

TIMELY TESHUVAH

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Nitzavim, concludes with the following exhortation:

See - I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil. Which I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d, to walk in His ways, to observe His commandments, His decrees, His ordinances; then you will live, and flourish, and Hashem your G-d will bless you in the Land which you come to possess... I call today Heaven and Earth to bear witness against you: I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse; Choose life! so that you may live, you and your offspring. [30:15-19]

The verse appears to give four options from which one can choose: life, good, death, and evil. Rashi, however, does not understand it this way. If there were indeed four different choices, then Scripture should have paired life with its opposite, death, and goodness with its opposite, evil. Rashi therefore explains that there are in fact only two options: Choosing "good" will result in "life," while choosing "evil" will ultimately lead to "death." The Torah then explains that choosing "good" means, in a nutshell, being an ehrlicher Yid (good Jew): To love Hashem, learn Torah, do mitzvos, etc. Accordingly, however, we are mystified as to why the Torah concludes by exhorting us to "Choose life!" If - as we have explained - "life" is a result of choosing "good," then we should be urged to choose good, through which we will merit life!

What is the greatest mussar sefer (ethical work) of all time? Mesilas Yesharim? Chovos HaLevavos? Or perhaps something earlier like Pirkei Avos? Some might even say that the oldest and most venerable mussar sefer is Mishneh Torah, the last of the five books of the Torah - sefer Devarim. Sefer Devarim is full of insight, ethics, and rebuke.

The great Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer zt"l, once looked at a clock upon the wall. "Do you know what is the greatest mussar sefer of all?" he mused. "A simple clock. The seconds tick away, the minutes pass - and there's nothing we can do to stop it. How precious is time!"

And who, after all, fully appreciated the value of time more than the Gaon. It is told that one year, before Yom Kippur, the Gaon, in a period of great remorse, decided he would add together all the minutes he had idly wasted that year. He reckoned that - over the period of a year - he had wasted more than two hours that could have been spent studying!

I would like, perhaps audaciously, to suggest a variant on the Gaon's "mussar sefer," something more contemporary, and perhaps somewhat more meaningful for those of us not yet at the level of the

Gaon. I woke up one morning this week, and found on my desk a battered photo album that one of my daughters has seemingly scraped together from pictures that never made it into the family collection. Birthdays, family gatherings, school performances, old friends that have moved away, infants that now seem so grown up, moments past and long forgotten. Tears welled up in my eyes, as they do now as I write these words. My how time flies. Where have so many years gone?

While it's hard for me to be genuinely aroused by the seconds ticking by on my clock, the photo album, for me, is "mussar sefer" without equal. How could I let so many years slip by? Do we really think we're going to live forever? We have so many plans, so much we want to do, to change, yet we never quite seem to get around to it. Life is so precious, yet we seem to squander so much of it on matters of little consequence.

The Midrash (Sifri, Parshas Re'eh 53), commenting on the verse "Choose life!" tells the following story:

A man once sat at a fork in the road. Before him lay two paths. The first was smooth at first, yet soon became thorny and rough. The other, rough and thorny at first, soon became smooth. He would tell the passers-by: Do you see this smooth path? Take it for a few steps, and you will find thorns. But do you see the thorny path? Take it a small way, and you will find it smooth and level.

The paths, says the Midrash, are our lives. Sometimes, we take the easy path, at first so comfortable, only to later be filled with regret. If, however, we are wise, we gaze into the distance, and realize that paths which may at first seem tiresome and difficult, are in the end full of satisfaction and fulfillment. This is what the Torah means, the Midrash concludes, by urging us to "choose life!"

Perhaps therein lies the answer to the question we posed earlier: If "life" is dependent on choosing "good" (Torah), why exhort us to "choose life?" We will only begin to live our lives with true, outstanding dedication to Hashem and the Torah, if we first gain an appreciation of what life really is. As long as we live in the illusion that time stands still (more-or-less), we will not have the impetus nor the emotional werewithal to make the changes in our lives we so desperately need. "Good" brings "life," but to choose good, and to make that choice meaningful and lasting, we must first learn to appreciate life.

A pasuk (verse) in Tehillim (Psalms 75:3) comes to mind: "When I shall sieze the time, I shall judge with straightness." Many explanations are given. Perhaps we can explain thus: When I shall sieze the time - when I will grasp a true appreciation of time, I shall judge with straightness - then I will be able to be my own judge, and self-assess whether my days are being spent the way I want them to be.

It's Elul, and we all want to be moved to teshuvah (repentance). So keep learning mussar, and if you aren't doing so, there's no time like the present. Make a cheshbon ha-nefesh (self-examination), and spend some time reassessing your values and priorities. And if you have a moment, maybe, just maybe, dust off an old album, think about how time passes, and appreciate the treasure we call life.

Have a good Shabbos.

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