

THE NACHASH WAS WRONG

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The *nachash* was wrong. Not just about glorifying a transgression of Hashem's commandment. He got the whole *bechirah* thing all wrong.

Most of us, surprisingly, are still on his side, even if we've had close to 6000 years to mull over Adam's regrettable *aveirah* that so completely devastated our quality of life. By now, we realize that eating from the Tree of Knowledge was a big blunder. We're definitely not with the *nachash* about that. But we still accept the *nachash's* implicit understanding of *bechirah*. What else could it be, other than choosing between "good and evil," just like the *nachash* promised would happen by eating from the forbidden fruit?

He was wrong. There is much more to it than that. In fact, he missed most of it.

The greater part of *bechirah* is choosing and identifying with absolute Good. It is about valuing it for its own sake - not as a rejection of its opposite, but in comprehending its absolute worth. (Were this not the case, the specialness of *Klal Yisrael* would have to be temporary; it would dissipate in the messianic era in which "the spirit of *tumah* I will purge from the Land."^[2]) For this reason, we are called the *am nivchar*, and the *beis hamikdash* is called the *beis habechirah*. These phrases employ *bechirah* not in the sense of good instead of evil, but of a connection to goodness itself.

Others miss this point. To them, the choice is all about selecting between opposites. The *nachash* was of that mind; to him, it was only about good vs. evil.

Chazal famously declare that just as *shemita* was given at Sinai - meaning both its generalities and its specific details - so were all mitzvos. It will be worthwhile to study what make Sinai and *shemita* important in this teaching.

First we must realize that there are two ways in which generalities and collectives are formed. In some cases, the collective is the aggregate of many specific members. In other cases, however, the collective is primary. The specific exists only to the extent that it draws from the general collective.

Most collectives that we know are simply the sum of many parts. National groups other than *Klal Yisrael* are such collectives. The group is composed of all of its independent individuals. *Klal Yisrael*, however, functions differently. Its foundation is the collective; individuals are what they are insofar as what they draw from that collective.

This was not always the case. The *Bnei Yisrael* acted in this regard like every other people, until they

arrived at Sinai. Thus, the verbs used to describe them were plural verbs, at least till they encamped at the mountain in preparation to receiving the Torah. "Yisrael encamped /*vayichan* (singular) there, opposite the mountain."^[3] Ready for Revelation, they were able to access their core oneness.

When the other nations were offered the Torah, they responded with, "What's written in it?" Each of their collectives was formed by individuals coming together to become a whole – in other words, *peratim*, parts that became a *klal*. Their national identities, then, were based entirely on parts, on details. They asked for the same when considering the Torah.

In the case of the *Bnei Yisrael* standing at Sinai, however, every individual was a different refraction of their oneness, their unity. Common to all of them was a yearning for the Word of Hashem. Their response, therefore, was simply an expression of that: *Naaseh v'nishmah*. As *klal* people, they had no use for the details of what was in Torah. They just wanted Torah.

Shemita is the perfect example of this relationship. The Oneness of Hashem is reflected in the oneness of His people, who are given one Land to the nation as a whole. For six years of the *shemita* cycle, the *peratim* of the Land are expressed as individual ownership. In the *shemita* year, the *peratim* return to the *klal*. The presence of the *perat* is muted; the Land is shared by all equally.

So it is with all mitzvos. They all – and all their details – contain within them expressions of the unity, the oneness of *Klal Yisrael* that was achieved at Sinai. Through them, there ought to be constant expression of the *ahavas Yisrael* that is a corollary to it – love of all the byways of the Jewish people, in all their different varieties; love of all their varied existence; love of all that they possess.

1. Based on Mei Marom, Bamidbar #1.
2. Zechariah 13:2.
3. Shemos 19:2.