

CHOOSE LIFE!

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Today's Learning:

Beitzah 5:7 / Rosh Hashanah 1:1

Orach Chaim 316:4-6

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nedarim 38

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Kiddushin 43

Our parashah opens, "See, I put before you today a blessing and a curse. That blessing: when you hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today. And the curse: if you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d . . ." We read similarly in Parashat Nitzavim (30:15), "See, I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil." The midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments: "Lest a Jew say, 'Since Hashem has placed two paths before me, a way of life and a way of death, I may choose whichever I wish,' therefore the Torah says (30:19), 'You shall choose life'."

R' Yitzchak Eliyahu Landau z"l (1781-1876; Vilna) explains: In man's mundane affairs, if one person (call him "Reuven") instructs another person ("Shimon") to do something for Shimon's own benefit, Reuven will not punish Shimon for failing to do that thing. The only loss that Shimon will suffer

because of his failure is that he will not obtain the promised benefit. One might think, therefore, that when Hashem gives us a choice between good and bad and between life and death, He does not care which we choose. If we perform the mitzvot we will be rewarded, and if we don't perform the mitzvot, we will not be punished. (So one might think.)

Says the Torah: "You shall choose life." The reason Hashem created the world was to share His Goodness, and if we do not choose life, we frustrate His very goal in creating us. Therefore, we are commanded to choose life, and we will be held accountable if we do not. (Patsheggen Ha'ketav: Divrei Chachamim)

"You are children to Hashem your G-d." (14:1)

The story is told of a "paritz"/gentile landowner who was ill. Hearing that the Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (died 1760) could cure all sorts of illnesses, he visited the Ba'al Shem Tov and begged the Ba'al Shem Tov to cure him of his ills. The Ba'al Shem Tov told him that the root of his troubles was his excessive pursuit of physical gratification, so the "paritz" asked:

"What do you do to defeat the type of urges that are troubling me?"

The Ba'al Shem Tov answered, "I am an old man and I do not suffer from such urges."

Later, the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson, R' Baruch of Medzibozh z"l, asked the Ba'al Shem Tov why he did not answer that he does not succumb to excessive urges because he is Jewish and the Torah prohibits such behavior. The Ba'al Shem Tov answered, "It is impossible to explain to a gentile what it means to be Jewish."

When retelling this story in later years, R' Baruch would add, "My grandfather said that it is impossible to explain to a gentile what it means to be Jewish. I say that it is also impossible to put into words for a fellow Jew what it means to be Jewish."

What does this mean?

R' Shalom Noach Brazovsky shlita (the "Slonimer Rebbe") explains R' Baruch's statement in light of our verse. We are called "children to Hashem." Rabbi Meir says in the gemara that even when we sin, we are Hashem's children. This is a very lofty level, one that we ourselves cannot really appreciate or understand.

If a Jew had any inkling of his own holiness, he could never sin. R' Avraham z"l, the first "Slonimer Rebbe", said about this: Mishlei says (3:11), "The mussar / reproof of Hashem, My son, 'al timas' / do not despise." This may be interpreted as follows: "What is Hashem's mussar? It is the knowledge that 'You are My son!' Therefore, do not make yourself despicable by acting in a way that is not befitting a son of the king." The most searing mussar that a thinking Jew can hear is that he is a child of Hashem and must act in a way befitting his status. (Netivot Shalom: Kuntreis "Bechochmah Yivneh

Bayit," p. 7)

A related thought:

We read in Shir Hashirim (5:9-10): "With what does your beloved excel . . . ? My beloved is pure and red." The midrash explains that the gentile nations ask the Jews, "What is so special about your G-d?"

The Jews answer: "My G-d is pure. He is mine alone, and He redeemed me from Egypt and from other exiles."

R' Avraham Yoffen z"l (Novardok Rosh Yeshiva; died 1970) asks: Presumably every nation, even an idolatrous one, considers its own god to be as special and unique as we consider Hashem to be. If so, what is the import of the answer that we give the gentile nations?

The emphasis in our answer, says R' Yoffen, is on the fact that Hashem is "mine alone." We have a relationship with Him which cannot be explained in words. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Halevanon II p. 393)

"You shall tithe the entire crop of your planting, the produce of the field, year by year." (14:22)

Rashi writes: From here we learn that one may not tithe from the new crop on the old crop.

R' Yitzchak Elchanan Waldshein z"l hy"d (Assistant Mashgiach in Baranovitch; killed in the Holocaust) comments: One may tithe from his goats for his sheep (or vice versa) and from his healthy animals for his blemished animals, but not from two different years' animals or crops together. Why?

R' Waldshein answers: We read in the Pesach Haggadah, "In every generation and generation, one is obligated to see himself as if he had left Egypt." The Haggadah doesn't say simply, "Everyone is obligated to see himself as if he had left Egypt," because the Haggadah is teaching us that every generation is different and must use its own methods to impress the story of the Exodus upon itself. This is the thought behind the halachah that one may not tithe from one year's produce for a prior year. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Baranovitch p. 140)

[Editor's note: Perhaps R' Waldshein's explanation can be better understood in light of the Sefer Ha'chinuch's rationale for the mitzvah of ma'aser beheimah / tithing animals. The Sefer Ha'chinuch (a 13th-century work of unknown authorship) states in Mitzvah 359 that the purpose of this mitzvah is so that every farmer and rancher will make annual visits to Yerushalayim, the seat of the Sanhedrin, to learn Torah and to be inspired. Because every generation is different -- indeed, every person changes from year to year -- last year's lessons and inspiration are not good enough for this year. And, in order to ensure that a person comes to Yerushalayim every year, the Torah prohibited tithing two different year's animals together.]

"Beware lest there be a lawless thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year approaches, the sabbatical year,' and you will look malevolently upon your destitute brother and refuse to give him - then he may appeal against you to Hashem, and it will be a sin upon you." (15:9)

This verse warns us not to refuse to make loans although the shemittah / sabbatical year is approaching. (Because loans must be forgiven in the shemittah year, people may refuse to lend money close to the shemittah year.)

R' Shaul Yisraeli z"l (1909-1995; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Merkaz Harav) writes:

"Imagine to yourself! A man worked and toiled until he had saved up a certain amount. The Torah has warned elsewhere against trickery and deceit, on withholding wages from laborers and so on. The Torah has commanded us to conduct business faithfully, and to use honest measures and weights.

"The money which a person has saved notwithstanding all these commandments is his money which he earned honestly and through hard work, and now the Torah comes along and obligates him to lend it, and without interest or benefit. The Jew does this willingly and does not demand any return on his money; only one thought beats in his heart, there is only one thing that he wishes to guarantee - that he will get his money back. And that single thought, the Torah refers to as 'lawlessness.' The Torah demands that you make loans knowing that you may never be repaid.

"One who goes in the Torah's way and observes this commandment will effect a revolution in his thinking about his membership in a community. Through the quiet observance of this mitzvah, one will solve many of the hardest social problems that have worried man from time immemorial." (Ma'amar "Ha'Shemittah Be'mahalach Ha'dorot")

R' Velvel Maggid z"l

R' Velvel Maggid, the maggid / preacher of Vilna, was born in 1789. His father, R' Yechezkel Feivel, was likewise a famous maggid in Vilna and was the author of Toldot Ha'adam, on the life and teachings of R' Zalman of Volozhin.

R' Velvel established a society in Vilna known as the "Chevrat Asiri Kodesh" / "The Tenth Is Holy Society." Members of this group would observe a Yom Kippur-like day every ten days - fasting, introspecting, limiting their speech, and devoting extra time to Torah study and prayer. Many "ordinary" Jews who were not full-time Torah scholars joined this society. In general, R' Velvel had a profound impact on the lay citizenry of Vilna, and inspired many working class Jews to devote fixed times to Torah study.

R' Velvel objected to the use of exaggerated honorifics. The Chafetz Chaim used to repeat the following in R' Velvel's name.

A simple villager memorized the calendar and could tell anyone who asked when the next molad / appearance of the new moon would occur. Gradually, his fellow villagers came to think of their neighbor as a great Torah sage, and he, too, began to think of himself in this way.

One day, this villager came to Vilna and went to the Vilna Gaon's study hall for minchah. After the prayers, he went to take his "rightful" place at the table with those who were discussing various Torah subjects, but, of course, he understood nothing.

So, many people have become accustomed to being addressed as "Rabbi," and they think that this title is deserved. In the world of truth, however, they will come to sit near the true sages, and they will understand nothing of the conversation that is taking place.

R' Velvel used to say that just as an animal has two signs of kashruth, so a Jew has the same two signs of kashruth. A Jew is "ma'aleh gerah," which in the context of animals means, "regurgitating its fodder" ("chewing its cud"), but literally can mean, "Lifting [out of one's pocket] a coin [for charity]." Also, a Jew is "mafris parsah," which in the context of animals means, "has split hooves," but literally can mean, "Slicing bread [for guests]." (Source: Gedolei Ha'dorot p. 660)

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