

DON'T USE RAV ALLEH'S HECHSHER - IT'S A KUNTZ!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse. Choose life! (30:19)

"Perhaps Israel will say: Hashem has placed two paths before us - the path of life and the path of death - it is our choice to take whichever path we desire... Therefore the Torah concludes: Choose life!" (Sifri Parshas Re'eh piska 53)

Apparently, were it not that Hashem concluded with the words, "Choose life!" there would have been some confusion as to which is the right path to take. Why? Isn't the "living" path of the Torah and its holy mitzvos easily distinguishable from the "deathly" path of sin and immorality?

In the beginning of parshas Re'eh we find a verse almost identical to the above pasuk. "Behold I have placed before you today blessing and curse..." Interestingly, though, there the pasuk uses the plural form, "Behold I have placed before you (lifneichem = you (plural))." Here, the pasuk uses the singular form, lifanecha.

I know a very talented person. He can sing, dance, and compose rhyming verse on the spot. Once, after attending a chasunah (wedding) in Williamsburg, he stood outside the hall trying to find a ride back to Boro Park. Someone picked him up. Seeing who his passenger was, the driver asked, "How come you didn't come with your own car?"

"Actually," he answered, "I don't know how to drive."

"What - you don't know how to drive? But you're so talented - you know all the kuntzen! (Kuntz is a Yiddish word, not easily translatable. The best I can do is 'trick' or 'feat'.)"

"True," he answered, "and were it a kuntz to drive, I would surely be able to do that too!"

It has been said that it is no kuntz to do good when everyone else is doing good. What distinguishes the true G-d-fearing individual from the rest of the crowd is that he is doing the right thing even when everyone else is not. That is a kuntz!

Does Hashem want us to be kuntz-machers? No. The point is not to go around looking for the difficult situations in life. They present themselves all the time. Situations where it's so easy to just "go with the flow." Everyone else is doing this. All my friends do it. So it must be all right. No?

I once attended a shiur (lecture) on kashrus by Rav Heinemann of Baltimore. "Who can name," he threw out a question to the audience, "the most popular hechsher (kashrus supervision) in our

generation? OU? OK? No. It's the hechsher of Rav Alleh. 'Who's this Rav Alleh?' you ask. You never heard of him? He's the one giving the hechsher on the bakery down the street, and the pizza shop around the corner. I walk into these stores, and see religious Jews eating there. 'Who supervises this place?' I ask them. They shrug their shoulders. 'Alleh essen du - Everyone ('alleh' in Yiddish) eats here,' they answer."

This is the hechsher of Rav Alleh. His kosher stamp of approval is not only found on the food we eat. He also supervises the words we speak, the places we go, the way we do business and deal with people. This prodigious rav ha-machshir gives us instruction and guidance in all aspects of our lives.

That's why teshuvah (repentance) is such an individualistic process. It's not okay just to follow the crowd. What everyone else is doing might not necessarily be right **for you**. Whether it's right for them or not is their responsibility to decide. But each person has to look inside himself and ask: Is what I am doing right for me, or am I just getting caught up in whatever everyone else is doing? This process requires deep introspection and self-honesty. It's not easy to divorce one's thought process from societal norms, and completely expose himself to the penetrating light of the Torah.

One might at first be tempted to say that this "hechsher of Rav Alleh" actually makes some sense. After all, everyone can't have their heads screwed on backwards, can they?

No? How about Beanie Babies - do they make any sense? Their success is not because of any inherent value they might possess, but because "everyone's talking about them." It's not to say that **everything** people do is wrong or makes no sense, but that **not everything** people do makes sense. Our job is to take the time and effort to separate the chaff from the grain. In real life it's a lot harder than exposing the Beanie Babies farce - it's a real kuntz!

This, explain mefarshim (commentators), is why the first time the choice between "life and death" is mentioned, it's done so in the plural. The choice is out there for everyone to make. But the second time, in our parshah, when the Torah urges, "Choose life!", it is written in the singular. To choose "life" is something which can only be done by the individual. It demands that one separate himself from conventional "wisdom" and make a decision about what's right for me.

This also, says Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank ("Har Tzvi"), explains the above Midrash. The choice between "life and death", between blessing and curse, is in and of itself clear and obvious. Our clarity, however, is blurred by what those around us do. What's the right way - do I blindly do as others do, or do I bravely attempt to forge my own path? Choose life! urges Hashem. The choice isn't always an easy one.

There's never a bad time for cheshbon ha-nefesh (introspection). The month of Elul is especially good - it's set aside for it. Shulchan Aruch (603:1) writes, "Even one who is not meticulous not to eat bread from a gentile baker a whole year should be meticulous during the Ten Days of Teshuva (repentance)." The days of teshuva are a time to inspect the hechsherim we rely on all year. Watch out for the hechsher of Rav Alleh!

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