

Life is ultimately about perception. The way you perceive who you are directly dictates the choices you make, how you rebound from failure, and every interaction you have with another human being. And yet, critical as this question is, it is remarkable how rarely we pause to consider it in a serious way. Many of us are content stopping at the level of neurons and neurotransmitters, and others see nothing more than a Darwinian evolved primate. But a Jew looks deeper. To a Jew, the inner sanctum, the truest self, is the נשמה-- the pure Divine spirit that was breathed into man at the dawn of time. As a spark of the Divine Himself, this essence is pure and good, and drives a person towards all that is good in life. It allows us to love, to give, and to aspire. We can try to ignore this self, through rationalization, distraction, or substance abuse, but it is always there, deep beneath all the barriers superimposed upon it. And the more we live in accordance with this self, the more alive we become.

The great Torah commentator Ramban finds an allusion to this concept in Parashat Nitzavim. In describing the Messianic era, the Torah teaches (30:6) "ומל ה' אלוקיך את לבבך ואת" -- "and G-d will circumcise your heart and the heart of your children." In explaining the most perplexing imagery of circumcision of the heart, Ramban explains that in the future, the Almighty will remove the ego from mankind, "כי החמדה והתאוה ערלה ללב" -- "for craving and desire are like a foreskin to the heart." That is, selfishness, deceit, craving, and all the ungodly aspects of our ego are not the intrinsically true will of a person, but rather represent a false self. Like the removable ערלה (foreskin) of a baby, the impulses of the ego are all external and in a sense artificial, superimposed upon a person's pure inner essence.

Indeed, the term ערלה means to block (see Targum Vayikra 19:23). Like the anatomical ערלה, the ego obstructs the natural Divine light of a person from shining through to the world. A plebeian imposter, the ego convinces a person in the heat of the moment that jealousy, anger, mockery, and arrogance are his or her true desires, and that he or she "wants" to succumb to these. It leads to an unquenchable pursuit of pleasure, approval, and physical gratification, which ultimately enslaves a person in misery and suffering. When something snaps a person out of this trance, he or she experiences a feeling of self-betrayal, having fallen for fool's gold, rags in the face of royalty, the false self in place of the highest self, a vapid mirage instead of true greatness. One recognizes one's desires as nothing more than an external serpent, that has deceitfully brokered the exchange of Paradise for an inconsequential fruit.

The challenge of life is to never forget who one truly is. The more that one lives identified with the cruel ego, the more one experiences pettiness, insecurity, and angst. The more one identifies as a חלק אלוקה ממעל -- an aspect of the Divine, the more one lives with a sense of unconditional self-worth, rooted in the ultimate Source of all goodness. As opposed to existential pointlessness and boredom, every aspect of one's life takes on Divine significance. Mistakes and failures cease to be sources of humiliation and devaluation, and rather

opportunities to learn and to grow. Human approval ceases to be something to crave like a drug, and rather, something that inevitably comes and goes. Such a perspective reminds you that no matter what society or your inner critic may tell you, you are never ugly, you are never disturbed, and you are never filthy. The true “you,” beneath the ערלה of the heart, is always pure and good. Of course work must be done to rectify the mistakes that have been committed, but these cannot impinge upon a person’s innate nobility.

The essence of תשובה, literally returning, is to return to what one has always been. We do not build ourselves into a new creation, but rather return to our true Divine selves. Our task is not to assume a new persona or identity, but rather one of circumcision, peeling away the obstructive layers that have distanced us, to return to the inner core that is, and has always been, good. The process of תשובה does not break a person down, but rather builds a person up, filling him or her with joy and hope.

We bid farewell to 5780 with endless gratitude for the blessings and miracles we have experienced, and simultaneously facing significant ongoing challenges that we must continue to fight. In addition to a devastating pandemic, we continue to see widespread civil unrest, with vitriolic language on news and social media reflective of a society largely disconnected from its soul. We are also confronting deadly wildfires of historic proportions, which have literally and figuratively brought further darkness to our world. What we can directly change in these situations, we of course must. But beyond that, we must combat this darkness spiritually. Through sincere תשובה, returning to our true essence, we reveal our inner light that can illuminate a darkened world, even from the privacy of our own homes. May our renewed efforts bring peace and health, and may this coming year herald the coming of the Mashiach to elevate all of mankind.