TESHUVA—PARADIGM SHIFT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

It will be when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse that I have placed before you—and you will [finally] take it to heart, among all the nations where G-d has dispersed you. You will return to Hashem your G-d, and you will listen to His voice…you and your children with all your heart and all your soul. Then Hashem, your G-d, will return you from your exile, and have mercy upon you; He will gather you in from all the peoples to which Hashem your G-d, has scattered you…Hashem, your G- d, will circumcise yours heart, and that of your children, to love Hashem your G-d will all your heart and with all your soul. (30:1-6)

Familiarly known as parshas Ha-teshuva, the above passage is the Torah's most detailed description of the process of abandoning sin and repentance. Some people have a custom of reading this section daily, accompanied by a special prayer that Hashem help us to achieve a degree of teshuva shleima/complete repentance.

The question is this: The beginning of the section implies that teshuva is a process that must be undertaken by us. After undergoing sufficient punishment from our sins, we will realize that the blame lies within: "and you will return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice…" But later in the section, the Torah speaks about Hashem "circumcising our heart," implying that it is not really us that return to Hashem, but rather He Who removes the spiritual impediments preventing us from approaching Him. Also: If Hashem, so to speak, does "circumcise our hearts"—then what have we really accomplished?

Earlier in the Book of Devarim (4:25-29) the Torah also describes the teshuva process:

When you…will do evil in the eyes of Hashem your G-d, and anger Him. I appoint Heaven and Earth this day to bear witness against you—you will surely perish quickly from the Land…Hashem will scatter you among the peoples…From there you will seek Hashem your G-d, and you will find Him, if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul.

Once again we have man initiating teshuva, but here there is no mention of Hashem "circumcising our hearts," perhaps implying that the entire process depends on us. However, the Torah describes the culmination of teshuva as "finding Hashem." The term "to find" implies something that one has found circumstantially—i.e. one has come across it quite by chance. Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to state that one will "reach" or "achieve" a certain level of teshuva, as opposed to "finding" it?

In both sections the Torah expresses how teshuva involves searching "with all one's heart and with all one's soul." In the first passage, the wording is used twice, once describing our teshuva, and once when describing the stage after Hashem has circumcised our hearts, "Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise yours heart, and that of your children, to love Hashem your G-d will all your heart and with all your soul." It seems unnecessary for the Torah to add these final words. Hashem is perfect, and so are all of his actions. If He circumcises our hearts and draws us close, obviously there will be in this an aspect of perfection, and we will serve Him with all our hearts and souls. Such words are only necessary when describing the requirement of teshuva initiated by us.

What emerges from all these questions, says the holy Yismach Moshe, is that teshuva is a process begun but not completed by us. Have you ever seen a strong man struggle for many minutes to open the lid of a tightly- closed jar, and then after he finally gives up, a small child steps up and opens it with ease? "What's the big deal?"

Of course we all know what really happened. With his effort, the strong man loosened the jar just enough that—unbeknownst to him—it needed just a tiny bit more.

It's not a perfect comparison, but it serves to illustrate our point. Hashem doesn't expect us to ever reach the plateau of teshuva shleima. He just tests us, again and again, to see how seriously we mean it, and if we're going to give up when the going gets tough. It's not a question of how far we can go, but how long we can persevere, and if our conviction to change can stand firm even in the face of extreme trials and difficulties. In his words, "[Throughout the teshuva process] we experience many ups and downs. When Hashem feels we've struggled enough, He circumcises our hearts. This is when [the change brought about by teshuva] becomes permanent.

Someone trying to quit smoking often goes through many stages, at times thinking he's conquered his addiction, only to suddenly crave once again. At those times, he feels as if all his previous efforts were useless; as if he's gotten nowhere, and his cravings and desires are just as strong. Sometimes this frustration causes him to give up.

But if he sticks to his resolve, and fights his desire over and over again, even though it seems as if he's gotten nowhere, at some point a strange thing will happen. A day, a week, and a month will go by during which he realizes he has not had any serious cravings. Thinking back, it will not be clear to him exactly when or how this happened. One week things were just as difficult as always, and the next—it's over, as if he never smoked to begin with.

Trying to change poor character traits is a very similar experience. It's not even that our progress is measured in baby steps; it's more like a yo- yo, swinging up and down. Sometimes we imagine we're actually getting somewhere, then, often without warning, we're right back where we started. We might even feel we've regressed. We question why we even bothered. The bliss of ignorance somehow seems more appealing than this emotional roller- coaster that seems to be going around in circles and getting nowhere quickly.

Feelings such as these often cause us to abandon the process. We conclude we're simply not capable. There is a lot of pain associated with working very hard and not making any progress.

Alas, if only we remembered—that therein lies the test. A time will come— providing we persevere—when we suddenly perceive change. Not just a small change; a massive one. It occurs to us that the middah (trait) that so challenged us is no longer an issue. What just recently seemed so difficult now seems trivial. (That's not to say we can let down our guard— but to some extent, the struggle to overcome our shortcomings has undergone a paradigm shift; now there are other battles to wage.)

Thus, he explains, there is the concept of "you will return"—meaning the struggle to do so. And when you have struggled and wrestled for long enough, then "Hashem will circumcise your hearts" and you will experience a paradigm-shift. This is all provided, as the verse stipulates, that you first did whatever you could "will all your heart and all your soul."

That's why the Torah refers to the culmination of teshuva as "finding." You may have exerted much effort in the struggle, but in the end, you suddenly "find" yourself a new person, without ever quite realizing exactly when or how the actual change took place.

Were teshuva to be a gradual, consistent, step-by-step process (somewhat like a diet, where you can see those pounds slowly disappearing), it would be a relatively simply mitzvah. Hashem didn't make things quite so easy. Instead, we struggle blindly. Rest assured, though, that one day, without warning, we will receive Heavenly assistance, and all those efforts will have been well worth it.

Have a good Shabbos, and a k'siva ve-chasima tovah.

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