

# TRADING PLACES ON THE LADDER OF LIFE

by Jon Erlbaum

- This Week's **RRR** (Relevant Religious Reference): **"Do not judge your fellow until you have arrived at his/her place"** - *Hillel in Ethics of the Fathers (Avos), 2:5*
- This Week's **SSC** (Suitable Secular Citations): **"Pay up, Mortimer... We took a perfectly useless psychopath like Valentine, and turned him into a successful executive. And during the same time, we turned an honest, hard-working man into a violently deranged, would-be killer!"** - *Randolph Duke, collecting his \$1 debt from Brother Mortimer, as Valentine (Eddie Murphy) listens with wide-eyed shock from the bathroom stall in TRADING PLACES*

## THE \$1 WAGER

What do you get when two classic characters, played by the likes of Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd, are tricked into trading societal places? Aside from a continual flow of hysterical lines and vintage Eddie Murphy camera-stares, you also end up with fascinating food-for-thought. In the hilarious comedy "Trading Places", the \$1 wager of Randolph and Mortimer Duke gives comedic expression to the age-old debate of nature vs. nurture (see SSC above). To settle the score, the Duke Brothers conspire to orchestrate a "life swap", switching the environments and lifestyles of Billy Ray Valentine (Murphy) and Louis Winthorpe III (Aykroyd). Ultimately, the dastardly Duke duo "succeeds" in turning an underprivileged con-man into an upstanding business leader, while converting an honest executive into a common criminal.

With regard to their bet, which of the Duke Brothers is more in line with Jewish wisdom - Randolph (on the side of nurture) or Mortimer (on the side of nature)? To some degree, Judaism would agree with each of the brothers, asserting that nature and nurture both play a large role in determining a person's position in life. But let's up the ante on their wager: if nature and nurture forces are so powerful, must we bet against FREEWILL - a central tenet of Judaism - and concede that there's no room for freewill to operate in a world with such dominant forces?

## THE SHIFTING BATTLE LINE OF CHOICE

There's no need to concede, as Jewish wisdom beautifully resolves this quandary. Our sages reveal that each person possesses two competing drives: 1) a positive drive, which lifts us towards constructive, meaningful endeavors; and 2) a negative drive, which sucks us into seemingly "self-serving" yet ultimately self-destructive behaviors. **The clash of these drives creates a dramatic tension that allows for the challenge of choice. Each of us, however, has a unique choice-point - our own inner battle line where the freewill struggles are taking place (i.e. where the competing drives are at equal strength).** So there is always potential for freewill in the equation: true, our Creator sets the stage for us, endowing us with certain NATURES and emplacing us in certain circumstances of NURTURE, all of which are beyond our control. But wherever those forces may place us - and in whichever direction our combat zone might move due to prior victories and defeats (see next section) - there will always remain a battle line where our drives will clash with equal power.[1]

## FREEWILL AND JACOB'S LADDER

### (INCIDENTALLY, 2 SONG TITLES BY THE ROCK POWER TRIO "RUSH")

Another metaphor is used to illustrate the shifting battle line of choice: the up-and-down movement on a ladder that spans from the earth to the heavens (as per Jacob's dream in this week's Portion). As with the shifting battle line, **each time we climb to a higher rung on this ladder of moral mobility, we actually "raise the bar" of our moral maturity - leaving behind challenges that are now beneath the zone of our temptation. Conversely, each time we drop to a lower rung, we enter a zone of lower-level temptations.** In doing so, we leave ourselves vulnerable to the frightening phenomenon of the slippery slope: before we know it, we might find ourselves three or four rungs down, engaged in behaviors that were previously unthinkable.

Now let's run our own TRADING PLACES "experiment" in the "laboratory of Jacob's ladder" (getting back at Randolph and Mortimer by calling our Jewish guinea pigs Randy and Mordechai). Randy is a Jewish thief, who has grown up in a den of thieves - glorifying "survival of the fittest" and comfortably convinced that stealing represents acceptable, way-of-the-world behavior. Mordechai comes from a long line of rabbis and lives in a nurturing household, conducive to spiritual advancement. For Randy, the notion of "thou shalt not steal" is so foreign that it sounds funny when he first hears it. Therefore, resisting the temptation to steal is on a rung that is ABOVE his battle line of moral struggles (in fact, one of his moral struggles is whether to shoot someone who witnesses his theft!). For Mordechai, the temptation to steal flies way BENEATH his radar, many rungs down on the ladder of moral mobility. [2]

## WHO IS GREATER: THE THIEF OR THE RABBI'S SON?

Let's say Randy becomes further exposed to ethical ideals, gradually refining himself to where he consistently resists temptations to steal. Sure, he still gets into occasional street fights, etc. - but let's say he manages to climb up six rungs from where he started (which still leaves him five rungs beneath Mordechai). And let's say Mordechai also refines his character, making strides in his commitments to Torah study, etc. Sure, he still could pray with more fervor, and he occasionally looks down on people with lesser knowledge - but let's say he manages to climb up two rungs from where he started. Question: who is greater in the eyes of G-d? To the NAKED EYE, Mordechai may compare favorably to Randy in every EMPIRICAL measure of morality. But from a Divine perspective - at least according to one formula of calculation - **look who did more with what he had!** Similarly, assume an investor were to invest \$10,000 with one broker and \$110,000 with another; if the first broker returns \$70,000 and the second returns \$130,000, which one might the investor be more impressed with?

While I certainly don't presume to understand the infinite intricacies of Divine calculations, I think we can arrive at certain conclusions with conviction: first, let us be clear that we should never despair about where we are on the ladder. We all have our tailor-made battle lines, and our current rung is far less important than our current direction. Moreover, we can now heed the words of Hillel with greater appreciation: "Do not judge your fellow until you have arrived at his/her place!" **Not only is judging someone unfavorably an undesirable, elitist thing to do - but even more, it doesn't make sense from a logical perspective. Why? Because we have never truly arrived at another person's place - we have never experienced the precise combination of forces that make up another person's battle lines.** While it is reasonable to condemn inappropriate actions (and to penalize the perpetrators when necessary), it is illogical to judge the inherent value of the people behind those actions. May we all climb life's ladder in the direction of our positive purpose, and may we judge others favorably as they attempt to do the same!

*Have a Wonderful Shabbos! Love, Jon & The Chevra*

---

1,2. Adapted from Rabbi Dessler's famous compendium of essays known (in English) as Strive for Truth

---

Text Copyright © 2008 by Jon Erlbaum and [Torah.org](https://torah.org)