

# PRO-CHOICE

*by Shlomo Katz*

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## Chukas

Today's Learning Taharot 3:6-7 Kitzur 165:2-6 Eruvin 61 Yerushalmi Shabbat 83

Our parashah opens: "This is the Torah-a man who will die in the tent . . ." Making a play on these words, Chazal say that the Torah will remain only with one who "kills himself" studying it. R' Avraham Yishayahu Karelitz z"l (1878-1953; the "Chazon Ish") explains:

This "death" means looking below the surface of life at life's innermost details. This means conquering one's character, because a person's traits are the superficial covering of his life. Killing one's impulses leads to life on the Torah path.

There are many degenerate traits, the Chazon Ish writes, but breaking even one of them gives a

person life and enables Torah to remain with him. Prominent among those traits is laziness. Laziness is so pervasive that it can affect both thoughts and deeds. Ironically, laziness can sometimes motivate a person to act, as when, for example, a person knows that what he plans to do is wrong, but he is too lazy to control himself and to declare war on his impulses.

Laziness causes a person to adopt a "business as usual" attitude towards his own development, and this is the root cause for abandonment of the Torah. (Igrot Chazon Ish I, No.3)

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"Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of Bnei Yisrael . . ." (20:12)

Rashi writes: Had you spoken to the rock, Hashem's Name would have been sanctified because Bnei Yisrael would have reasoned, "If a rock, which has no senses and which has no needs, obeys the will of Hashem, how much more so must we obey the will of Hashem?"

R' Shimon Schwab z"l questions this logic. He asks: How can we learn from a rock? Rocks have no free will!

He answers (in the name of his teacher, R' Yerucham Levovitz z"l of Mir): If we truly recognized our subservience to Hashem, we would realize that we have no free will either. The best choice a person could make is the choice to return his free will to Hashem. (Maayan Bet Sho'evah)

A related idea:

The prayer which we call "Shema" has three parts. The gemara (Berachot 13a) calls the first part, "Accepting the yoke of Heaven." The gemara calls the second part, "Accepting the yoke of mitzvot."

How is the yoke of Heaven distinct from the yoke of mitzvot? asks Rav Avraham Grodzenski (mashgiach of the Slobodka Yeshiva) hy"d. To understand this, we must understand the basic tool of the yetzer hara, says Rav Grodzenski. That tool is the concept of "choice." Man doesn't mind doing what is right, but he is "pro-choice" - he must feel like he is in control and no one can tell him what to do. Phrased differently, man does not object to doing mitzvot; what he objects to is the yoke of Heaven.

Conversely, says Rav Grodzenski, accepting the yoke of mitzvot is not so hard, so long as one has accomplished the prerequisite: "Accepting the yoke of Heaven." This means subjugating man's desire for "choice" to the recognition that man is ultimately a slave to G-d. (Torat Avraham p.59)

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"The Canaanite king of Arad, who dwelled in the south, heard that Yisrael had come the route of the spies, and he warred against Yisrael . . ." (21:1)

R' Moshe Grunwald z"l explains: Bnei Yisrael had sent the spies because they wanted to conquer

Eretz Canaan by natural means, without the intervention of open miracles. When the King of Arad heard that Bnei Yisrael were no longer relying on miraculous aid from Above, he found the courage to attack. (Arugat Ha'bosem)

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"[The] well that the princes dug, that the nobles of the people excavated, through a lawgiver, with their staff. A gift from the wilderness." (21:18)

The latter part of these verses is interpreted by the gemara as a formula for successful Torah study, i.e., if one is humble like the wilderness, the Torah will be given to him as a gift.

The Vilna Gaon z"l writes that the first part of the verse can be read in the same spirit. The Torah can be acquired by the toil of study (like the "princes of Torah" who "dig" for the Torah's treasures) or by supporting Torah study (like the nobles who "excavate" - see Bereishit 50:5, where "excavated" means "bought"). Torah can be acquired by the scholars who make the laws and by those who use their "staffs" to support Torah. This is the meaning of the verse (Kohelet 7:12), "Because in the shade of wisdom is the shade of money." (Kol Eliyahu)

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### An Astonishing Midrash

When the angels heard (Bemidbar 19:2), "This is the decree of the Torah," they asked: "Then why will Moshe die?"

Hashem responded (in the words of Kohelet 9:2), "The same fate awaits the righteous and the wicked . . ."

A "chukah"/"decree" is a mitzvah whose reason is not revealed to man. The law of the parah adumah/red heifer is such a mitzvah.

Why didn't Hashem reveal the reason for parah adumah to Bnei Yisrael? Chazal teach that the parah adumah is connected with Bnei Yisrael's atonement for the golden calf. Yet, according to the gemara, the mitzvah of parah adumah was given to Bnei Yisrael before the sin of the golden calf occurred. (Hashem always creates the "cure" before the "disease"; thus, for example, Esther was already enthroned as Queen of Persia when Haman became prime minister.) However, Hashem could not very well reveal the reason for the parah adumah to Bnei Yisrael; after all, while Hashem knew that they would sin by making a golden calf, they did not know it. They had the free-will not to make a golden calf.

Only Moshe knew the reason for the parah adumah, for he had attained the level of wisdom and prophecy were he could, so-to-speak, "read Hashem's mind." This was a level that no one had attained since Adam had sinned and death had been decreed on mankind. Thus the angels asked, if

Moshe has attained the level of Adam before the sin, why will he die?

Hashem answered: It is the way of the world. Everyone must die. (Binat Nevonim)

[Ed. Note: In light of the foregoing, we can understand why the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, which had been given much earlier, is described in the same parashah in which Moshe's death is decreed.]

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R' Shimshon of Sens z"l ("Rash"/"Rashba")

born approx. 1150 - died approx. 1230

Although the Talmud commentary that we know as "Tosfot" was written by teams of scholars over several hundred years, the 18th century posek/halachic authority and bibliographer, Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai ("Chida"), writes that whenever any of the rishonim/medieval sages quotes the Tosfot, he is referring specifically to the teachings of R' Shimshon. (Most of the Tosfot which appear in our edition of the Talmud are abridgements of R' Shimshon's teachings.)

R' Shimshon also was the author of one of the major commentaries on the first and last of the Six Orders of the Mishnah. This commentary is known as the "Rash." (Although R' Shimshon was known by both of the acronyms which appear in the title of this biography, he should not be confused with the 14th century sages "Rosh" - Rabbeinu Asher - and "Rashba" - R' Shlomo ben Aderet.)

R' Shimshon studied under Rashi's grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, and great-grandson, R' Yitzchak of Dampierre ("Ri"). He later established a yeshiva in Sens, France, where he disseminated Ri's teachings. One unique feature of Rash's lectures was his extensive use of the Talmud Yerushalmi (the "Jerusalem" or "Palestinian" Talmud, as opposed to the "Babylonian" Talmud which is the focus of yeshiva studies to this day).

R' Shimshon played a pivotal role in the controversy surrounding Rambam's/Maimonides' halachic code. After a Spanish sage took exception to one of Rambam's statements regarding the World to Come, R' Shimshon was asked for his opinion. Although he had never before heard of Rambam (who was his contemporary), R' Shimshon reviewed parts of Rambam's works and declared that, while Rambam was wrong about the particular statement in dispute, "he discerned the wonders in G-d's Torah."

In 1211, Rash settled in Eretz Yisrael with several hundred people from among his disciples and their families. He is buried in Akko. (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim p.136; She'eilot U'teshuvot Yosef Ometz No. 101)

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