentions, desires, and goals. Sincerity is key.

Otherwise a person is not likely to be able to follow through on his commitment to behave differently. While he might be able to do so temporarily, his deeper desires are likely to overtake him once again. So if those deeper goals and desires are anything but truly wanting to change oneself and one's life for real, if they are still attached to other ends, they will likely overpower him in time and drag him back once again in a direction away from Hashem.

To phrase it differently, when one's *ratzon* (will) is to return to Hashem and be who Hashem created him to be, he aligns himself with the infinite Will of Hashem, which is the root and source of everything. That gives a person unmatched strength and the ability to overcome obstacles far beyond what he could access on his own.

In contrast, when one's will is still attached to achieving personal desires not designed to bring him closer to Hashem, he is much weaker and less equipped to reach the heights that *teshuvah* offers. So often, that's the first place a person needs to look, at his *ratzon* – where is his will really?

In addition, desire, motivation, honesty, compassion coupled with conviction, determination, perseverance, patience, sensitivity, and true love of Hashem are all important components of this holy work. It is up to the adult self to try to cultivate these qualities in himself in order to help the part of him who sinned to do the *teshuvah* he needs to do. Before approaching the matter of wrongdoing with a younger, vulnerable self, it's helpful for the adult self to try to strengthen these aspects of himself, doing whatever is possible to ready himself for the encounter.

The first conversation between the adult and the wrongdoing younger, vulnerable part needs to be approached with great sensitivity. Shame and deep feelings of unworthiness often hover around whatever is about to be explored. There needs to be a sense that the adult self is there to understand and to help from a place of genuine love and care. This is a stance that is not always easy to reach.

Many times, the starting point is working with the adult self to help release feelings of disdain, disgust, anger, disappointment, judgment, even hatred for this part who did wrong. From there it is possible to help the adult self cultivate more compassion, more recognition that this part did what it did for a reason that needs to be understood, more acceptance of the reality that it was a vulnerability of some sort that drove the misbehavior, and more awareness that engaging from this place of supreme sensitivity is not a contradiction to ultimately being able to label the behavior as wrong and requiring *teshuvah*.

Once the adult self is in this expansive place, he/she is ready to reach out to the wrongdoing younger, vulnerable self. Then begins the process of convincing the younger self that the adult is there as an ally to help.

The adult might start by acknowledging how hard it is to look at mistakes and take responsibility for them. He can also help the younger self appreciate the *gadlus* (greatness) of doing this sort of work in service of Hashem no matter how uncomfortable it might be. Doing so cultivates feelings of worthiness that make it easier to examine behavior that undermined his sense of worth.

As the Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuvah*:

A *ba'al teshuvah* should not consider himself distant from the level of the righteous because of the sins and transgressions that he committed. This is not true. He is beloved and desirable before the Creator as if he never sinned.

Furthermore, he has a great reward, for he has tasted sin and yet separated himself from it, conquering his [evil] inclination. Our Sages declared: "In the place where *ba'alei teshuvah* stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand." The level of *ba'alei teshuvah* transcends the level of those who never sinned at all, for they overcome their [evil] inclination more. (Rambam, *Hilchos Teshuvah* 7:4)

Both the adult and the younger self need to know and understand this teaching of the Rambam and the words of our Sages that he quotes about the place in which a *ba'al teshuvah* stands. To really internalize this truth might take time. The adult needs to know that it is time well-spent both on behalf of his present and

his younger self. With a firm grasp on their true value and worth in Hashem's "eyes," regardless of what was done, it will be much easier to move forward.

The adult can also suggest to the younger self what might have been going on back then that drove the behavior that now needs attention. Once a relationship of trust is established between the adult and the wrong-doing younger self – and both can hold onto an intrinsic sense of worth – the work of healing, growth, and *teshuvah* is well underway.

As one woman who encountered *teshuvah* in the course of her Inner Torah work wrote:

Inner Torah is always deeply liberating, I feel it builds me into an adult, it makes me access the good inside me. These last two sessions had for me the new aspect of teshuvah. A cleansing, a return to truths I really know. To truths that are much bigger than me or my opinion, or anyone's opinion. But were dusted over with layers of corrupt beliefs and opinions that are/were taking hold of my mind and heart. Some from upbringing and surroundings and some brought upon myself by choices I made in the past which in retrospect I see were wrong. (these last words are a mindful choice to describe past choices in a gentle way; the original wording in my mind was harsh . . .)

It's a journey of returning to Hashem, which brings tears to my eyes as I'm writing this. Tears of deep regret, and longing, and cleansing, of realizing my smallness compared to the vastness I truly exist in. And thanking Hashem that He is helping me come back to Him. (words don't really do justice to an inner experience, each word I wrote has a world to itself)

The journey is so difficult at times, I was tossing in bed with so many thoughts and experiences and feelings and questions and confusions that came up as a result of [the teshuvah work]. But I strengthen myself, this is the path of truth. It's not for the fainthearted; it's for those who trust in Hashem. I try to be one of them.