

LIFE CHOICES

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Shoftim

Life Choices

Volume XVII, No. 47
29 Av 5765
September 3, 2005

Sponsored by Mr. and Mrs. Yaakov Chaim Katz and family on the aufruf and forthcoming marriage of Yochanan Eliezer

The Lewin family, in memory of father Dr. Isaac Lewin (Harav Yitzchak ben Harav Aharon a"h)

Today's Learning:

Shabbat 1:8-9

O.C. 408:2-4

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Shabbat 124

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Horiot 3

Our parashah opens, "See, I put before you today a blessing and a curse. The 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, but if we don't perform the

mitzvot, we will not be punished. Or, 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)

"When a prophet will arise among you . . ." (13:2)

The Gemara (Bava Batra 12a) teaches: "A wise man is greater than a prophet." R' Avraham son of the Rambam explains: The prophet referred to by this statement is not one of the prophets of the 24 books of Tanach, for they were all wise men and women in addition to being prophets, and they were certainly greater than someone who is only wise, but not a prophet. Rather, this statement refers to the many people mentioned in Tanach who experienced prophecy briefly, although they were not necessarily wise (see Shmuel I 19:20-21). Why is a wise man superior to them? Because he does not need them, but they do need him; without the wise man's wisdom and Torah knowledge, these "part-time" prophets would have no inkling of what is expected of them in this world. Such a prophet is even required to stand in the presence of a wise man, for there is no level higher than that of a Torah scholar. Knowledge of Torah is the ultimate purpose of creation, as Hashem told the prophet (Yirmiyahu 33:25), "If not for My covenant [being kept] day and night, I would not have created heaven and earth." For the same reason, even a king is required to have a Sefer Torah with him at all times.

(Igrot R' Avraham ben Ha'Rambam, No. 7)

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

Our Sages comment on this verse: "When Yisrael does the will of Hashem, it is called His 'sons.' When it does not do His will, it is called His 'servants'."

R' Yosef Gruenwald z"l (1903-1984; the Pupa Rav in Hungary and Brooklyn) asks: Do not servants do the will of their master? Also, we know that Hashem gives us Eretz Yisrael when we do His will, and He takes it away when we do not do His will. If the term "servants" refers to those who do not do His will, why do we read in Tehilim (136:21-22), "He presented their land as a heritage, for His kindness endures forever; a heritage for Yisrael, *his servant,* for His kindness endures forever"?

R' Gruenwald answers: We are taught, "A tzaddik decrees and Hashem fulfills." In this light, our Sages comment on our verse can be given another meaning based on a slightly different translation of the words: "When Yisrael makes Hashem's will - i.e., when we are completely righteous and we cause our will to be Hashem's will as well - then we are called 'sons.' When we are on a lower level, still doing the will of our Master, but not quite righteous enough to affect Hashem's will, then we are

called 'servants'." (Thus the first question above is answered.) The message of the verse in Tehilim is that Hashem's kindness is so great that He gives us Eretz Yisrael even when we serve him only on a lower level, i.e., like "servants."

(Haggadah Shel Pesach Va'yechi Yosef p.241)

"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 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")

Letters from Our Sages

[The following letter was written by R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) in 1906, when he was rabbi of Yaffo (Jaffa). The letter was written in response to a dispute between leaders of Yerushalayim and Chevron over the distribution of charity from overseas, and it focuses on a topic alluded to in our parashah - the holiness of Yerushalayim.]

Regarding the dispute between the leaders of Yisrael who stand at the heads of the charities - I was

very saddened by the dispute involving the head of the charity, a very distinguished man in Yerushalayim who sought my advice. My opinion is that we must use all our powers to avoid new divisions. We have more than enough divisions among us due to our great sins. It would be better to give- in regarding the matter in dispute than to cause Chevron to stand on its own separately from Yerushalayim. It goes without saying that we should allow nothing to cause a part of our nation to have any resentment [against Yerushalayim] which might lead to a lessening of Yerushalayim's stature in their eyes as compared to other cities in our Holy Land. This [i.e., equating other cities with Yerushalayim] is precisely what the Torah prohibits when it outlaws bamot / private altars outside of the Temple in Yerushalayim [see 12:11 and Rashil]. . . One may not equate the holiness of any place, even in Eretz Yisrael, with the holiness of the place that Hashem chose and the city upon which Hashem's Name is called. Certainly one may not lessen its status. Only Yerushalayim's holiness encompasses a microcosm of the holiness of all of Eretz Yisrael; therefore, Chevron's holiness is a subset of Yerushalayim's holiness (see Zohar: Parashat Chayei Sarah 128b) . . . This is what R' Bezalel Ashkenazi z"l [16th century author of th Talmud commentary Shitah Mekubetzet] meant when he wrote: "If there is no Yerushalayim, there is no Chevron."

It is plain that the mitzvah of building Yerushalayim takes precedence over building any other city in Eretz Yisrael. Therefore the Gemara says: "If one brings joy to a bridegroom, it is as if he built one of the ruins *of Yerushalayim*." Not just any ruin in Eretz Yisrael, but a ruin of Yerushalayim . . .

R' Kook continues: Don't ask why some tzaddikim chose to live in other holy cities when they could have settled in Yerushalayim. There is no doubt that every city in Eretz Yisrael has its own unique aspect of holiness as written in the work Chessed L'Avraham. Even on a plain [i.e., not kabbalistic level] each city has its own religious attraction. For example, one can be attached to this city, Yaffo, because it is alluded to in the Torah as a border of Eretz Yisrael - "The border of the sea." Also, it is a place where the prophet Yonah walked. A person who was able to recognize that the root of his soul was connected to a specific place in Eretz Yisrael would settle in that place.

(Igrot Ha're'iyah No. 39)

Copyright © 2005 by [Shlomo Katz](#) and **Torah.org**.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>.

Hamaayan needs your support! Please consider sponsoring Hamaayan in honor of a happy occasion or in memory of a loved one. Did you know that the low cost of sponsorship - only \$18 - has not changed in seventeen years? Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.