



29 Elul, 5780
September 18, 2020

Praying For Teshuba

The Gemara in Masechet Berachot teaches, “Ha’kol Bi’ydeh Shamayim Hutz Mi’yirat Shamayim” – “Everything is in G-d’s Hands, except for fear of G-d.” This means that although G-d controls everything that happens in the world, there is one area which He chose not to control, and that is our free will. We, and only we, decide whether to act properly or improperly. G-d does not force us to choose good over evil or vice-versa. He leaves this completely in our control.

The Ben Ish Hai (Rav Yosef Haim of Baghdad, 1833-1909), in his Ben Ish Hayil, raises the question of how to reconcile this fundamental precept with other sources, which indicate that G-d can cause us to repent. In one context, the Gemara says that opposing the Yeser Ha’ra (evil inclination) and performing Teshuba would be impossible without G-d’s help. And, we recite each day in the Amida prayer, “Hashibenu Abinu Le’Toratecha,” praying that G-d should bring us back to religious observance. How can we recite such a prayer if G-d does not interfere with our free will, and only we decide whether to act correctly?

The Ben Ish Hai answered this question by distinguishing between two different stages of repentance: the initial thought, and the follow-up action. Teshuba begins with a stirring of the heart, with the recognition in one’s mind that he needs to improve. But this is only the beginning. After arriving at this realization, one must then do the hard work to change and to pray for forgiveness. The Ben Ish Hai explained that G-d “interferes” with our free will by putting the idea of Teshuba in our minds. The thoughts of Teshuba, and the feelings of disappointment with ourselves which we occasionally experience, come to us as a gift from the Almighty. But the rest is up to us. G-d puts the thoughts of Teshuba in our minds, but we must then invest the effort to make it happen. And thus when we pray “Hashibenu,” asking G-d to bring us back in repentance, we refer to the initial push and inspiration. We ask G-d to give us those initial feelings, the desire to repent, acknowledging that the rest of the process is solely up to us.

These two stages are reflected by the two stages of the Yamim Nora’im (High Holidays). In our Rosh Hashanah prayers, we do not mention anything about repentance and forgiveness. The Rosh Hashanah prayers focus on the theme of G-d’s kingship, and the fact that He judges the earth. Rosh Hashanah is the time when we develop the thoughts of Teshuba, by contemplating G-d’s rule over the universe. This is alluded to in the word “Rosh,” which means “head,” indicating that this is the time when we develop thoughts and feelings of repentance. The rest of this period, the Ten Days of Repentance and Yom Kippur, is when we take these thoughts and put them into practice, taking the time to pray for forgiveness and to think about how we can improve during the coming year.

The message for us is that Teshuba requires hard work, but also requires prayer. We must pray that G-d inspire us to improve so we can then work to make the changes that need to be made. This is true all year round, but especially during the period of Yamim Nora’im. As part of our efforts to repent, we must beg the Almighty to do His part, to stir our hearts and give us the inspiration we need to perform complete Teshuba and turn ourselves into better people.

Shana Tova,
Rabbi Mansour