

Paving a **NEW PATH**

The only way to return is to avoid continuing on the same road we stumbled on | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT MOSHE RABBEINU spent forty days and forty nights on Har Sinai (Mount Sinai) receiving the Torah from Hashem, only to descend from the mountain after all that time, tablets in hand, to find the nation committing the terrible Cheit HaEigel (the sin of the golden calf), at which point he made the decision to throw down the tablets that were in his hands, smashing them to pieces. What followed was another forty day and forty night period on Har Sinai during which Moshe pleaded with Hashem to forgive the Jewish people. Hashem forgave us and instructed Moshe to “carve for

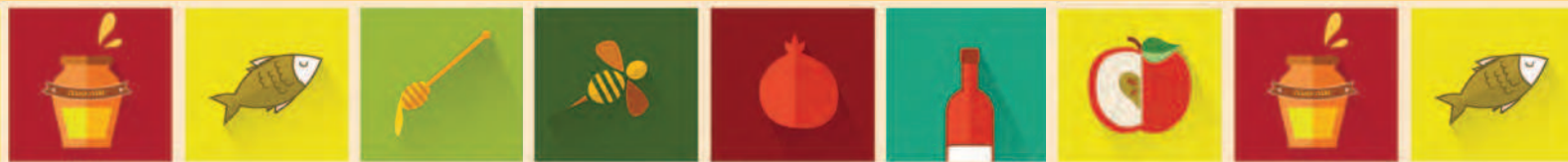
yourself” another set of tablets, after which Moshe ascended the mountain once again for yet another forty day and forty night period of study.

During the first forty days, we know that Moshe studied the entire Torah under the personal tutelage of Hashem. Surely he didn’t need another forty day intensive review just over a month after his first forty day lesson? And there is no reason to believe that it took that long to write the second set of tablets. So, why was it necessary for Moshe to remain on the mountain for so long and to study the Torah once again? To understand the an-

swer, we first need to understand the nature of this world and what changed as a result of the sin of the golden calf.

THE ESSENCE OF OLAM HAZE: THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE TO “GO OUT”

Loshen HaKodesh (lit: the holy tongue), aka Hebrew (not modern day Ivrit, but the language of the Torah and the Hebrew Bible), was not created by man. Hebrew is composed of the letters with which Hashem created the world. Each and every letter has unique spiritual qualities and strengths, the combination of which

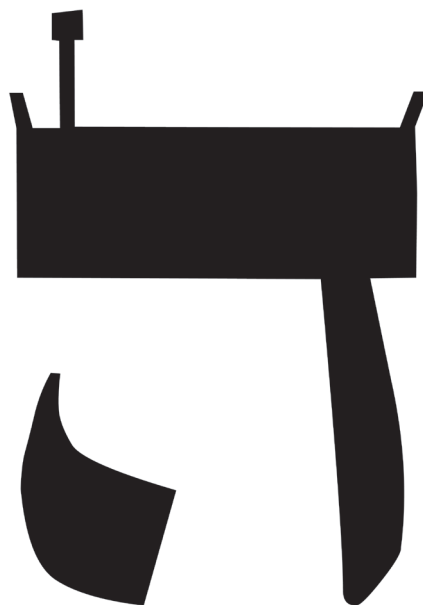


makes possible entirely new creations – akin to the letters we use to represent the elements on the periodic table and the different molecular structures that can be formed via their various combinations. The name of every creation is composed of different letters, and those letters, when combined together, serve to express the special purpose of that particular creation. In the same way that H₂O represents water, so too does the Hebrew word **מַיִם**.

Our Sages teach¹ that Olam HaZeh (lit: This World) was created with the Hebrew letter “Hey”. Of all the letters in the Hebrew alphabet, why did Hashem create the world with a “Hey”? What are the characteristics of this letter that are the essence of Olam HaZeh? Our Sages focus on the very shape of the written letter, comparing its structure to a lobby, enclosed on three sides, with the fourth side (ie, the bottom of the letter) entirely open, so that anyone who wants to “go out” from it can “go out”. In other words, we are not blocked on all sides from “going out”; we can choose an avenue of “escape”. Olam HaZeh was created in order to give us free choice: the possibility of doing Hashem’s will, or, chas v’shalom, its opposite (“escaping”). The ability to go against Hashem’s will always exists for us, including, as history testifies to all too well, even doing the most terrible evil imaginable.

There are no objects in the world that are by their very nature holy and pure or the opposite; every object has the ability to be used for good and for evil. No matter how far a man climbs, even reaching to a lofty level where he merits ruach hakodesh (a Divine inspiration to rest upon him and influence his thoughts), he still maintains the possibility of “going out” – of using this Divine inspiration for evil. Our Sages illustrate² this point with none other than Korach, who early on in our history challenged Moshe for the leadership of the Jewish people³ because he erred in what he foresaw in a vision: a great chain of descendants emanating from him, including Shmuel HaNavi (the prophet Samuel) who was considered

comparable to Moshe and Aaron, as well as 24 mishmaros of Levi’im (divisions of the tribe of Levi who would serve in the Holy Temple), all of whom would prophesise using ruach hakodesh. Korach saw all of these descendants and said: “Is it possible that this greatness will result from me in the future and I should be silent?” Everything Korach saw was accurate and even came to be, but he twisted it to suit his own ends, causing tremendous evil and bringing about his own destruction along with that of many others. So we see that even on an elevated level, where one mer-



its ruach hakodesh, a person is given the power to err. This is the essence of Olam HaZeh: permission and choice are given into the hands of man, such that where a person desires to err, he will always find a place to do so, and where a person wishes to do evil, he can and will do evil.

A SMALL, NARROW OPENING TO PROVIDE A WAY BACK

Our Sages continue to dissect the letter “Hey”, asking: Why does the left-side leg hang in the air as it does, instead of being attached like the leg on the right-side? And they answer: so that if someone who “goes out” later wants to return, he can

enter through that tiny space at the top of the letter. In other words, the letter not only provides a way for someone to “go out”, but it also provides a potential way for him to return. The possibility of returning from and of repairing our sins, ie. teshuva, is rooted in the very essence of Olam HaZeh, actually built into creation itself from the beginning.

So why is it necessary that there be another opening to return, when there is a much wider and more easily accessible opening below? Because it’s impossible for a person to return via the opening that he went out, via the path that he previously went astray; he must make a new opening through which he can return. Our Sages teach that if a person wants to return, to cleanse himself from his sins, he will be helped, but that if a person seeks to make himself impure (ie. to sin), then the door is opened for him. In other words, unlike someone who wants to return, the person who wants to go out is not given assistance to do so – merely the opportunity for it to happen. The person who wants to return, however, needs help to do so because without that help he would not have the strength to stand up to and to defeat his yeitzer harah (evil inclination) into whose grip he has fallen by choosing to “go out”. Not only does a person need help from heaven to return, but he needs help to remain steadfast in that return and not to fall again.

So why does the opening to return have to be at the top of the “Hey”? Our Sages teach that when a person stumbles in a particular character trait, he needs to go to the opposite extreme because, after the person sins, it is impossible for him to return and cleanse himself until he has distanced himself as much as possible from that particular sin. In other words, one who stumbles and sins needs to change completely the path that he finds himself on, a path that has thus far failed to prevent him from stumbling. He needs to turn to a new path with new, stronger guardrails in place that will more ably and securely prevent him from returning to his old ways.

If we look closely at the Hebrew letter



“Hey” as it is written in a Sefer Torah (Torah scroll), we will also notice that there is a tiny crown on it – a small line that protrudes upwards from the left side. Our Sages teach that Hashem places a crown on the ba’al teshuva – the one who returns – on the person who has been set free from the snare of his desires. Those who “go out”, who feel themselves free from mitzvos, are not really free at all, just the opposite, they are shackled very strongly, each one a slave subjugated to his desires. The Torah – and only the Torah – gives freedom and dominion over those desires. A person who succeeds in being freed from his desires and manages to reign over them, he is the true king. And he reaches to the highest point that a man can reach, as our Sages teach⁴: “In the place that a ba’al teshuva stands, not even a complete tzaddik is able to stand.” The tzaddik reaches his level on account of his own strengths, but the ba’al teshuva, who requires and receives help from heaven, as a result reaches a much higher place than the tzaddik ever could. This is the gift that comes from doing teshuva.

RECEIVING THE TORAH ANEW

When the Jewish people originally stood at Har Sinai, when they received the Torah for the first time, they did so in an incredibly elevated state that was equivalent to Adam HaRishon (the first man) prior to the sin of eating from the tree of knowledge.⁵ In other words, the damage that had been done by the sin of Adam HaRishon had been repaired by the time we first received the Torah. But, unfortunately, it did not last. Before Moshe had even managed to descend the mountain with the first set of tablets, we sinned grievously. The sin of the golden calf changed everything. Forever. We toppled from the incredibly elevated level that we had reached, and what followed was a forty day period during which Hashem’s “anger” raged and Moshe pleaded with Him that He not destroy the Jewish people until, finally, Hashem relented.

Our relationship, however, required entirely new terms. Our now diminished level meant that we needed to receive the Torah anew – in a state of teshuva, after having repented for our actions and returned. The Torah that had been taught to Moshe during the forty days and forty nights before the sin of the golden calf no longer applied to us. We now needed a Torah that could harmonise with the new reality in which we found ourselves, a Torah that would teach us how one is able to stand in a situation of sin, as well as to rise from that situation and return, reaching all the way up to achieving even a level of perfection. Moshe needed to spend another forty days and forty nights on Har Sinai receiving the Torah again, and being taught the Torah as it now applied, “after the sin of the golden calf”. This was not another Torah, chas v’shalom. Moshe again learned the Aseres HaDibros (The Ten Commandments) and the Taryag Mitzvos (The 613 Commandments), but he now

Shana tova umetuka



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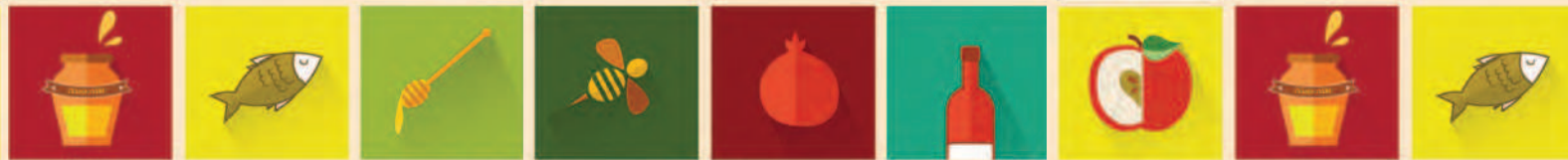
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learned them from a new perspective that would enable the Jewish people to ascend from the depths of sin.

RETURNING ON A NEW PATH WITH NEW GUARDRAILS

Just as with the original forty day period from Rosh Chodesh Elul (the beginning of the Hebrew month named Elul) to Yom Kippur, where Hashem paved for us a new path for safeguarding His Torah, a path appropriate to a ba'al teshuva, so too throughout the generations we have merited that those forty days be days of ratzon (goodwill), of additional help from heaven. Teshuva is not only the decision not to stumble again, but a decision to build new paths with new guardrails. After a man sins and stumbles on a path, he needs to be wise and understanding, foreseeing the outcome of his actions, realising that continuing on the same path

will not prevent him from repeating his sins, and accepting that the fear of heaven that was in him previously failed to stand up to the test. Desire alone not to continue in our mistakes is insufficient. A person needs to carefully consider how he can construct a new path with new fences that will close-off all of the potential openings where he might "go out" again.

Why is it that, despite a strong desire and even great efforts, many do not succeed in successfully returning during Elul each year? The key is in setting out on a new path, one that will foreclose the possibility of falling in the very same place again, and not deceiving ourselves by naively thinking: "Yesterday and the days before yesterday, I was not okay, but from today and now on, I will be okay." When we have stumbled so many times in the past, why shouldn't we stumble again? We

need to recognise the enemy, the yeitzer harah – to know it, to know its strengths – and that it's impossible to fight against it and win without help from heaven. We must make a point of distancing ourselves from the circumstances that caused us to stumble in the past, while asking Hashem to help us going forward. Finally, we must remember that, although we cannot succeed without Hashem's help, the first steps in our return must come from our side. We have to find that small, narrow opening to the path that leads us back and we have to step through it. **IL**

Adapted from a sicha by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz"l

¹Menachos 29b

²Bamidbar Rabah 18:8

³See Bamidbar 16:1

⁴Brachos 34b

⁵See Shabbos 146a

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