



Introduction

There are many lenses through which to look at and work with the events and circumstances of one's life. Some, such as healing, growth, and *tikkun hamiddos* (correcting character traits), have been explored in-depth in previous Inner Torah books. The lens of *teshuvah*, to which this book is devoted, is perhaps the most transformative and powerful of them all.

Teshuvah allows us to actually change the past and influence the present, in a way that no amount of inner work can accomplish on its own. Its Divine origin gives it a power that wouldn't otherwise exist in this world. It is available only because Hashem created it and gifted us with it.

We are in this world to become our true selves, in relationship with Hashem, as fully as is possible for an embodied soul. Before birth, our *neshamos* are *zoche* (merit) to know the whole Torah, which is meant to be forgotten upon birth and reacquired through arduous effort over a lifetime. Likewise, before birth – and actually throughout our lives – our souls know from where they came, Who created them, and the incomparable delight of closeness to

their Creator. That knowledge, as well as the experience it fosters, is also meant to be realized by our this-world selves through a lifetime of working to know and cleave to Hashem from the vantage point of the physical world and a life lived according to Torah.

Once we land in *olam hazeh* (this world), we are immediately consumed by physicality. Our early years are dominated by this dimension of ourselves. Torah is not yet accessible to be grasped. We are creations of G-d with unlimited potential to grow and come close to Him, though we don't yet know and understand that. We careen around in the early years, familiarizing ourselves with our environment and the people that inhabit it. We don't yet know how anything fits together or what is expected of us other than in a very mundane day-to-day way.

Only later does the bigger picture start to reveal itself through various avenues of learning and experience. Nonetheless, even in our early years, we start to form impressions and reach conclusions and consider them to be reality – which they are in the limited context in which we're operating at that stage of life. Missing as many pieces of the puzzle as we are at that point, it's easy to see how our early impressions and conclusions could be of dubious value. Yet, we don't know that. We begin to rely on our limited understanding of people, events, and circumstances and mistake it for truth.

Then we grow older and we start to embroider other pieces of knowledge and experience onto our original canvas. We accumulate a hodge-podge of conscious and unconscious knowing that shapes our sense of ourselves and the world we inhabit. It becomes hard to distinguish what's coming from early experience that was lacking in perspective and what's shaped by later, more

informed reflection. Along the way there are often many missteps, things that are done from a less-than-fully developed place in us that contravene Torah or are otherwise damaging to ourselves and/or those around us.

Before He created the world, Hashem understood that this would be our way; that at times we would be groping in the dark led by our own understanding and desires in directions that ultimately would not be good for us and/or others. He also understood that the *neshamah* that He placed within us would never stop longing to come close to her Creator and that we would need a vehicle to reverse direction and return to Him whenever we strayed.

That vehicle is *teshuvah*. It is ours to use any time for mistakes big and small. It gives us the chance to admit our wrongdoings, regret how they took us away from Hashem and the direction we are meant to be heading in this lifetime, learn whatever lessons they hold, and use them to springboard to even greater closeness to Hashem than we would have been able to achieve without them.

It is this springboard dimension of *teshuvah* that is so remarkable. Through it we can transform misdeeds into merits, turn distance into closeness, and advance exponentially in our life goal of *devekus* to Hashem and becoming who He created us to be. This is nothing short of miraculous!

Teshuvah is the path to our true selves and to true relationship with Hashem from there. It is an enormous gift, the likes of which we can't even fathom. As explained in the preface, Hashem created *teshuvah* before He created the world. He knew we would need a vehicle to return – to Him and to our true selves – as we made our way through all the trials and tribulations of this world.

Our souls are sent down into this world for that purpose – to engage with those trials and tribulations, to struggle with the challenges of being an infinite spark from Hashem in a finite body in an imperfect world, to heal and grow, and to elevate and repair and purify and return our souls to Hashem at the end of our stay here in as pristine form as we can, enhanced by all that we experienced and dealt with as the Torah asks of us.

This is hard work. Punctuated of course by the glory, the light, the joy, the pure delight in life that Hashem blessed us to be able to feel. The challenges are great and the rewards are great. We have the ability to experience something so sublime, so literally out-of-this-world: connection with Hashem, connection with the Infinite. It is far from easy. Hashem knows we will fall in the process. And that we will fall again and again and again. Our very entry into this world is a fall from the soul world to the flawed physical world. What He wants from us is to get back up, take responsibility for our misdeeds, our flaws, our shortcomings, and learn and grow from them, and keep moving in the direction He wants us to go in this lifetime. With all our falls we can rise further; we can springboard from them to new heights.

Each time we go back and revisit ourselves in our struggles and fallings, we bring that part of ourselves forward, we shed the impurity, the mistakes, the poor judgments, the loss of control, and use them to appreciate even more the greatness and goodness of who Hashem created us to be. *Teshuvah* – and the difficult feelings that come with it – are a necessary part of the process we are intended to engage in while in this world.

The focus of this book is on the inner work of *teshuvah*, on entering the terrain within yourself that only you know. It's about having the courage to honestly face wrongdoing and wrong being,

without needing to rationalize, equivocate, whitewash, minimize, or otherwise hide from your own truth. To do anything else is only to fool yourself. This is territory that only you and Hashem are privy to. He knows the truth. He is not fooled by anything you might come up with to obfuscate reality.

So this is between you and you. How willing are you to be real with yourself, to not shy away from what is wrong so that you can keep moving in the direction that Hashem wants you to go – toward holiness, purity, and goodness in thought, speech, and deed? What does it take to develop this level of transparency with yourself? To face yourself and look at darker parts that lurk in the shadow, parts that might be mean, selfish, manipulative, harsh, uncaring, phony, untrustworthy, and all sorts of other potentially hurtful things that you'd rather pretend weren't there?

And, at the same time, how deeply do you know and can you feel your intrinsic worth – the value you have as a creation of Hashem in this world for a purpose, expected to learn and grow and continually correct the inevitable imperfections that are part and parcel of being human, being a holy, eternal soul in a finite, earthly body?

And how able are you to make this honest accounting and do the necessary inner work without drowning in guilt, which ironically can become yet another hiding place? We need to be able to see our failings without beating ourselves up and getting lost in endless self-recrimination.

Think about it: Have you ever approached another person to discuss something she did or said that bothered you only to have that person launch into how bad *she* feels that *she* did something wrong, something that upset you? Try as you will to have her focus on the issue you raised, to acknowledge *your* experience,

and to see how to make amends, all she can focus on is herself, how bad she feels, what a terrible person she is, and on and on, until you find yourself trying to help her feel better, reassuring her of her goodness, minimizing the event, and essentially sidestepping what actually happened and the repercussions on you and the relationship, because there is nobody home to talk about it in a way that allows for genuine healing and growth.

For a wrong to be righted, the wrongdoer has to take responsibility from an adult place, be concerned about the impact of what he/she did, make amends, and commit to behaving differently in the future, or at least trying to do so. The same is true when we do something counter to Hashem's Will, when we distance ourselves from Him (as well as, of course, from the self He created us to be), and negatively impact His world. We want our focus to be on repairing the damage, not on continual self-flagellation.

Also think about how you would feel if your spouse or one of your adult children sat down to reflect on whether there was anything they were doing that was hurtful to you or to your relationship. And after such reflection, for example, your spouse came to you saying: "I realize that the tone of voice I use with you is harsh; I'm so sorry; I regret doing it; I'm trying to look at where it's coming from in me and why I do it so that I can change in this area; I want to stop doing it and am resolving to improve in this area from now on."

Think about how good you would feel, how moved you would be, how it would make you think more highly of him or her, how much it would mean to you, how touched you would be. Well, when you do *teshuvah* in the context of your love of Hashem, and your desire to be close to Him and contribute positively to His world, and not wanting to continue doing things that interfere

with that, it's the same thing. We are acknowledging a lack in ourselves and doing what we can to remedy it.

One of the words for sin in *lashon hakodesh* is *chet*, which means “missing the mark.” The “mark” for us is determined by the needs of the *neshamah*, which the Torah tells us how to meet. Wrongdoing and wrong being occur when we veer from that path, when we allow ourselves to be hijacked by physical and emotional stirrings that are intended to be worked with and brought into alignment with our *neshamah* needs, and instead take on a life of their own, pulling us in directions we are not meant to go.

These are stirrings that Hashem built into Creation. He meant for us to wrestle with them. He understood that sometimes we would succeed in taming them and stay on the path He laid out for us in the Torah, and that other times we would fall prey to their lure and need a way to get back on track.

Throughout, a person's essence – his *neshamah* – remains pure. It is his this-world self and lower levels of soul that stray and fall out of step with the *neshamah*, that spark from Hashem that each of us carry. We simply need to come back into *neshamah* alignment, and for that Hashem gave us *teshuvah*, which literally means return. We identify where we lost our way and through the process of *teshuvah*, travel back to the main Torah road that is the path to experiencing our true selves and to connection with Hashem.

When we're hijacked by physical and emotional pulls that take us away from what the Torah is asking of us, we're actually not being who we were created to be. We're not in relationship with our essential and unassailable core, the spark from Hashem that each of us carries within ourselves and that wants only to connect to its Source.

The pulls that lead us in other directions are the vehicle through which Hashem gave us the chance to exercise our power of free choice, to continually choose relationship with Him, with the way of the Torah. When we aren't strong enough to resist the temptations from within and without that lure us elsewhere, we leave our G-d-given center, and locate ourselves in terrain that actually diminishes our experience of ourselves, takes us away from who we truly are. Through the process of *teshuvah*, we come back to the self that Hashem created us to be and are able to help the part of us who lost his/her way to return home, ideally humbled and made wiser by the experience.

Each time we make that passage from “off-road” to “on-road,” we are building the self we came to this world to build – the self that is meant to live in the physical world with all its temptations and distractions. *Teshuvah* then is an ongoing part of our lives, a necessary tool for course correction that everyone needs throughout life. It is also an ongoing process in that we can continue to revisit our prior actions and do *teshuvah* on increasingly deeper levels as we reach new heights in our *avodas Hashem*. This ability to do *teshuvah* on *teshuvah* on *teshuvah* ad infinitum is another aspect of this great gift Hashem has given us. There is literally no end to how far we can go.

What's required though, in order to be able to rightly use this precious tool that Hashem gave us, is to continually learn what the Torah is asking of us. Without the guidance of Torah, we can't know where we are, whether we're on course or are straying. We can't know what is best for our *neshamos*, what is needed to become the people Hashem created us to be. So in addition to being willing to constantly engage in *teshuvah*, we need to be willing to constantly engage in learning Torah, which is the only

source we have for knowing and understanding the true needs of our *neshamos* and what we have to do in order to meet those needs.

May this book be of some small help to do the work Hashem is asking us to do, to cleanse ourselves from the inside, to return to Him from the depths of our beings, and to uproot – as much as we can in this lifetime – anything that we carry inside ourselves that creates a barrier between us and Hashem, between us and our true selves who are only and always in this world to do Hashem’s Will.