HILKHOT TESHUBA 5:3: Free will and human progress

Yesterday we explained that the idea of free will is, according to Maimonides, the essential foundation of the Tora and its mitzvot. We also said that what makes us different from animals, is not only our intelligence, but above all, our power to make moral decisions. In the animal world there are no "moral choices". Just survival instincts. See this.

Man, thus, is a privileged being, and thanks to its free will a "super-natural" creature. This ability to choose is what, according to Maimonides, brings us closer to God.

How?

Let's deepen this concept a little further.

Maimonides (MT, Teshuba 5: 4) explains that HaShem designed us deliberately with free will: *"In the same way the Creator established natural laws, for air to rise and water to descend, … and animals to be driven by their natural instincts, so decided [the Creator] that man will have freedom of choice, and all his [moral] actions would depend on him …. "*

In the natural world, progress does not consist in a series of choices. Animals progress towards the reaching of their maximum fulfillment in an involuntary, "automatic", way. The only exception is man. Human beings have an enormous intellectual and spiritual potential, which's development depends solely on the choices he or she make. If a man chose to progress, say, intellectually, he would study, learn, instruct himself. But if he wants, he can also relegate his progress and remain as ignorant as he was when he was born into this world. The realization of man's potential is not a involuntary, automatic, "natural" process which happens by itself. It depends exclusively on the individual. Ironically, man is the only creature that can choose to remain less than he can be. This is the essence of "free will".

We are in an intermediate state, as the philosophers say, between "angels and beasts." Thanks to our free will, we can elevate ourselves toward HaShem, or descend to an animal state. The more we exercise our free will, that is, when we

learn and grow intellectually and spiritually, when we train ourselves to control our impulses, we get closer, we resemble, God, Who is, as we explained, the epitome of free will.
Conversely, the more we relegate our intellectual and spiritual progress, doing nothing to learn, doing nothing to master and learn to control our urges, we move away from God and we get closer, we resemble, animals .
In this sense Teshuba means to become conscious that we have a huge potential, and the realization of this potential depends whether we choose to get closer to HaShem, learning and growing spiritually. The commandments of the Tora train our basic impulses . For example: Kashrut, trains us to control our urge to eat. Taharat haMishapjá, our sexual instincts. Shabbat, the day we stop making money, teaches us to control our material ambitions. etc. And so is the case with every Mitsva of the Tora.